ALESSIO GIOVENE

Feminist Memoirs: Illness and Disability as Thresholds of Rhizomatic Subjectivity in Francesca Mannocchi's *Bianco è il colore del danno* and Claudia Durastanti's *La straniera*

Two Feminist Memoirs

In her essay 'On Being Ill', Virginia Woolf states that 'it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature',[1] considering how illness is common. For Woolf, literature does its best to maintain body and soul separated; the body appears as a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear. Conversely, 'All day, all night, the body intervenes; […] But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record'.[2] One hindrance to the representation of the body, and therefore illness, is squarely confronting human vulnerability. Still, Woolf pinpoints the importance of taking account of illness where 'things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals'.[3] A century later, the representation of illness and disability has spread widely, fostering the emergence of a new literary field, narrative medicine, and the academic discipline of disability studies.[4] Since people who were born or became sick or disabled tend to question their existence, narratives of illness and disability have found their foremost expression in autobiographies, memoirs, and collections of letters.[5]

This essay focuses on two memoirs that represent two hallmarks in the portrayal of illness and disability within the context of contemporary Italian literature: Claudia Durastanti's *La straniera* (2019) and Francesca Mannocchi's *Bianco è il colore del danno* (2021). This paper compares these two memoirs in light of Thomas Couser's intuition, for whom chronic disease and disability often overlap, as most chronic illnesses are disabling.[6] I contend that reflecting and reinterpreting disease and disability is a strategy employed by the two writers to affirm their feminist agency. The texts present an intersectional feminist critique grounded in disability

---

[1] V. Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *The New Criterion*, 4.1 (1926): 32 – 45 (p. 32).

[2] Ibid., pp. 32 – 33.

[3] Ibid., p. 36.

[4] Although some reflections on the representation of illness and disability were introduced by French theory starting in the late 1960s, particularly in the work of Foucault and Derrida, there was a significant increase between the 1990s and the early 2000s in the US. A landmark in critical thought about disability is R. Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). A pivotal reading in defining narrative medicine is R. Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[5] The bibliography is immense. Here are cited the works that probably had the most significant influence among women writers in the last decades: A. Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (Argyle, NY: Spinsters Ink, 1980), A. Ernaux, *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), and J. Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

[6] G. T. Couser, *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

studies,[7] for which ableism serves as a normative practice that reinforces sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression. Conversely, the two autobiographical narrators assert their womanhood through their relationship with illness and disability. Rita Charon has outlined how postmodern memoirs have likely been the most fruitful in narrative medicine, as they favor a new recount of oneself 'to be seeking and not merely repeating the grounds of meaning in a life, and to search not only among his or her memories but also among his or her intimates for that meaning'.[8] Charon also contends that women's memoirs mainly differ from men's, for they narrate the story of a self in her meaningful relationships with others, as exemplified by the two authors to whom this paper is devoted.

Francesca Mannocchi (Rome, 1981) and Claudia Durastanti (Brooklyn, 1984) are millennials who grew up in Italy but came from very different backgrounds. Mannocchi was born and has always lived in Rome, in a working-class family that she describes as very typical.[9] Durastanti, a CODA (Child of Deaf Adult), was born in Brooklyn, moved to Basilicata with her mother and brother after her parents' divorce, and lives between Rome and London. Mannocchi is a journalist and documentarian who has travelled to Libya and Iraq to witness migration stories, as illustrated, for instance, in her book, *Io Khaled vendo uomini e sono innocente* (Einaudi, 2019). Durastanti writes fiction that portrays women on a quest for selfhood, set against socio-economically challenging backdrops, as seen in her latest novel, *Missitalia* (La nave di Teseo, 2024). As such, *Bianco è il colore del danno* and *La straniera* have been two unique and pivotal events in their career as writers, allowing them to reconsider and reengineer their experience to define their feminist subjectivity. *La straniera* tells the story of the relationship between Durastanti and her deaf mother, and how it helps the autobiographical narrator find her agency. *Bianco è il colore del danno* was conceived after Mannocchi was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) and highlights her quest to maintain and enforce her agency despite her disease.

A key distinction is evident in what has just been described: in Mannocchi's memoir, the autobiographical narrator endures the disability; in Durastanti's, her mother does. However, we need to remember the abovementioned Charon's thought, for whom women's memoirs differ as women 'do not become—or create—themselves in autonomous and deracinated acts of will but instead develop over time in concert with others'.[10] Charon, for instance, lingers over de Beauvoir's *Une mort très douce* (1964) and Ernaux's *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* (1997) to point out how the two writers 'articulat[e] and expos[e] the deepest parts of [their] own interiority by way of telling of [their] aging mother'.[11] Similarly, Durastanti's self-exploration is intertwined with the deaf mother, as suggested by the memoir title. The stranger of the title reflects Durastanti's nomadic condition as a citizen of a globalized world, but it also carries an existential meaning: the lack of a steady identity she shares with her deaf mother, who has chosen to live outside the bounds of social norms. The tangle between being a stranger and disability is immediately marked at the memoir's beginning, when Durastanti describes her

---

[7] See K. Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991): 1241 – 99, doi.org/10.2307/1229039 and S. Schalk, *Black, Disability, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

[8] Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, pp. 74 – 75.

