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Abstract: The movie *Il padre d'Italia / There is a Light* (2017, dir. Fabio Mollo) tells the story of a road trip across Italy: Paolo and Mia, a gay man and a pregnant woman, meet by chance and travel from the north to the south. The Italian landscape becomes the setting of a narrative of displacement that challenges dominant gender-nature associations in contemporary Italy. The journey allows Mia to "move away" from her "natural" maternal role and Paolo to become the father of Mia's daughter, Italia. This article engages with ecofeminism and queer ecology to analyze *Il Padre d'Italia* as a critique of cisgender appropriations of nature that aim to strengthen hegemonic socio-cultural models of parenthood. My analysis plays on the etymology of the term "ecology"—a logos about our "homeplace"—to show that any ecological discourse, far from providing a reassuring fixed home, leads to an unsettling journey through (un)familiar encounters and contaminations. Mollo's visual eco-logos destabilizes the construct of natural masculinity by creating an alternative model of nurturing ecomasculinity. The movie also displaces the notion of *famiglia naturale* (natural family) by suggesting a thought-provoking identification of Paolo and Mia with the Christian holy family. This multiplication of differences is ultimately revealing of nature's complex inclusiveness.

Keywords: fatherhood, ecomasculinity, homeplace, Italian landscape, natural family.

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Fabio Mollo's *Il padre d'Italia* / *There is a Light*: A Visual Journey through Queer Ecology, EcoMasculinity, and Fatherhood

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In nature nothing is stable,
all is change, bears, dogs, peas, the willow,
all disappear. Only to be reborn.
Rocks crumble, make new forms,
oceans move the continents,
mountains rise up and down like ghosts
yet all is natural, all is change.
(Anne Sexton, "The Wall")

I never never want to go home
because I haven't got one
anymore
(The Smiths, "There is a Light that Never Goes Out")

Introduction

Mia – Ebbè, è normale.

Paolo – No, non è normale. Non si può volere tutto, è da egoisti. Ci sono dei limiti. Non si può far finta che non ci siano.

(*Mia* – Well, that's normal.

Paolo – No, it's not normal. You can't want everything, it's selfish. There are limits. You can't pretend there aren't.)¹

This dialogue is from *Il padre d'Italia* (translated as *There is a Light*), a 2017 movie directed by Fabio Mollo, starring Luca Marinelli and Isabella Ragonese.² In this brief exchange, Paolo and Mia, a gay man and a pregnant woman who embark on an unexpected road trip across Italy, discuss the possibility of Paolo becoming a father. Their conversation problematizes dominant gender-nature constructs of parenthood in Italian society by featuring a dual set of dichotomies: normality/abnormality and respecting/trespassing natural boundaries.

While Mia finds Paolo's desire for fatherhood natural, it is Paolo who surprisingly echoes the biological argument in support of the so-called *famiglia naturale*, an allegedly "natural family" founded on the heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman. To conform to this cultural script, during the road trip, Paolo engages in a sexual relationship with Mia. However, despite growing very fond of her, he eventually decides to return to Turin alone. A few months later, Mia gives birth to a baby girl. Viewers are not told who the biological father is; they only know that Mia leaves the baby at the hospital along with Paolo's contact number. By refusing her maternal role, she entrusts Paolo to perform the parental function of single father to her daughter, Italia.

Mollo's movie, through its unconventional paternal character and attention to the Italian landscape—a territory in which beauty and socio-environmental pollution coexist—raises a key destabilizing question: what would fatherhood look like if reimaged through an ecological queer

¹ Mollo, *Il padre d'Italia*. Quotes are from the English subtitles.

² I would like to thank Lorenzo Bernini, Laura Cima, Greta Gaard, Sara Fichera, Monica Lanfranco, and Fabio Mollo for their help with this article.

paradigm, as an alternative to the heteronormativity of the *famiglia naturale*? This article explores how the visual journey of *Il padre d'Italia* works toward the common objective of queer cinema: to make “new forms of worldliness visible, thinkable, and malleable.”³ The movie dislocates spectators from cisgender appropriations of nature that strengthen hegemonic socio-cultural practices. In doing so, its narrative of displacement suggests that the (re)birth of Italy entails exploring new paths of eco-masculinity and parenthood.

My analysis plays on the etymology of the term “ecology”—a *logos* about the *oikos*, our “homeplace” or “familiar environment”—that, like Paolo and Mia’s road trip, involves encountering unexpected, life-changing differences. Here I draw on the theoretical frameworks developed by feminist environmentalism and queer ecology. Engaging with these perspectives, my goal is to show that, if ecology is founded on transformative interconnectedness and deep intimacy between organisms and their surroundings, Paolo and Mia’s journey is both ecological and queer, as it creates unforeseen familiar connections by multiplying differences and revealing nature’s complex inclusiveness. To think ecologically, Levi Bryant remarks, is “not to think nature per se but to think relations between things, what happens when things relate, what happens when relations are severed, and positive and negative feedback loops that emerge in interactions between things.”⁴ In line with this relational approach, *Il padre d'Italia* can be viewed as an ecological journey in which gender dualisms are severed, commonly held beliefs about the realm of nature lose their divisive function, and multiple gender-nature interactions are explored.

Ecological thinking, beyond offering a theoretical lens, lays the groundwork for the comparison and contrast of feminist environmentalism in North America and Italy, particularly in its relationship with queer studies. In the last few years, North American scholars, including Stacy Alaimo, Greta Gaard, and Catriona Sandilands, have reframed woman-nature association beyond essentialist views based on gender binaries. In this context, Gaard has been a leading figure in redefining ecofeminism as an inclusive intersectional platform founded on the idea that if sexism is a prime form of oppression, “the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing.”⁵ Her process of self-critical redefinition has addressed the limitations of essentialism and eurocentrism that characterized ecofeminism from the 1970s to the 1990s. More broadly, this reassessment has inspired a number of sub-fields (e.g. ecological feminism, material feminism, ecocritical feminism) and publications. However, many scholars still adopt—as I do in this article—the term “ecofeminism” as an all-encompassing category designating a feminist environmentalism that embraces both its woman-focused origins and more recent developments.⁶

A central aspect in the revision of ecofeminism in North America has included advancing the agenda of queer activism and exploring viable alternatives to widespread ecophobic masculinity.⁷ As Carol Adams and Lori Gruen assert, only by eroding “interconnected structures of normative dualism,” can ecofeminism work “in solidarity with those struggling against gender oppression, racism, homophobia and transphobia, environmental injustice, colonialism, speciesism, and environmental destruction.”⁸ This cooperation with queer activism has indeed been crucial in the evolution of North-American feminist environmentalism into a broader eco-justice platform. In comparison, Italian

³ Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World*, 19.

⁴ Bryant, “Black,” 296.

⁵ Gaard, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism,” 114.

⁶ For a detailed overview of the evolution of ecofeminism, see Gaard’s “Ecofeminism Revisited” and her introduction to *Critical Ecofeminism*.

⁷ See Sandilands, “Queer Ecology,” 170.

⁸ Adams and Gruen, *Ecofeminism*, 35.

ecofeminism—as presented in Maria Alberta Sarti's essay “Ecofemminismo e natura” (Ecofeminism and nature, 2006) or in the collection *L'ecofemminismo in Italia* (Ecofeminism in Italy, 2017)—although serving an important socio-political role in challenging androcentric power, still seems anchored to the man/woman dichotomy and, as we will see, has rejected manipulations of nature that may allow for people who identify as LGBTQIA+ to experience biological parenthood.

In this article, after discussing feminist environmentalism in Italy, I move to examine how *Il padre d'Italia* unites ecofeminist and queer perspectives through its eco-*logos* of displacement, encounter, and regained sense of homeplace. Only by moving away from a view of their embodied nature as a stable “house” can Paolo and Mia experiment with truly ecological forms of familiar intimacy that involve “thinking and practicing weakness rather than mastery, fragmentariness rather than holism, and deconstructive tentativeness rather than aggressive assertion.”⁹ The subsequent sections explore two discourses of “deconstructive tentativeness” featured in the movie: the portrayal of Paolo's queer identity as a visual narrative of eco-masculinity, and the use of Christian iconography to provocatively redefine family bonds. To investigate eco-masculinity, I draw on Gaard's proposal that ecofeminism must broaden its scope to include male identities that resonate with its feminist ecological agenda. In Mollo's film, Paolo's role as Mia's travel companion, caring for Mia and supporting her decision to keep the baby, portrays queer masculinity as a feminist ally, suggesting, at an environmental level, collaborative ways to reject the patriarchal exploitation of women and nature. The last section examines how *Il padre d'Italia* frames the debate about Paolo's “unnatural” fatherhood within a queering of the Christian holy family. During the trip, Mia wears a flamboyant jacket with an image of the Virgin Mary, and Paolo accompanies Mia in her journey through maternity, even though he is not the biological father of her child. As the final voice-over remarks, through his fatherhood, Paolo will bear witness to a miracle; and yet, what are miracles if not subversive events “contro natura” (against nature)?

Ultimately, this article creates destabilizing connections, showing that any ecological discourse, far from providing a reassuring green “home,” is a journey through unsettling detours, (un)familiar “contaminations” and unresolved tensions.

Between Difference and Inclusion: Ecofeminism in Italy

In sketching the evolution of ecofeminism in Italy, I will highlight two key aspects: the preeminence of political activism over scholarly work, and the tension between openness to queer theories and adherence to the binary approach of *femminismo della differenza* (feminism of difference). The questions Mollo's film prompts us to ask are whether Italian feminist environmentalism can reconcile its internal frictions and how this reconciliation may advance the gender-nature debate. Examining these issues will lead us to tackle a further challenge: can ecofeminism include eco-masculine allies and/or subjectivities who do not identify with gender binaries without diluting its feminist mission? Putting it briefly: is an ecofeminism that speaks *indifferently* to everybody, an *indifferent* feminism?

Laura Cima and Franca Marcomin trace the origin of ecofeminism in Italy to a political program that emerged in the mid-1980s, in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident (the explosion of a reactor in a nuclear power station at the Ukraine-Belarus border in 1986).¹⁰ The radioactive material released by the explosion contaminated flora and fauna across Europe and caused

⁹ Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 278.

¹⁰ See Cima and Marcomin's introduction to *L'ecofemminismo in Italia*; for an overview of ecofeminism in the Italian language, see also the journal *Deportate, esuli, profughe*.

increased cancer risk, among other health conditions. The Chernobyl disaster acted as a call for action: Italian women activists realized that this environmental emergency caused by a patriarchal management of resources had a detrimental impact on their everyday lives—from food to procreative choices—and it was indeed a feminist issue. Local activism led to the creation of the first *liste Verdi* (Green electoral rolls) in 1986 and, later on, to the creation of the Italian green party (*I Verdi*). Once elected, the women of *liste Verdi* voiced pressing concerns, such as raising awareness of the danger associated with nuclear energy, promoting anti-militarism, defending animal rights, and educating people about procreation and reproductive technologies.

The politics of these environmentalist Italian women—the *donne Verdi*—envisioned a type of “*polis*, intesa non solo come comunità degli esseri umani ma [...] come comunità di *tutti i viventi*” (*polis*, understood not only as a community of human beings, but [...] as a community of *all* living beings).¹¹ According to Monica Lanfranco, the community-making power of ecofeminism relied, and still relies, on the welcoming image of Mother Nature seen both as an authoritative nurturer and a feminine body that has limits and imposes limitations on our human action.¹² This attempt to create an alternative community echoed second-wave feminism, in particular Luce Irigaray’s critique of the masculine neutral and of the absence of female subjectivity in social life, which greatly influenced the Italian *femminismo della differenza* of the 1970s.¹³ The *donne Verdi* recast their difference by strategically re-appropriating women’s historical debasement in the sphere of corporeality and emotions. They redeployed traditional ideas about women as nurturers into an all-encompassing ethics of socio-environmental care.

However, Italian women’s commitment to the ethics and politics of care came to an abrupt end when the green party dissolved in 2009. Since that time, although Italian feminist environmentalism has not had an official political activist body, it still retains a social impact, most recently by attacking the hetero-patriarchy. For example, in November 2017, the lesbian grassroots group *ArchiLesbica* organized the event “Ecofemminismo. Percorso irrinunciabile?” (Ecofeminism. An indispensable path?) in Bologna to prompt dialogue between ecofeminism and lesbian activism. The common feminist goal was to create a “*rivoluzione necessaria*” (necessary revolution) against a false social determinism that masks “[i] privilegi dei maschi eterosessuali, bianchi, borghesi, abili e carnivori” (the privileges of white, heterosexual, bourgeois, able, carnivorous males) as the natural state of things.¹⁴

The mission of gathering different voices in a shared transfeminist platform is at the core of *Non una di meno* (NUDM) (Not One Woman Less), an intersectional movement founded in Rome in 2017 and particularly attuned to LGBTQIA+ groups.¹⁵ This platform coordinates a broad anti-violence plan against the many types of violence enacted by ultra-conservative, populist, and misogynist politics, including the environmental violence that neoliberal capitalism enables through its biocidal practices. Among its many local initiatives it is worth recalling the NUDM protest against

¹¹ When not otherwise indicated, translations from the Italian original are mine. Francescato, “Il verde e il rosa, un intreccio vitale,” in *L’ecofemminismo in Italia*, 71.

¹² Private interview, May 22, 2018.

¹³ See in particular Cavarero et al., *Diotima*.