[9] I am referring here to the interview with Daniela Preziosi and Cristina Petrucci, 'Presentazione di *Bianco è il colore del danno* (Einaudi editore) di Francesca Mannocchi', YouTube, (24 February 2021). Available: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ygxwgl8ug8>. Accessed: 18 June 2025.

[10] Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. 75.

[11] Ibid., p. 75.

mother's way of speaking, stating: 'parlando con la sua voce alta e forte e dagli accenti irregolari, sembrava solo un'immigrata sgrammaticata, una straniera'.[12] Interestingly, Mannocchi makes the same semantic choice to represent her new condition: 'Nel nostro appartamento pieno di luce, con la palma a dare il benvenuto al giorno tutti i giorni ero diventata straniera'.[13]

Beyond metaphor, being a stranger signifies a lack of roots, a fundamental aspect of postmodern critical thought that has been a key influence since the emergence of French theory. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari borrow the botanical image of the rhizome to contrast with the root. The rhizome represents multiplicity, fluidity, and deterritorialization. Of course, this definition transcends epistemology and becomes political. The rhizome is a 'becoming-minoritarian'[14] since only oppressed minorities (i.e., women, black people, etc.) question their own roots to reinvent themselves, and 'becoming-woman' is 'the key to all the other becomings'[15] as women have historically been the most significant other by which the patriarchy has known itself. Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, argue the peculiarity of women's writing, for 'writing should produce a becoming-woman as atoms of womanhood capable of crossing and impregnating an entire social field and of contaminating men, of sweeping them up in that becoming'.[16] A woman's book should reject linearity and show the fluidity of the subjects, whose life is made of deterritorializations and destratifications. A similar theory is proposed by Rosi Braidotti, who expands on the concept of the rhizome in relation to the nomadic subject. Nomadism is a 'vertiginous progression toward deconstructing identity; molecularization of the self', a figuration 'made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity'.[17] For Braidotti, the nomad is feminist as they express a non-phallogocentric way of thinking, and she finds this in women's writing: 'What gets activated is a seemingly absent-minded floating attention or a fluid sensibility that is porous to the outside and which our culture has coded as "feminine"'.[18] Women narrators are once again perceived as distinct from men, as they shed the self and open up to encounters with the outside and others to redefine their own subjectivity.

Considering these theories, Durastanti's and Mannocchi's autobiographical narrators are strangers who emerge as two rhizomatic and nomadic subjects, and thus feminist. This sensibility is demonstrated by the structure of their memoirs, which contests the chronological order of traditional autobiography. From the beginning, we observe how the books are built on fragmentation, where past and present coexist, and writing aims not so much at reflecting on past events but toward the future. Here, being and becoming confront each other, and memories require imagination to enable the realization of the subject's virtual possibilities. As such, Durastanti calls her book 'un'accurata opera di falsificazione'[19] because she is reengineering her relationship with her deaf mother to define her agency. Mannocchi, similarly, opens her

---

[12] C. Durastanti, *La straniera* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2019), p. 20.

[13] F. Mannocchi, *Bianco è il colore del danno* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021), p. 36.

[14] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 291.

[15] Ibid., p. 277.

[16] Ibid., p. 276.

[17] R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 16 – 20.

[18] R. Braidotti, 'Writing as a Nomadic Subject', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 11.2-3 (2014): 163–84 (p. 171), doi.org/10.3366/ccs.2014.0122.

[19] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 229.

book by stating it is rooted in 'la memoria ricostruita e quella da ricostruire',[20] which helps her trace her identity as a woman and a mother following the MS diagnosis. We are in front of forms of countermemory that resist assimilation into male-dominant narratives of self-representation, where time is neither linear nor certain but must be reconsidered and filled with vibrations of becoming. In this context, the new feminist nomadic subject is a privileged figure of otherness who naturally intersects with and is empowered by other forms of deviation from normativity, such as chronic illness and disability.

Quite endorsing Woolf's insistence upon its importance, the body has gained significant meaning in self-narration and the assertion of one's own disability and illness. Since Descartes' notion of the cogito that divided the body from the mind has been rejected, the body has become a signature in representing the interior of the self, and, therefore, 'corporeality has become such an urgent touchstone of much recent work in autobiography'.[21] The body is the gateway between the world and the self, the medium through which individuals experience the world and express their emotions. Consequently, the body has become a weapon used by oppressed minorities to affirm themselves. Judith Butler squarely demonstrated how bodies have historically been regulated by norms: the body 'is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But "the body" is itself a construction, as are the myriad "bodies" that constitute the domain of gendered subjects'.[22] In line with Butler's thought, intellectuals and social movements advocating for minority rights have supported the emergence of subversive bodies, rejecting the notion of the body's performativity defined by a consistent set of actions, to assert the dignity of individuals marginalized due to their antinormative identity. This also explains the pivotal presence of bodies in memoirs of people with disabilities. Traditionally, the physically disabled body has served as a vessel for societal anxieties such as vulnerability and lack of independence, also perpetrated by the literary representations of disability and illness.[23] Still, the constantly growing urgency of disabled and sick people to tell their stories and redefine their selfhood has led to a recasting in the narration of unorthodox bodies. In the memoirs this essay will focus on, the autobiographical narrators offer a version of female subjectivity that embraces and emphasizes female bodies, challenging dominant cultural narratives, such as the notion of normalcy and the ideal of femininity, and claim their agency.