¹⁴ This translation is of a flyer available on both the Facebook page of the event and through Bologna City Hall: <https://www.facebook.com/events/124569244883442/>; <http://www.comune.bologna.it/sites/default/files/documenti/Ecofemminismo-pieghevole.pdf>

¹⁵ See their blog and downloadable program: <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/>; https://drive.google.com/file/d/1r_YsRopDAqxCCvyKd4icBqbMhHYNEcNI/view. In English it has been translated as “Not one woman less, not one more death”; see, for example: <https://nacla.org/news/2016/11/01/niunamenos-not-one-woman-less-not-one-more-death> [accessed 24 May 2019].

the World Congress of Families, a meeting held in Verona in March 2019, to “affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family.”¹⁶

The many projects that have inherited the political tradition of Italian ecofeminism are certainly promising, yet the synergy between feminist and environmentalist perspectives is not devoid of internal incongruences. Taken-for-granted gender dualisms, references to women's privileged symbiosis with nature, or quick dismissals of queer theories as a fashionable call for genderqueer fluidity have made it difficult to stimulate a truly inclusive dialogue.¹⁷ Even the universal feminine archetype of Mother Nature could be seen as a limitation. While nature is a source of nourishment, it can thrive without people and even act as an agent of destruction. Furthermore, how does this maternal/feminine “Nature” relate to women who decide not to experience motherhood? Or to those who cannot become mothers *because* of nature? Or, finally, to women who, like Mia, are biological mothers but renounce parenthood? To identify “Life” on earth with a caregiving “Mother” is controversial from both environmental and gender perspectives. Furthermore, as anti-speciesist Massimo Filippi explains, the feminist logic of unmasking the overpowering, and homogenizing, role of masculinity in order to actually engage in the dialectics of the man-woman binary does not reflect the intrinsic multiplicity that characterizes “la faglia vitale che attraversa tutto il *vivente sensuale*” (the vital fault that crosses the whole of *sensual life*), a life that must be freed from human practices of banning and appropriation.¹⁸ Exclusion/inclusion frameworks cannot help but foster dynamics of separation that are ultimately incompatible with any ecological discourse.

The feminist practice of strategic difference is undoubtedly justified by the fact that, as Lanfranco stresses, Italy is a country still ravaged by sexist language and stereotypes, a country in which misogyny is foundational to other forms of violence.¹⁹ In her opinion, deconstructing stereotypical gendered models is a priority. But she also remarks that erasing the distinction between feminine and masculine would inevitably produce a disembodied discourse and ultimately annihilate femininity along with the historical achievements of feminism.

Logics of inclusion/exclusion have also undermined the cohesiveness of the Italian LGBTQIA+ movement. In a 2017 document entitled “A mali estremi lesbiche estreme” (To extreme evil, extreme lesbians) ArciLesbica blamed queer anti-binarism for destroying lesbian subjectivity and cannibalizing feminine difference.²⁰ The association has declared that its members have been ostracized for not aligning with the “LGBT diktat” on procreation rights. ArciLesbica endorses sperm banks, viewing the procedure as non-invasive on donors, but has been quite critical of medical practices, especially surrogate maternity, that allow couples or single individuals—heterosexual or gay—to achieve parenthood at all costs. For the association, surrogate maternity is extremely problematic, as it marginalizes women during pregnancy and delivery. In addition, “il business delle bambine e dei bambini su commissione” (the business of ordered babies) exerts patriarchal control on the female body by labeling the uterus with a “marchio” (trademark) and re-creating a female caretaking role deprived of parental agency.²¹

Through its polemic attack, ArciLesbica has voiced the concern that the lesbian struggle would fall into indifference—indifference toward, and between, gender identities and sexual orientations. And “indifference” has indeed become the key word in a heated debate that sets in opposition the

¹⁶ See the website of the event: <https://wcfverona.org/it/about-the-congress/>

¹⁷ Sarti, “Ecofemminismo e natura,” 199.

¹⁸ Filippi, “I quattro concetti fondamentali dell’antispecismo,” 35.

¹⁹ Private interview.

²⁰ Arcilesbica, “A mali estremi, lesbiche estreme.”

²¹ Arcilesbica, “A mali estremi, lesbiche estreme.”

feminist group Diotima—the spokeswomen of *femminismo della differenza*—and what they have dubbed “travestitismo [queer] generalizzato” (generalized [queer] transvestitism).²² Diana Sartori, in her essay “Noi che non siamo indifferenti” (We who are not indifferent) has explained that “il senso libero della differenza sessuale” (the free sense of sexual difference) is an embodied yet precarious balance between necessity and freedom, body and meaning, nature and culture.²³ She warns readers of an “impianto individualistico e indifferenziante del *gender* come emancipazione dalla differenza sessuale” (individualistic and indifferent notion of *gender*, understood as emancipation from sexual difference). Such indifference is fostered by views that aim to de-sexualize parental roles and promote an anti-discriminatory fight for equality focused on gay rights of marriage and adoption. What is at stake in Sartori’s feminist critique of “queer indifference” is a discourse about gendered bodies and parental figures that does not allow the corporal narrative of women to be left out of consideration. Yet, is her view actually at odds with queer theories?

Lorenzo Bernini, in a presentation effectively entitled “Indifferenti a chi?” (Indifferent to whom?) has addressed Sartori’s criticism, clarifying that the purpose of queer theory is not to erase differences in such a way as to create a collective gender masquerade. The shared objective of a number of queer theories is to highlight how all of us, “comprese le lesbiche e i gay, comprese le persone bisessuali, transgender e intersessuali—siamo travestiti di abiti cisgender ed eterosessuali che altri hanno scelto per noi” (including lesbians and gays, including bisexual, transgender, and intersex people—are already transvestites with cisgender and heterosexual clothes that other people have chosen for us).²⁴ Queer theory—Bernini continues—does not see gender identity as a way to bypass biological features. While in her article Sartori sees transgender bodies as the ultimate Promethean dream of control over nature, Bernini draws attention to intersex babies and to the fact that queer studies scholars have raised concerns of surgical or medical practices, denying these individuals the ability to search freely for their gender identity. Similarly, queer theories have criticized the adoption of standardized practices to change gender or the idea that surgical intervention is needed to legally recognize transgender identities. According to Bernini, Sartori’s defense of women’s difference may conceal a hidden agenda, namely, a defense to the bitter end of a model of parenthood that identifies women as, by nature, the sole “buone genitrici” (good parents and procreators).

I see a further issue with Sartori’s perspective. She connects the proliferation of gender indifference exclusively with the fluid economy of post-patriarchal capitalism. While creating (artificial) differences is definitely a consumerist strategy, the recent rise of nationalist models across Europe and the U.S. has marked a revival of a unifying geo-politics that celebrates “carbon-heavy masculinity.”²⁵ Perhaps feminism should fear more of the irreconcilable differences that undermine progressive platforms. Divisive narratives are partly responsible for the spread of a type of populism that polarizes public opinion through a manipulation of the binary “natural/unnatural.” In fact, in an epoch undermined by environmental inequity, populist rhetoric does not use this binary to advance eco-justice policies that can guarantee the psycho-physical wellbeing of under-represented peoples and silenced nonhumans. Rather, the populist discourse engages the “natural/unnatural” dualism to justify its own political agenda; e.g. to advocate for the *conservation* of Mediterranean waters against the *polluting* piracy of immigrant traffickers and NGO rescue ships, to call for the proposal to increase birth rates to boost the *naturalness* of Italian citizenship, or to foster the idea that gay couples are *naturally unfit* for parenthood.

²² See Muraro, “La differenza sessuale c’è.”

²³ Sartori, “Noi che non siamo indifferenti.”

²⁴ Bernini, “Indifferenti a chi?”

²⁵ See Alaimo, *Exposed*.