Mannocchi's *Bianco è il colore del danno*

In her interview with Chiara Valerio on *L'Espresso*, Francesca Mannocchi defines her memoir as a political book: 'Non è un romanzo sulla maternità, né un romanzo sulla malattia. È un romanzo che parla di politica. Politicamente guardiamo le cose, politicamente non sappiamo come guardarle. Il modo in cui guardiamo il nostro corpo nel mondo è un gesto politico'.[24] By

---

[20] Mannocchi, *Bianco è il colore del danno*, p. 10.

[21] Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. 76.

[22] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 12 – 13.

[23] Many of the most memorable portrayals of disability in narratives have contributed to reinforcing and perpetuating cultural stereotypes. See, for instance, V. Hugo's Quasimodo in *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), D. H. Lawrence's Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), or the patients of Cottolengo in I. Calvino's *La giornata di uno scrutatore* (1963).

[24] C. Valerio and F. Mannocchi, 'Francesca Mannocchi: "La mia malattia è una battaglia politica"', *L'Espresso*, (21 February 2021). Available: <https://lespresso.it/c/-/2021/2/1/francesca-mannocchi-la-mia-malattia-e-una-battaglia-politica/45742>. Accessed: 21 June 2025.

saying so, Mannocchi expands the realm of sickness, enlarging it from medicine to politics and thereby incorporating it as a form of discrimination. To achieve this, the disease must be portrayed in its concreteness. Susan Sontag was the first to denounce the tendency to metaphorize illness while arguing that 'the most truthful way of regarding illness […] is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking'.[25] Sontag states that literature has always romanticized disease without focusing on its pathophysiology and socio-political implications, such as the disparities between people or the terrible hygienic conditions that favor contagion. Mannocchi, who read Sontag while writing her memoir,[26] avoids any metaphorization of MS and describes her illness realistically. In the chapter 'Identikit', she introduces herself: 'Ho una malattia neurologica cronica. Sono una donna di trentanove anni malata di sclerosi multipla'.[27] In this, like in other chapters, Mannocchi meticulously describes all the medical procedures and challenges she faces as a patient with a chronic disease, and the socio-economic discriminations that force people who cannot afford private medical expenses to wait months for a visit. So, Mannocchi never evokes punitive or sentimental fantasies about MS. Instead, she perceives it as a 'percorso di rivelazioni',[28] as the disease allows her to reinterpret her past and redefine her womanhood.

The use of concrete language, however, does not mean adopting medical language. This is clear from the title, where the color white indeed indicates the presence of white spots seen in the magnetic resonance, showing damage to the white matter of the central nervous system. However, the white has also become a key element in Mannocchi's personal language for understanding and describing the progression of her disease. She argues that her language must express her feelings, and in this respect, scientific language falls short because it can describe physical issues but cannot convey her fears and vulnerabilities. In the chapter describing her first magnetic resonance, Mannocchi first makes a detailed narration of the procedure, then copies down her medical report, after which she complains how she has read that report a thousand times, but still cannot figure out the correspondence between what she is feeling and what is written: 'la lingua della medicina non coincide col male che prova a descrivere'.[29] Akin to metaphors, scientific language 'altera il [suo] male, lo anestetizza. Nel [suo] caso poi la medicina, oltre a non descriverlo, nemmeno lo cura'.[30] Thus, Mannocchi seeks a narration to help her process and heal herself alongside medical treatment. In a later conversation with her doctor about the gap between her language and that of medicine, he reminds her that the word diagnosis comes from the Greek *diagignōskō*, meaning to recognize oneself through something: writing a memoir is thus a helpful form of diagnosis. Arguably, giving an account of herself with concrete yet sensitive language avoids alexithymia, induces emotional catharsis, and, in Mannocchi's hope, encourages awareness of medical issues among readers.[31] The explanatory self-account, therefore, leads Mannocchi to accept her illness and reevaluate her life, which also

---

[25] S. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 3.

[26] See the abovementioned interview with D. Preziosi and C. Petrucci, where Mannocchi identifies Sontag, Didion, and Erneaux as models for her memoir.

[27] Mannocchi, *Bianco è il colore del danno*, p. 16.

[28] Ibid., p. 115.

[29] Ibid., p. 53.

[30] Ibid., p. 54.

[31] About the risks connected with alexithymia in medical diagnosis and the importance of therapeutic retellings, see D. Kaminer, 'Healing processes in trauma narratives: A review', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 36.3 (2006): 481-99, doi.org/10.1177/008124630603600304 and S. Calabrese, 'Trauma e racconto', *TestoeSenso*, 21.1 (2020): 1-14 <https://testoesenso.it/index.php/testoesenso/article/view/466>.

means showing her vulnerability and portraying a woman and mother contending with canonical expectations.

In the interview with Valerio, Mannocchi argues that 'Non c'è una lingua politica per raccontare la malattia. Per la sclerosi […] esiste un raccontare per l'eroismo del singolo malato o del singolo medico, ma non esiste una lingua che racconti la vulnerabilità' and, consequently, she claims her purpose to use 'parole nuove che possano descrivere la vulnerabilità'.[32] Mannocchi wants to redefine vulnerability within the context of resistance, rejecting the patriarchal view that considers vulnerability as a form of defiance. Once again, her thought can be read through the lens of feminist theory. Judith Butler has noted that vulnerability is both an existential condition, since everyone is susceptible to accidents that can quickly end their lives, and a socially induced condition, which accounts for the heightened exposure to suffering, particularly among oppressed minorities. These two notions of vulnerability are tied and lean on the political meaning of the human body as the first bulwark of resistance. For Butler, 'there is plural and performative bodily resistance at work that shows how bodies are being acted on by social and economic policies that are decimating livelihoods'.[33] But these bodies, while revealing this precarity, are also resisting these powers; 'they enact a form of resistance that presupposes vulnerability of a specific kind, and opposes precarity'.[34] Traditionally, normativity requires corporeal vulnerability, without which norms to regulate society would be ineffective. Conversely, feminists like Butler and Mannocchi in her memoir aim to depict a destabilizing idea of vulnerability rooted in the body as a fundamental part of political resistance. Speaking with her mother, for instance, Mannocchi questions the boundary between fragility and strength, concluding that they are two inseparable aspects of her disease. Accordingly, by showing her vulnerability as a young mother with MS, Mannocchi makes a political act of resistance to assert her existence and claim her agency. And the touchstone of this discourse relies on her body.

The female body plays a significant political role since Mannocchi's coming of age in high school. Specifically, she remembers her English teacher, a feminist who preferred to focus on independent women characters such as Lady Chatterley from the eponymous novel or Molly Bloom from Joyce's *Ulysses*. Calling to mind a lesson about Molly Bloom's famous final monologue, Mannocchi remembers the teacher stating that Molly claims her identity through her body. Also, she argued that memories are a matter of the body, as they are inscribed within it rather than in the mind. Eventually, she concluded by telling the teen Francesca not to be afraid of her body since it is a 'strumento di comprensione, usalo per conoscere il mondo e le persone, usalo anche per farti conoscere dagli altri'.[35] Mannocchi recalls these memories while waiting for a lumbar puncture, concluding that our actions on our bodies are a political gesture. Since she became a mother and was diagnosed with MS, Mannocchi realizes people expect to see her body act in a determinate way. Evoking the theory of staring, shared by feminist thought and disability studies, she states that women and disabled bodies are the object of the stare, a gesture that perpetrates normativity, since that gaze that 'fixes a person in gender, race, disability, class or sexuality systems is an attempt to control the other'.[36] The autobiographical

---

[32] Valerio and Mannocchi, 'La mia malattia è una battaglia politica'.

[33] J. Butler, 'Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance', in J. Butler, Z. Gambetti, and L. Sabsay (eds), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 12 – 27 (p. 15).

[34] Ibid., p. 15.

[35] Mannocchi, *Bianco è il colore del danno*, p. 82.

[36] R. Garland Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 43.

narrator reminds herself of editors staring at her body, searching for signs of her disease, who did not want her to continue her job as a reporter because of MS. Similarly, she remembers other mothers criticizing her choice to work despite her maternity and to keep wearing heels and appear attractive. In sum, people seem to be looking for physical expectations about a maternal body affected by the chronic illness. However, Mannocchi questions this limited perspective, arguing that 'il corpo non ha organi ma soglie';[37] therefore, it is fluid and its boundaries can be continually redefined.

This motif of fluidity is tied to the idea of potentiality, suggesting that life and humans are not a fixed, unchanging essence but rather a space for multiple, complex, and sometimes conflicting experiences. This concept is so embedded in the book that the first title Mannocchi considered was *La paura potenziale*.[38] The idea of potentiality is also rooted in MS, which medicine defines as a potentially debilitating disease of the brain and spinal cord. For Mannocchi, the key word of this definition is 'potentially', as it refers to the course of the disease but also her life and identity as a sick woman. Just after the diagnosis, she was frightened by the absence of certainty. In the chapter 'Il condizionale è un modo miserabile', Mannocchi argues that the first transformation into a patient is the revelation that medicine is not an exact science and cannot answer every question. The hospital becomes 'lo spazio del potenziale perché anche la medicina è fragile'.[39] Still, patients have no time for uncertainty; they want a prognosis and a cure. Moreover, people with a disease want to know its origin, but those with chronic or autoimmune illnesses, like Mannocchi, may never find out. This condition can bring up the fear that your life is over, that you will be an outcast who cannot behave as you used to. In this regard, Mannocchi is aware she cannot live like she did before, but she also believes that MS is a process that shows people should be encouraged to act as they want and affirm their identity, and thereby, she calls her life after the diagnosis a new birth.