However, the conflicts existing between the embodied discourse of Italian feminism and the queer mesh of ecology can revitalize the “positive philosophy of complexity and connection” that has informed ecofeminism.²⁶ If we think about the notions of complexity and connection from a chemical perspective, we can see how it is instability—the instability of electrons—that creates bonding, allowing for more complex, and at times even more stable, connections. Inner instability is similarly central in the feminism of Diotima, which conceives of sexual difference as “mancata coincidenza” (a missed coincidence), an unfillable divergence, “qualcosa che si vive come un eccesso e una carenza che non si compensano fra loro” (something that one lives as an excess and a lack that do not balance each other).²⁷ Movement, tension, vulnerability, and unbalance can shape a feminist eco-ethics of complexity and connection, “valuable precisely for an irreconcilability that cannot be figured as opposition or negation” but as a transformative potential to affect and be affected: in a word, to connect.²⁸

But how can the ecofeminist platform connect people across genders and sexualities without slipping into the indifference feminists dread? If, as Gaard reminds us, “all environmental ethics are constructed through the lens of gender,” the unique identification of ecofeminist ethics with the nurturing icon of Mother Earth, which is still dominant in Italian ecofeminism, is not as unifying as it wishes to be.²⁹ Eco-femininity should neither be erased nor shelved for good; yet, it should be questioned and flanked by “diverse expressions of eco-genders—not just eco-masculinities but also eco-femme and eco-trans identities.”³⁰

Il padre d'Italia offers a visual representation of eco-genders that casts doubt on binaries without dismissing a free search for personal and social identity. The movie inspires a more inclusive feminist ecology by picturing Paolo and Mia “travelling away” from traditional models of masculinity, femininity, and parenthood. By participating in Paolo and Mia’s unplanned road trip, spectators move away from a popularized “green imagery” inhabited by motherly femininity and wild masculinity, to engage in a queer journey, and ecology, of connecting complexity.

Ecologic Connections, or Travelling Away from “Home”

Mollo’s movie frames the story of Paolo and Mia’s encounter within an overarching narrative of unpredictability and displacement. The two protagonists meet in a disco: she faints, and he brings her to the hospital and then to his apartment. The next morning, Paolo borrows a van from his boss to drive Mia to her boyfriend’s house. But the quick ride suddenly turns into a long road trip: Mia has a heated argument with her boyfriend, so Paolo offers to drive her to Rome, where she lives. They end up proceeding to Naples, where Ettore, the alleged father of her child, is from. In Naples, Paolo and Mia learn that Ettore died long before Mia got pregnant, leading to the realization that she had been pretending all along that he was the father. Thus they proceed south, to her family’s house, in Calabria. There they act as a heterosexual couple until Mia suddenly leaves and Paolo asks Mario, his former partner, for a ride back to Turin. However, even this departure is not final: Paolo returns after *Italia*’s birth to acknowledge her as his daughter and embrace a new journey through fatherhood.

²⁶ See Cuomo’s observations on Warren’s philosophy, in “On Ecofeminist Philosophy,” 9.

²⁷ Muraro, “La differenza sessuale c’è.”

²⁸ I am borrowing from Oliver’s reflection on non-binary ethics, in “Sexual Difference, Animal Difference,” 308.

²⁹ Here Gaard is summarizing the core point of Kneel’s *Nature Ethics*; see Gaard, “Toward New EcoMasculinities, EcoGenders, and EcoSexualities,” 238.

³⁰ Gaard, “Toward New EcoMasculinities, EcoGenders, and EcoSexualities,” 238.

The road trip becomes the terrain of Paolo and Mia's bonding, with viewers seeing the characters' connection emerge from shared moments of estrangement and vulnerability. Paolo's anxiety about skipping work and keeping the van, his nostalgia for Mario, and his self-shame for concealing his homosexuality intermingle with Mia's uncontrollable exuberance, hidden fears, and unspeakable sense of inadequacy for motherhood. In this context, displacement is a visual metaphor for the abandonment of expectations about their gendered behaviors and roles, i.e., the metropolitan gay man and the single mother. Furthermore, the multifaceted territory of the Italian peninsula is also a protagonist in Paolo's and Mia's departure from scripted roles. One of the establishing shots, which shows the routine of the male protagonist as a shop assistant of Arredalcasa (an Ikea-like store at the outskirts of Turin), sets Paolo in contrast to a billboard of his company featuring a happy (white, heterosexual, bourgeois) family. This unidimensional *famiglia naturale*, ironically placed in a suburban "desert" of concrete and asphalt, advertises a lifetime promise: "La tua casa, il tuo futuro" (Your house, your future). The predefined future of the billboard is what the movie calls into question.

Italy, with its composite "storied matter"—a centuries-old history of cultural, racial, and socio-economic meshes, inscribed in the material stories of the peninsula—acts as a narrative co-agent in Paolo and Mia's story of encounter and transformation.³¹ As the cinematic eye moves away, to capture a disco in Turin, a hospital, impersonal highways, Roman residential neighborhoods, the baroque richness of Naples, and, finally, the transparent water of a southern beach, it problematizes from different perspectives the promise of Arredalcasa's billboard: a man-made destiny concealed as our "natural" destination. For instance, Naples is the scene of an eccentric masquerade of social conformism—Mia pretends to buy a wedding dress and runs away from the store, dressed as a bride. In contrast, the marine location becomes revelatory. The southern village, with its beautiful beach and archaic culture, is the place in which two well-established gender-nature associations, heterosexuality and biological family bonds, are eradicated. In this place seemingly unchanged by time, Paolo embraces his gay identity, and Mia, although portrayed as a fertility goddess, is rejected by her "natural family" as being unfit for motherhood. The association of biological nature with a comforting sense of belonging is purposefully dispelled in two scenes set in Mia's old-fashioned home: Mia greets her father, who is hoeing the family orchard, and he virtually ignores her; later in the sequence, her mother, who is cooking with all the women of the family, shames Mia's decision to keep the baby, affirming that women like Mia usually "pensa[no] prima a trovare una soluzione a questo problema" (look sooner for a solution to this problem). Far from being the seat—or "homeplace"—of unchanging values, the Calabrian village, is revealed to be the seat of conflicted dynamics yet also of potential change.

The destabilizing potential of Paolo and Mia's journey resides in its ability to recast our construct of nature from a safe place into a departure point. Travelling away is what allows the two protagonists to re-connect with their social and emotional environments. In a parallel way, departing from the futurity myth that equates "saving the planet" with preserving natural balance would allow people to embrace a new understanding of ecology. Nature, in mainstream "green discourse," has been exclusively equated with homeostasis, with an Edenic "house" threatened by change and always striving to re-acquire equilibrium. However, as Bryant illustrates, positive feedback (phenomena perturbing balance) is equally natural as homeostatic tendencies. Therefore, the "mystified conception of nature [as a self-balanced paradise] confuses its own normative preferences with the being of nature as such."³² The demystifying ecology of *Il padre d'Italia* portrays the interaction between Paolo and Mia not as the natural/heterosexual way to maintain the social equilibrium of reproductive futurity, but as

³¹ On the concept of "storied matter," see Iovino and Opperman's *Material Ecocriticism*.

³² Bryant, "Black," 291.

the equally natural process of developing new (un)familiar relationships through transformative closeness.