Rebirth is a condition that redefines Mannocchi's relationship with her family, starting with her son Pietro. She uses the image of a relay race to describe the connection between maternity and disease, since her diagnosis occurred right after her pregnancy, and some neurologists suggest this might have triggered her condition. Initially, MS causes her to doubt her motherhood: 'Com'è la madre danneggiata di un figlio appena nato?'.[40] Despite asserting her rebirth after the diagnosis, she still questions her actual birth as a mother. The point is that maternity has inflexible rules and breaking them can lead to being seen as selfish. Mannocchi argues that, once women become mothers, they are viewed as stoic individuals who must sacrifice their own identity for their children. In the chapter 'Benemale', she recalls a conversation with her partner, who accused her of running away from Pietro, and the dialogue with a friend who remembers how she seemed to look forward to being done with the pregnancy. As such, Mannocchi concludes that the image of a mother is considered unquestionable; still, 'sapermi scritta dalla vita di mio figlio mi sembrava innaturale'.[41] She, instead, wants an alternative approach to maternity, focusing more on teaching freedom than on caring. So, for example, when they are at the beach and Pietro wants to swim with her, she explains to him her need to swim alone in the mornings and evenings. By doing so, Mannocchi

---

[37] Mannocchi, *Bianco è il colore del danno*, p. 127.
[38] Mannocchi speaks of the alternative title in the interview with Petrucci and Preziosi.
[39] Mannocchi, *Bianco è il colore del danno*, p. 54.
[40] Ibid., p. 47.
[41] Ibid., p. 154.

concludes that she aims to teach her son the importance of independence and freedom, while also insisting on the need to exist as a woman beyond her roles as a mother.

Finally, Mannocchi's reconsideration of womanhood is reflected through her mother and grandmother, to whom the memoir is dedicated. Particularly, the grandmother Rita quickly emerges as a symbol of sacrifice. With a leg affected by osteomyelitis since she was young and a husband with a heart condition, Rita spent her life working all day as the breadwinner and caring for the entire family when she returned home. Nonetheless, she never complained about her disease or her bad luck. Even at the end, when she is dying from cancer, she seems more concerned that others do not suffer because of her. Similarly, Mannocchi's mother is described as a woman who always lived in self-denial. In the chapter 'Storia di un corpo', the mother speaks of her relationship with sickness - before with her parents, now with her daughter – and says how disease and family have been synonyms for her, representing concrete or symbolic sacrifices. For instance, once the daughter was diagnosed with MS, she decided to give up eating ice cream as a form of *fioretto*, saying that mothers behave that way: they sacrifice. Ultimately, Mannocchi recognizes that abnegation is the legacy of these women, whose womanhood is tied to their role as mothers; however, as suggested in one of the final chapters, she aspires to behave like a modern Morgan le Fay and chooses to transform her destiny. The MS diagnosis has been a watershed to reveal human fragility but also their infinite possibilities; after confronting the female examples in her family, Mannocchi claims a rebellion for the female body, where woman is a concept that is continually transforming and infinitely larger than being an abnegating receptacle for human life.

Durastanti's *La straniera*

The bond between mother and daughter is even more significant in Durastanti's memoir, where the narrator's feminist agency also emerges through her relationship with her deaf mother. Here, the motif of the nomadic subject is woven into the story, as Durastanti portrays herself as an expat searching for her identity.[42] The entire memoir can be read as the narrator's coming of age, as she recalls fragments of her memory and her mother's, to realize that all these narrated episodes are essential to her journey into womanhood. Divided into non-chronological and thematic sections that recount, for instance, Durastanti's reflections on love, family, travel, and work, the book highlights the suffering associated with nomadism, but also its importance in the process of self-discovery. Accordingly, *La straniera* embodies what Tiziana De Rogatis has called an 'autobiographical rhizome', 'the subject's magmatic entanglement through which excesses, nomadism, and idiosyncrasies were born';[43] for De Rogatis, this is the final form of women's autobiographies, where it matters what they remember, how they remember it, and how they alter the reality of the facts. On the same path, Durastanti aims to reconsider and reinterpret her past, as well as her relationship with her mother, to escape the normative expectations she has followed for years and embrace a new, fluid figuration inspired by her mother's approach to disability.

---

[42] For Durastanti's self-representation as an expat in *La straniera*, see O. Campofreda, 'Coming of Age among Multiple Languages: Exploring the "Polyglot" as an Intersectional Subject in Claudia Durastanti's *La Straniera* (2019)', *Italian Studies* 79.1 (2024): 21-33, doi.org/10.1080/00751634.2024.2322319.

[43] T. De Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi: Traumi e translinguismi delle migrazioni in Morante, Hoffman, Kristoff, Scego e Lahiri* (Siena: Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena, 2023), p. 55. The translation is my own.