The van that the two characters use on the road trip is a site of visual narrativity with an important destabilizing function. In western societies, cars are objects that have historically mediated and shaped models of hetero-masculinity. The fact that Paolo does not even own a car and needs to borrow a van from Assunta, his supervisor—an immigrant woman—marks a pivotal plot point in shaking dominant systems of material and symbolic relations that are falsely perceived as natural. The Arredalcasa delivery van is also the mobile “home” in which the two characters begin questioning their gender roles: at first, the vehicle acts as the material reminder of social norms—Paolo constantly feels the pressure of breaking the “law” by keeping the van—yet, the vehicle gradually turns into a microcosm of resistance and liberation. In a scene set in Naples, Paolo resolves to deliver the contents of the van—a kitchen set—to the orphanage where he was raised, performing an act of rebellion against capitalist “re-productive” systems. After this defiant action, when the van eventually runs out of gas, Paolo and Mia feel free to abandon it at the edge of the road and *ecologically* walk away.

The image of travelling away from the self-regulating balance associated with both nature and the capitalist market resonates with queer perspectives that have “contest[ed] the reassuring image of sexual minorities as victims of discrimination whose only desire is to be assimilated into existing societies (matrimony, adoption, the right to serve in the military, and all the juridical support that would guarantee the comforts of a bourgeois homosexual life).”³³ Critiques to assimilation may foster forms of life in which freedom is not *capitalized* by a productive, and reproductive, “agenda for the future” but, as Bernini contends, expresses itself in a “transformative research that has to do with the life of the subject and the subject’s [non-hierarchical] relationship to the other and to collectivity in the present.”³⁴ Such a transformative search can enter into dialogue with Muraro’s understanding of “difference” not as a static “difference between” but as a dynamic embodied difference that “mi impedisce di identificarmi con quella che sono, mi mette in relazione con quella che non sono” (prevents me from identifying myself with the person I am and puts me in relation with the person I am not).³⁵ In the movie, Paolo sees fatherhood neither as a stable identity nor as the accomplishment of an assimilation plan. In fact, he does not legally adopt Mia’s daughter. He claims that Italia *is* his daughter. Paolo adapts to a transformative journey in which he precariously balances between a number of identities: gay man, working-class youth, and single father. Thus, at a social level, Mollo’s movie creates an ecosystem in which non-teleological dynamics (conflicting desires, self-shame, and even death drive) coexist with the possibility to enable alternative forms of community and gender behaviors as suggested by the relationship between Paolo and Mia, or Paolo and Italia.

As we have seen, the visual journey of *Il padre d'Italia*, along with Paolo and Mia’s characterization as restless travelers, displaces gender-nature constructs that equate the (heteronormative and capitalist) homeplace with the natural seat of balance. This revised imagery, beyond leading the audience to a reflection on Italian society, can serve as a thread of “connecting complexity” linking Italian ecofeminism and queer theory.

In the 1999 conference “Politica sostantivo femminile” (Politics, female noun) Cima compared the ecofeminist *matriarcato verde* (green matriarchy) to a house featuring a hospitable atmosphere which allows for mobility: “un’immagine accogliente della casa verde, aperta e leggera come le tende o capanni delle popolazioni nomadi” (a green house, open and light like the tents or sheds of nomadic populations), a house in which an equal number of women and men are involved

³³ On the capitalist market see Bryant, “Black,” 291; on queer theories, see Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses*, 4.

³⁴ Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses*, 9.

³⁵ Muraro, “Il pensiero della differenza va capito.”

in decision-making.³⁶ Here, the term “matriarchy” may raise critiques for its combined focus on reproductivity and power, yet this matriarchy is placed in a mobile dwelling. As Cima highlights, feminist difference “ha sconfinato in altri mondi e l’ecologia ha rafforzato, con il valore della biodiversità, l’idea delle differenze come ricchezza” (has trespassed into other worlds, and ecology has strengthened, along with the value of biodiversity, the idea of difference as a form of enrichment).³⁷ This reference to the enriching value of difference recalls a statement by feminist Carla Lonzi who, in her seminal work *Sputiamo su Hegel / Let’s Spit on Hegel* (1970), defined “il mondo della differenza [come] il mondo dove il terrorismo getta le armi e la sopraffazione cede al rispetto della varietà e della molteplicità della vita” (the world of difference [as] a world where terrorism drops its weapons, and abuse of power cedes to the respect of life variety and multiplicity).³⁸ Seeing difference as the key element for a vibrant feminist ecosystem has informed the aforementioned program of ArciLesbica, in which the image of the house is associated with a political free space that defies the threat of flattening equality. Finally, Sarti, in her account of ecofeminism, has translated the concept of a mobile dwelling open to differences into environmentalist terms, positing the unifying principle of life in a multiplicity of forms.³⁹ The notion of an embodied life characterized by intrinsic mobility is an ecofeminist pathway that can connect the Italian feminist tradition with queer theories. “Per la prima volta ho visto un futuro. Sono matto secondo te?” (For the first time I saw a future. Do you think I’m mad?) Paolo asks Mario, during their encounter in Calabria. The future Paolo dares to envision is feminist as it *mobilizes* the gender (un)balance of mainstream family constructs.

In fact, the image of a mobile house appears in the theoretical discourse of Teresa De Lauretis, one of the founders of queer theory. In the 1990 article “Eccentric Subjects,” she sees lesbianism as the experience of giving up a stable homeplace, “not only the home of [...] childhood and the family, but any other ‘home,’ such as a women’s community that would replicate the conditions of home, that is to say ‘the suppression of positive differences [that] underwrites familial identity.’”⁴⁰ Leaving the house entails engaging in a queer journey in which futurity is not a (re-)production of the same, but a time-space in which, as Kelly Oliver proposes, “conceptions of difference might be informed by multiple meanings that have been left behind to facilitate fixing difference into binary oppositions.”⁴¹ Oliver’s ethics draws on non-binary sexual behaviors in nonhuman animals to deconstruct human conceptions, and manipulations, of difference. This ethics similarly stresses the necessity of abandoning a notion of gender difference conceived of as stable. In building her argument, Oliver borrows from Derrida the idea that the “recognition [of phallogocentrism or the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness] should not make of either the truth value or femininity an object of knowledge [...]; still less should it make of them a place to inhabit, a home.”⁴² Travelling away from the construct of home as a cozy place one must inhabit forever and always—the future Arredalcasa’s family promises—is the necessary detour towards a stronger, yet less stable, ecological community.

A community, according to De Lauretis, is “inherently unstable and contextual, not based on sameness or essential connections, but offering agency instead of passivity; a comm-unity [sic] that is

³⁶ Cima and Marcomin, *L’ecofemminismo in Italia*, 205.

³⁷ Cima and Marcomin, *L’ecofemminismo in Italia*, 201.

³⁸ Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*, 21.

³⁹ See Sarti, “Ecofemminismo e natura,” 201.

⁴⁰ De Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects,” 136.

⁴¹ Oliver, “Sexual Difference,” 295.

⁴² Oliver, “Sexual Difference,” 295.

‘the product of work, of struggle...of interpretation.’”⁴³ Based on this definition of community as a locus of displacement and difficult encounter, the friction inherent in the term “feminist ecology” acquires positive meaning. Ecology, as both a house to inhabit and “(de)leave(r)” to future generations, and a house to leave in order to experience the present and its unpredictable challenges, creates connections through a shared feeling of instability. In a similar way, Mia and Paolo’s journey ends with a regained, yet destabilizing, sense of familiarity that Paolo, as the symbolic father of Italy, evokes.