The mother represents an unconventional woman who surpasses cultural subjugation and uses her physical differences as a weapon to assert her agency; in doing so, she demonstrates that any impairment is a medical condition, but it also involves discriminatory societal expectations that are culturally determined. Since childhood, the mother has expressed non-conforming behavior and refused the role of the victim: for example, at school, she opposed the ruthless actions of the nuns, who tried to force her to speak by placing a knife on her tongue or making her touch electric wires; similarly, she splashed boiling water on a neighbor who was gossiping about her deafness. The grammar of embodiment, as defined by normativity, expects certain characteristics in disabled women, such as passivity, marginalization, and fragility. Conversely, Durastanti's mother claims her independence and strength by rejecting cultural norms and, for instance, embracing a bohemian lifestyle while in Rome in her twenties. In this regard, Durastanti has stated: 'My parents were pretty anarchic and empowered in their own way, even if they were rejected by the world. Their rejection was due to their rebellion against the expectations around what it means to be a "good" deaf person, or migrant, or poor person'.[44] The mother enacts this rebellion through a subversive body, especially affirming a strong sexuality.

Resisting the cultural tendency to deem sexuality improper for disabled people, the mother upholds her right to control her own body and express her sexuality. Like for Mannocchi, the matter here is political, as controlling bodies create a system of oppression. The crip theorist Robert McRuer has spoken of 'compulsory able-bodiedness',[45] a utilitarian vision of the body driven by industrial capitalism, where bodies are valued only for their efficiency and utility, and consequently, people with disabilities who cannot work are seen as less valuable and inappropriate to have offspring. This discourse is more challenging for disabled women, whose identity is traditionally tied to bodies expected to be reproductive. As such, the idea that women's disabled bodies may be asexual and unfeminine leads to what is called 'rolelessness',[46] a social condemnation and the erasure of femininity in women with impairments. Durastanti's mother, instead, disputes the dominant standards by asserting her body to forge her world of self-authorization and argues that deaf people engage in sex but cannot experience love, since the body is their primary means of communication and their only tool to assert their agency: 'L'amore tra sordi non esiste, è una fantasia da udenti. C'è il sesso, l'intimità, ma non quel bisogno'.[47] Speaking with her mother, Durastanti attempts to understand this idea and argues that deaf people could need concrete images and face greater difficulties in understanding figurative metaphors and abstract concepts.[48] The body, hence, is not evidence

---

[44] M. Colleran and C. Durastanti, 'A Formal Felling: A Conversation with Claudia Durastanti', *The Paris Review*, (28 January 2022). Available: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2022/01/28/a-formal-feeling-a-conversation-with-claudia-durastanti/>. Accessed: 29 June 2025.

[45] R. McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 1.

[46] The idea of 'rolelessness' linked to disabled women has been explored by M. Blackwell-Stratton, M. L. Breslin, A. B. Mayerson, and S. Bailey in 'Smashing Icons: Disabled Women and the Disability and Women's Movements', in M. Fine and A. Asch (eds), *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 306 - 332.

[47] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 57.

[48] In this regard, it is also significant the interview with Clorinda Donato at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Los Angeles on 22 March 2022, now on YouTube: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cum4o8tjvp8&t=2001s>. It is essential to note that research on the comprehension of metaphors by deaf and hearing children has not yielded definitive results; however, the majority agree that there is no significant difference between deaf and hearing children in their comprehension of metaphors. See A. Iran-Nejad, A. Ortoni, and R. K. Rittenhouse, 'The

of her pathology but instead becomes the primary text to emphasize creating and affirming herself as a woman.

The confrontation with the mother and her body also signifies Durastanti's encounter with nomadism, as suggested in the book: 'io sono stata la figlia di donne diverse. All'inizio era un'handicappata. Poi è diventata una disabile. Per attimi è stata una donna diversamente abile. A un certo punto non era che una pazza. Oggi è una persona che sta su internet'.[49] This description recalls people's consideration of the mother over the years, but it also refers to the multiple layers of experiences of a woman who has reinvented herself many times to secure her agency. As said earlier, the body has played a pivotal role, for it is not the spectacle of a corporeal difference, but rather the platform of a rhizomatic otherness—a way to express herself more clearly, making it the stage for a dissonant performance that exposes the normative assumptions linked to bodies. Yet, it is the very porous condition of disabled bodies that prompts further reflections on their nomadic nature. Confronting her mother's deafness with the gradual disablement of aging in others, such as her mother's brother becoming deaf, Durastanti recognizes the illusion rooted in the fantasy of complete and everlasting able-bodiedness, as well as the divide between ability and disability. Aligning with Lennard Davis' concept of 'Temporarily Able-Bodied',[50] which sees disability as an amorphous identity with unclear boundaries, Durastanti contends that disabled people are not a minority and that disability is not an exception. Instead, they are a hidden majority and disability is a destination, since 'diventeremo tutti disabili prima o poi'.[51] By saying so, she utterly inscribes disability into the realm of nomadism, for it is not a steady condition but an unstable category depending on the erratic nature of bodies.