Ecomasculinity

In one of the last sequences of *Il padre d'Italia*, the two protagonists go to the beach in the village where Mia’s family lives. This sequence is introduced by a montage of the couple walking together and posing like movie stars. Through its playful tone, the montage emphasizes the unusual nature of the two characters’ relationship, and the subsequent scene focuses on a destabilizing passing of the baton. Mia teaches Paolo to swim: she is figuratively entrusting Paolo with the ability to stay afloat in his future parental role, while he is learning to face his own queer masculinity reflected in the water. This moment of care, co-dependency, and mutual trust is meaningful, as it *converts* patriarchal standards into ecomasculinity.

As the movie presents a series of thought-provoking references to the Catholic religion, which is discussed below, this scene can be interpreted as a crucial moment of transformation recalling the sacrament of baptism as well as the episode of Saint Paul’s conversion in the Acts of the Apostles. Dominant masculinity is converted into a type of ecomasculinity that, while precariously grounded in water, is able to shake gendered hierarchies.

This transformative process is re-evoked in the final sequence of the movie, when Paolo returns to that southern beach before adopting Italia: in silence—the noise of waves is the only sound in this scene—he dips his toe in the marine water again facing his fears and finding strength. The symbolic connection of the male protagonist with water, an essential element for human and nonhuman life that has been exploited by patriarchal socio-economic apparatuses, is significant for the construction of Paolo’s identity as a sustainable alternative to mainstream capitalist heteromasculinity. As Alaimo highlights in her criticism of patriarchal masculinity, this hegemonic gendered structure is a catalyzer of a system of pollution: SUV emissions, overconsumption of meat, sexism, and economic exploitation of human and nonhuman others. To further contextualize Alaimo’s perspective on Italian society, we should briefly recall that, especially in the south, “carbon-heavy masculinity” can be tied to practices of rapid industrialization, petrochemical and toxic waste, unregulated fishing and overbuilding, which have endangered marine environments. In contrast, Paolo’s timid and respectful attitude towards sea water, his choice of not owning a car, his rebellious “donation” to the orphanage, and the fact that one of the few scenes involving food features him at a local food truck of hot *taralli* (a meatless snack similar to bagels or pretzels)—all these key aspects of Paolo’s characterization create a nurturing model of ecomasculinity.⁴⁴ Yet this alternative model is uncomfortable, as it questions cultural and sexist biases that remain quite strong in Italy. Matteo Andreozzi articulates this difficulty when he admits that, as an Italian male scholar interested in ecofeminism, he has noticed that these theories have been received with perplexity or even laughter during classes and conferences.⁴⁵

⁴³ De Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects,” 136.

⁴⁴ On ecomasculinity see Gaard, “Toward New EcoMasculinities, EcoGenders,” 237.

⁴⁵ Andreozzi, “Un’illogica utopia,” 13.

However, the ecofeminist critique of androcentric apparatuses also applies to male gay identities that, while being attuned to nature, still fall into misogynist behaviors. We may recall two cinematic examples, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and the recent *Call Me by Your Name* (2017): both movies associate homosexuality with an immersion in nonhuman nature. Yet, in deconstructing the assumption that gay sexuality is “against nature,” these works create characters who exploit female partners in order to express their homoerotic desire. Modern “screen ladies” serve as cover-ups for male lovers, yet the emotional exploitation of these women does not seem to constitute any problematic plot point in the development of the film narrative. By contrast, Paolo’s relationship with Mia delineates a journey within the journey; namely, it traces a path that leads both characters towards self-acceptance. For both protagonists, this inner and relational process is more of a meandering than a linear progression. Paolo struggles with telling Mia about his desire for fatherhood and, in a parallel way, Mia suffers in admitting that femininity, womanhood, and motherhood do not necessarily overlap. Thus, the characters’ mutual unveiling unfolds through physical intimacy as if, paradoxically, bodily exposure could hide the shame that verbal disclosure cannot conceal.

Il padre d'Italia construes a complex affective ecosystem that blurs neat divides and binaries. Paolo resolves to return to Turin because, as he tells Mario, he realized that, in the remote southern village, he was “playing the straight” by pretending that Mia was his partner and Italia his child. The movie narrative, though, is much more subtle than Paolo’s reconstruction; it is unclear whether he was performing self-betrayal or if his attraction to Mia marked an important moment of self-exploration. Either way, the movie does not define the attraction between the protagonists: it neither portrays Mia as the “cure” to Paolo’s homosexuality, nor does it represent their relationship as a concealment of Paolo’s identity. Mia is fully aware that her travel companion had a relationship with a man—she discovers this, in Rome, by snooping on Paolo’s cell phone. And yet she embraces his gender ambiguity as the awareness that “living is more about the ability to incorporate change and uncertainty than it is about the fitness of predefined capacities.”⁴⁶

Mollo’s movie, in its engagement with change, uncertainty, and vulnerability, develops a queer ecological narrative that veers away from green ecology, with its bright futurity and progressive agenda. Instead, Mollo problematizes the simplistic transfigurations of people who identify as LGBTQIA+ as naturalized “champions of an egalitarian and liberal modernity in which love defeats power, and affectivity neutralizes the disturbing force of sexuality.”⁴⁷ Paolo’s shyness and ambiguity are effective visual renderings of what Sandilands has defined as “blue ecology”:

Blue is the compassion that derives from loss, and the networks of care that may spring from the experience: not hearty, organic, muscular, progressive solidarity. Blue is a recognition of fragility, vulnerability, and precarious, ecological enmeshedness in the world. Blue is a political form that does not rush to positivity, but instead lingers in critique for long enough to question the necessity and temporality of growth and expansion. Blue is desire and its limits. Blue is uncertainty. Blue is negativity (but not apocalypticism). Blue is fragility, a move toward dispersion in breath, in the sky, rather than a solid identity, grounded in the earth.⁴⁸

Sandilands also highlights that “blue is the journey, not the conclusion.”⁴⁹ Paolo’s journey, in fact, remains, and must remain, unfinished. The audience can only imagine the rewarding moments and

⁴⁶Sandilands, “Into This Blue,” 202.

⁴⁷ Bernini, introduction to *Queer Apocalypses*, xviii.

⁴⁸ Sandilands, “Into This Blue,” 198.

⁴⁹ Sandilands, “Into This Blue,” 201.

difficulties of his fatherhood. Imagining becomes a first step for viewers to leave their “houses” and build (un)familiar ecological relationships.

In an interview with Mollo, Marinelli, and Ragonese, the director and lead actors emphasized how the movie-making process deeply connected the cast and crew.⁵⁰ Mollo emphasized that his goal was precisely that: to extend this communal feeling to the general audience by generating reactions, rather than approval. *Il padre d'Italia* engages with “blue ecology” by crafting a socio-political message of change that does not focus on bright green positivity. Its message challenges the audience with the task of familiarizing itself with Paolo’s role and questioning the models of “natural” masculinity that are often undisputed in Italian society.

Parenthood

Mollo has stated that *Il padre d'Italia* was not intended to be a political movie, but was meant to tell the story of one man’s journey towards fatherhood.⁵¹ Yet when we view this journey within the context of our current socio-political situation, its message cannot help but become political. In the last few years, the institution of family has been at the center of media attention both in the U.S. and Italy. Among fairly recent news in the U.S. we might recall the zero-tolerance policy that Trump’s government implemented in separating families of illegal immigrants and the trial case of the baker from Colorado who refused to make a cake for the wedding of a gay couple.⁵² In Italy, the Lega-Cinque Stelle government has adopted strict anti-immigration measures while showing a benevolent attitude specifically towards women and children seeking asylum. The defense of select vulnerable groups has also been a main point in the agenda of the Minister of Family, Lorenzo Fontana. As a pro-life and pro-family advocate, Fontana has declared that the Italian government will defend the right of children to have a mother and a father, and he has criticized local governments that have recorded the names of babies of same-sex parents.⁵³ His view echoes that of vice-premier Matteo Salvini, who, in the 2018 meeting of La Lega in Pontida, vehemently condemned surrogate maternity, calling it “disgusting” (*fa schifo*) and claiming that he “difender[à] la famiglia naturale” (will defend the natural family).⁵⁴

Generally speaking, populist rhetoric has appropriated the construct of nature, from defending the homeland to endorsing reproductive models. Yet such biopolitics has also extended the myth of “righteous nature” to embrace Christianity and its moral and family values. As Bernini clarifies, in Italy, conservative Catholicism has attacked “gender theory” (a blurry macro-category including a variety of theories on gender) for undermining the institution of family and fostering a “philosophy of rebellion against nature, and thus against God.”⁵⁵ Conservative politics has, therefore, used nature as a standard in two ways, namely, as both the guarantee of the status quo and divine justification of such order.

Il padre d'Italia turns these right-wing manipulations of nature on their head. Montage and costumes create a queer parody of the Christian holy family, suggesting a visual parallel between Mia

⁵⁰ See Coming Soon, “Il padre d'Italia.”

⁵¹ Mollo, email to author, September 17, 2018.

⁵² On the trial and ruling of the Supreme Court see de Vogue, “Supreme Court rules for Colorado Baker in Same-sex Wedding Cake Case.”

⁵³ This is, in particular, the case of Italian babies born abroad (e.g. in countries where surrogate maternity is legal) or adopted. In these cases, local governments have included both names of same-sex parents in Italian birth records.

⁵⁴ See Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, “L’utero in affitto mi fa schifo, difenderò la famiglia naturale.”

⁵⁵ Quoted in Bernini, Introduction to *Queer Apocalypses*, xiv.

and Paolo, and Mary and Joseph. Parody, here, is not meant as mockery, but as a rewriting and “remediation” of a sacred narrative that is revealed to be unsettling and, most certainly, at odds with any biological/natural view of parenthood.

Throughout the film, Mia wears an eye-catching jacket featuring an image of the Virgin Mary, and a number of shots draw the viewer’s attention to this peculiar piece of clothing. One scene in particular emphasizes the comparison of Mia with Mary; Mia is shown in a bar performing “There is a Light that Never Goes Out” by The Smiths. The montage alternates the performance of the female protagonist with a series of cutaways. When the song begins, Mia is shown, from behind, walking down the hallway of her parents’ house, and a close-up then focuses on the portrait of the Madonna on her jacket. The subsequent shot is a cut back to the main scene, in which Mia is singing, wearing that same jacket. The sequence features two more cutaways: a close-up of Paolo and Mia lying in bed, and then another shot of Mia walking down the hallway. The segment ends with Mia, at the bar, turning away from the audience and showing, once again, the Madonna on the back of her jacket. This montage finds visual unity in the image of the Virgin Mary that opens and closes the sequence, connecting Mia, a mother by chance who turns her motherhood into a gift, with Mary, a woman chosen to turn her unexpected maternity into a redemptive gift.

In a parallel fashion, the character of Paolo shows a marked resemblance with Saint Joseph: a far more ordinary figure, this employee of a furniture store who dreamed of being a carpenter takes on the responsibility of helping pregnant Mia/Mary and, later, of becoming the adoptive father of her child. Paolo’s ecomasculinity further queers the image of the holy family: one of the final scenes of the movie, showing Paolo visibly moved, bent over Italia’s incubator, rewrites the traditional iconography of the Madonna with child. According to feminist thinker Adriana Cavarero, such a maternal posture is the visual rendering of an “ethical geometry” *inclined* towards—rather than vertically dominating—the needs of others. Yet, while in Christian iconography, the Madonna’s maternal inclination is “frozen” in an “originary and natural mold, an archetypal posture,”⁵⁶ Paolo embodies a relational inclination that emerges from a perturbing, yet thrilling, precariousness.

Mollo’s characterization of his protagonists finds a further similarity with the holy family in the framing narrative: both tell the story of an exceptional couple embracing a journey that is revealed to be life-changing. The nativity narrative of *Il padre d’Italia* is based on a miraculous, yet somewhat scandalous, new beginning, able to prompt a transformative action through the moment of birth. Paolo, after returning to Turin, hears Mia’s words: “la natura ogni giorno fa un sacco di miracoli. E guarda me, io sono un miracolo” (Nature works loads of miracles every day. Look at me, I’m a miracle). In exploring the event of birth as both an immanent miracle and a new beginning that sets things into motion, I recall Hannah Arendt’s definition of “action” as the possibility of re-enacting the beginning, intrinsic to our own (re-)birth. In *The Human Condition* (1958), she writes:

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.⁵⁷

Paolo’s *action* of adopting Italia, an action that is private as much as political, does not occur outside, or disconnected from, its environment. Like birth, which is ultimately a departure from the safe house provided by the womb, Paolo’s “revolutionary” beginning as a gay single father marks a peculiar type

⁵⁶ Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 9.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

of connection-disconnection in a chain of embodied relations. Leaving home is the original action that leads Paolo to interrupt what is perceived as the monotony of the natural cycle and experience the political value of Italia's birth and his own birth as a father.⁵⁸

Cavarero's development of Arendt's reflections about the ontological and political centrality of the category of birth can further illuminate how vulnerable relationality is a foundational condition of human and nonhuman agency. Cavarero uses the figure of the infant, who is the vulnerable and defenseless being par excellence, to argue that "the relation to the other, precisely the relation that according to Arendt makes each of us unique, in [...] [the case of the small child] takes the form of a unilateral exposure."⁵⁹ The feminist theoretician reaches the conclusion that the infant "proclaims relationship as a human condition not just fundamental but structurally necessary" for its survival precisely because her original vulnerability and helplessness make her a "creature totally consigned to relationship,"⁶⁰ beyond gender stereotypes associating weakness with the feminine body.

We may add that Paolo's fatherhood, unlike heteronormative parental roles, shares this condition of vulnerable exposure with his child—"A volte penso che non avremo un futuro facile, che la gente non ci accetterà e che faranno del male a te per farne a me" (Sometimes I think we won't have an easy future, that people won't accept us and they'll hurt you to hurt me). As emerges from this inner monologue, the choice of adopting Italia makes him more open and vulnerable to relationships that might wound him in the end. His free action involves entering the social ecosystem that gay parenthood provokes: hostile reactions, doubts, and accusations of abnormality may co-occur with openness to experiencing alternatives to the *famiglia naturale*. Furthermore, by alluding to Paolo's own past as an orphan, *Il padre d'Italia* implicitly asks its spectators if it is better to deprive children of familial relations—or, even worse, let them drown in the Mediterranean—than make a communal effort to explore how diverse models of family could offer equally safe and supportive environments.