So, Durastanti finds her feminist subjectivity only once she reconsiders her relationship with her mother. In the sections of the memoir set during childhood and adolescence in Basilicata, she does not hide her resentment for being called the daughter of the deaf woman, or considered an outcast because her parents were divorced, and they were seen as American immigrants. Consequently, she struggles to conform to others and, for instance, thinks she can discover her womanhood by acting out a set of actions in compliance with the normative idea of femininity. As such, she remains stuck in a relationship for years, believing that a girl is only complete with a guy. In the section 'Amore', Durastanti recapitulates the phenomenology of a relationship that was born by her need to love someone who was antithetical to her family. In retrospect, she understands that her young self was seeking normality and was deluded into thinking that this meant stability. Thus, she formed a symbiotic bond where her boyfriend was essential to her life, placing herself in a state she calls cryogeny, which lasted eighteen years but eventually made her feel incomplete and unfaithful to herself. Only as an autobiographical narrator and a nomadic subject, she has realized the fallacy of this perspective: 'È un'intima ribellione alla legge per cui cresceremo e diventeremo persone appagate e immutabili, quando siamo sempre stati partenze e ripartenze; strappi, suture e tagli'.[52] Still, to reach this awareness, Durastanti needs to form a new bond with her mother.

Comprehension of Metaphorical Uses of English by Deaf Children', *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 24.4 (1990): 551-56, doi.org/10.1044/jshr.2404.551.

[49] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 215.

[50] L. J. Davis, *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 36.

[51] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 36.

[52] Ibid., p. 268.

The initial distance between mother and daughter stems from a form of incommunicability, as Durastanti's mother considered sign language a form of stigmatization and avoided teaching it to her daughter. For her, deaf people have no problems until they start moving their hands to communicate; then, the theatricality of the gestures reveals disability and draws people's stares, which act as a form of visual dominance to reinforce the difference between able-bodied and disabled bodies as a means of discrimination. Durastanti describes her attempt to communicate with her mother as a physical effort, and in the chapter 'La stanza infinita', she compares the difficulty of interpreting her mother's language with her work as a translator. Speaking two different languages, they inhabit two different worlds, and, in fact, when Durastanti tries to express herself using sign language, her mother says she looks crazy. Still, *La straniera* is the story of Durastanti's feminist coming of age thanks to her rapprochement with her mother, and this also involves a linguistic reconfiguration. Thus, the chapter concludes with the image of Glenn Gould's semi-anechoic chamber: 'Non posso costruire una stanza semianecoica per fingere che il silenzio che condividiamo sia lo stesso, ma come John Cage, posso dire a mia madre il suono del mio sangue e lei può dirmi di quello del suo'.[53] Although mother and daughter cannot share the same silence, over the years, they have learnt to communicate with a common alphabet.

In her analysis of women's autobiographical narrations, De Rogatis has suggested the development of a new language of emotions, 'a common alphabet of shared experiences'[54] aimed at overcoming the limits of communication that traditional languages may create. In this respect, the condition of incommunicability caused by trauma—common in many women's experiences—is replaced by a space of creativity, where women find their selfhood also by creating a language of feelings with their siblings. Similarly, the relationship between Durastanti and her mother is redefined by the creation of a private language. The mother is reluctant to use standard language, which she considers too homologating, and distant from her self-awareness. Instead, she upholds forms of communication that reflect 'la letteralità della sua esistenza'[55] and, therefore, she talks to Claudia by reading horoscopes and tarot cards, which are seen as an alternative way to affirm herself and reject the limits of normative thought. Notably, tarot cards establish an initial bond between Durastanti and her mother through the arcana of the Moon, which is depicted as a symbol of femininity and nomadism, in a perpetual liminality between light and darkness. In the last sections of the memoir, though, once the mother has discovered the Internet, the tarot cards are replaced by social networks. For Durastanti, the approach to technology is not a reversal but a continuation of her mother's way of expressing herself; hence, her mother's Facebook page is called the triumph of anti-Enlightenment, where she uses a stream of consciousness made up of abbreviations (i.e., tvb, luv) that becomes a new vehicle of self-awareness. Eventually, the language of social networks also becomes the language of emotions and the bond between mother and daughter, as shown in the phrase 'Ok ti love you',[56] through which they finally reveal their reciprocal love.

On the last page of the book, once the two women share a common alphabet, the mother opens up to Claudia, confessing that her life would be insignificant without her disability, which gave her the strength to rebel against norms and affirm herself. In this regard, the renewed relationship with the deaf mother has become a milestone in Durastanti's feminist agency. The

---

[53] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 197.

[54] De Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi*, p. 4.

[55] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 139.