Paolo's adoption of Italia leads us to a few final observations of the current debate about parenthood. Paolo exemplifies a practice of care in the present that is neither matriarchal nor patriarchal. His parental role develops from the realization that, along the journey, it is possible to care "not (just) about the individual, the family, or one's descendants, but about the Other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations."⁶¹ In LGBTQIA+ communities, the discussion about gay parenthood has polarized around two extremes: on the one hand, the fight for equal rights, and on the other, the polemics against the "fetish of infancy," understood as the ultimate social machinery that manipulates children "to govern adults."⁶² The argument about the fetishism of infancy can also be connected to the exploitative economic system that fuels assisted reproductive technology. This is an aspect Cima and Marcomin highlight when they explain that environmentalist women are opposed to reproductive practices that validate procreative hubris and turn procreation "da un'economia della reciprocità a una di scambio" (from an economics of reciprocity to exchange economics).⁶³

Another way of looking at the issue of natural boundaries is that, if nature is a process of change, intermeshing, and trans-corporeal relations, and if, as climate change has harshly proved, there is no such thing as being "outside nature," human intelligence is certainly part of natural dynamics

⁵⁸ See Cavarero's discussion of Arendt's category of natality, in *Inclinations*, ch. 11.

⁵⁹ Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 21.

⁶⁰ Cavarero, *Horrorism*, 30.

⁶¹ Seymour, *Strange Natures*, 27.

⁶² In his analysis, Bernini refers to Edelman's criticism of heteronormative futurity, see *Queer Apocalypses*, 66, 81. For an overview of the queer debate on futurity see Hester's "(Ri)produrre futuri senza futurià riproduttiva."

⁶³ Cima and Marcomin, introduction, 21.

even when its action are detrimental to the environment. As Bryant reminds us, quoting a line from “No New Tale to Tell” by the group Love and Rockets, “you cannot go against nature, because when you do, it’s nature too.”⁶⁴ An even stronger provocation comes from the international xenofeminist collective Laboria Cuboniks that, in its manifesto, claims: “If nature is unjust, change nature!”⁶⁵ In the last few decades, it has been increasingly difficult to draw neat divisions between natural and artificial, or between life and non-life: for instance, are prosthetic bodies less human? Is a body that has undergone surgery an artificial body? Is the surgical body of a trans woman artificial? Keeping in mind such questions, we can reconcile two apparently contradictory viewpoints from Gaard’s reflections on reproductive technologies: nature is the measure of human boundaries, and everything is nature and therefore there are no boundaries. She frames her ecofeminist view in line with material feminisms and discussions of vibrant matter. As she explains,

genetic materials and the gestational mother/environment are not inert, “mindless matter” available for manipulation without unforeseen outcomes: they are material and energetic inputs and intelligences themselves. A “precautionary principle” approach suggests that it may be unwise to combine genetic materials and gestational environments without regard to those parents actively committed to raising the child produced through these manipulations. In light of the world’s swelling populations, and the children already present without parents or adequate nutrition/medical care/education/life opportunities, the options offered by the new reproductive technologies become visible as first-world elitism and indifference to the larger world of “all our relations.” A more ecological, ethical, and feminist strategy for creating families can and must be imagined.⁶⁶

Mollo’s movie portrays Paolo’s single parenthood as a type of family that must be imagined and embraced if we are to deal with a truly multifaceted and inclusive Italian society. Ultimately, the beauty of Paolo’s function as caretaker of Italia lies in the parental commitment he takes on that erases any distinction between the seemingly artificial relationality of adoption and the natural one of biological parenthood. Adoption “is nature too,” we might say. Paolo’s relationship of adoptive fatherhood is ecofeminist as, in its nurturing “inclination,” it dislodges the patriarchal script of combined domination over nature and women, while casting feminist and queer doubts on widespread views on gender-nature relations. His role of caretaker, accepted as a challenge and gift in the present, dislocates the idea that women’s essence resides in the futurity “myth of the child,” in their reproductive, maternal, and “earthy” *nature*—a myth that recent political campaigns have revived in Italy to increase natality. Paolo’s unexpected new beginning also calls into question another type of futurity myth that identifies women’s empowerment as incompatible with childbearing, so that motherhood, if desired, becomes a “female problem” that can be postponed or even “disembodied.” Oocyte cryopreservation and surrogate maternity often serve these futurity functions.

Paolo’s political “birth” as father is inspiring in its renewed understanding of family bonds, policies, and concerns that urge us to reframe the notion of family to explore unsettling ecological, ethical, and feminist paths.

Conclusion

⁶⁴ Bryant, “Black,” 296.

⁶⁵ Laboria Cuboniks, “Xenofeminism.”

⁶⁶ Gaard, email to author, July 13, 2018.

The journey narrative of *Il padre d'Italia* destabilizes a fixed ecological imagery so that the “oikos is not so much a bounded home as an ever-unfinished world.”⁶⁷ Using the lens of queer ecology, a multidisciplinary discourse that explores our ecosystem as an arena of transformative nature-culture relationships, I have illustrated how Mollo’s movie reveals an eco-*logos* by travelling away from seemingly natural gendered roles and family constructs in Italian contemporary society.

Paolo and Mia’s road trip across the peninsula turns familiar landscapes into agentic materiality that allows the audience to depart from the heteronormative model of the *famiglia naturale*, at least momentarily. Moreover, during the journey, viewers unexpectedly encounter a type of ecomasculinity that queers conventional systems of material and symbolic associations related to patriarchy and suggests new connections with human and nonhuman nature based on “love, warmth, vulnerability, and ambiguity.”⁶⁸ The audience also encounters unwelcoming biological parents, an (un)familiar couple disturbingly close to the Christian holy family, and a thought-provoking gay single father.

The travelling narrative of the film, which is purposefully focused on the potential for change intrinsic to life, can inspire a renewed dialogue between Italian ecofeminism and queer theories. Paolo and Mia embody a shared ontology of the vulnerable that overcomes hierarchies and oppositional binaries to connect “the human along multiple coexisting lines, which may be contingent and intermittent, at times even random.”⁶⁹ Such necessary detours and inclinations towards other perspectives can spur a critical feminist-queer discussion. To inspire a meaningful liberation movement this discussion must address embodied differences and common objectives, while addressing civil rights, social responsibilities related to procreation, and the creation of a more sustainable environment in line with different ecogenders.

Overall, Mollo’s unconventional father of Italia is evocative of a new starting point for Italy. This beginning may seem unlikely, considering the recent awakening of conservative nationalism. However, if the nature of any beginning is rooted in our human potential to perform what is infinitely improbable, an unforeseeable future is perhaps the final destination of Paolo and Mia’s unfinished journey.

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⁶⁷ Cohen, introduction to *Prismatic Ecology*, xxiii.

⁶⁸ Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 280.

⁶⁹ Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 129.

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