[56] Ibid., p. 213.

figure of the mother questions a common motif in many narratives for women, at least until the first half of the 20th century, where mothers promoted an ideology of womanhood that eventually adopted patriarchal values.[57] Conversely, here the mother serves as a means for Durastanti to confront and reconsider normative structures. The mother has shaped the young, insecure protagonist into the adult narrator, who portrays herself as an independent woman, drawing her strength from a fire that always burns inside her. Still, this does not mean that Durastanti now has a steady identity: 'Nessun significato assume una forma stabile in me'.[58] Durastanti's feminist coming of age unveils indeed this: the fluidity and complexity of womanhood.

Conclusions

In 'Sick Woman Theory', Johanna Hedva points out how disability and illness traditionally '*feminize* – e.g., render "weaker" and "more fragile" - any person who requires care'.[59] In other words, the patriarchal and capitalist systems see individuals requiring care as deviant, vulnerable, and inferior, and therefore feminine. For Hedva, the term woman does not indicate only a gender but encompasses all the oppressed who are discriminated against by white, straight, healthy, upper-class, cisgender, and able-bodied men. Accordingly, 'Sick Woman Theory' is a call to arms for 'women, people of color, poor, ill, neuro-atypical, disabled, queer, trans, and genderfluid people, who have been historically pathologized, hospitalized, institutionalized, brutalized, rendered "unmanageable," and therefore made culturally illegitimate and politically invisible'.[60] Hedva advocates for those who confront their vulnerability and fragility every day, striving to ensure their experiences are not only recognized but also acknowledged. Criticizing Hannah Arendt's definition of the political as any action performed in public, which excludes many invisible bodies like sick people unable to take their bodies into the streets,[61] Hedva argues that the private is also political. In this respect, she aims to honor and make visible the silent resilience of people facing precarity, which is dramatically exacerbated by the normative discourse.

Mannocchi and Durastanti gather Hedva's testimony, recast womanhood from a state of minority to one of strength, and write two memoirs in which disabled women become political agents, with vulnerability and fragility viewed as assets to bolster their resistance

---

[57] 19th-century novels often depict mother-daughter relationships that are either absent or reinforce patriarchy, where mothers define femininity only in relation to masculinity, as seen in J. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and G. Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Depictions of mothers passing their agency to their daughters remain difficult even in the Modernist era, although the rise of women's rights created a different context, as demonstrated in E. Wharton's *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) and V. Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The situation is even more complicated in Italy, where Fascism delayed the path of women's rights by twenty years, reinforcing the idea of women as mothers relegated to the domestic sphere. We need to wait until E. Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio* (1948) to see an innovative depiction of the mother-daughter nexus. To explore the relationship between mother and daughter in the narrative, see at least M. Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989) and P. Sambuco, *Corpi e linguaggi. Il rapporto figlia-madre nella narrativa italiana del XX secolo* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2014).

[58] Durastanti, *La straniera*, p. 112.

[59] J. Hedva, 'Sick Woman Theory', *Mask Magazine*, (19 January 2016). Available: <https://www.kunstverein-hildesheim.de/assets/bilder/caring-structures-ausstellung-digital/Johanna-Hedva/cb6ec5c75f/AUSSTELLUNG_1110_Hedva_SWT_e.pdf>. Accessed: 2 July 2025.

[60] Ibid.

[61] See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

against normativity. After the diagnosis of MS, Mannocchi reconsiders vulnerability as a form of resistance and the affirmation of fluid boundaries, challenging societal norms. She claims her body by rejecting the normative gaze that aims to homogenize and control individuals and affirms herself as a young mother living with a disease. In doing so, she withholds the traditional idea of sacrifice associated with womanhood and the passivity often ascribed to the disabled. Reconsidering her relationship with her deaf mother by developing a common language, Durastanti broke free from the state of cryogeny she had been in for years, stopping to conform to a normative femininity. Her mother's rebellious behavior and her approach to disability reveal to Durastanti the fluidity of any identity. Following her example, the daughter can complete her feminist coming of age by resisting the set of norms tied to femininity and becoming a strong and independent woman. Ultimately, thanks to their experiences with illness and disability, both writers find their feminist agency by reevaluating their concept of womanhood. Inscribed in a tradition ideally initiated by Virginia Woolf, whose major novels portray female subjectivity as a flow of positions and boundary crossings,[62] and further developed through the intersection of feminist and poststructuralist theories, as seen in the works of Deleuze, Guattari, Braidotti, and Butler, Mannocchi and Durastanti present themselves as becoming women, rhizomatic and nomadic subjects. They do not depict themselves as a single, fixed individual but rather as the site of numerous, often clashing experiences.

Within these terms, their memoirs are two feminist Bildungsromans where the autobiographical narrators undergo self-discovery. Still, their writing also echoes the voices of many invisible people. Inscribed into feminist thought, these texts promote networks of solidarity and resistance against injustices perpetrated by hegemonic groups. As such, they acknowledge that vulnerability is both an existential and social condition, caused by prejudice and discrimination against minorities, along with the unequal access to medical care, which is becoming progressively evident also in Italy. Recalling Hedva, Mannocchi and Durastanti provide the groundwork for a new alliance rooted in shared interests by those who are finally demanding to be seen and heard. They highlight the need for a radical kinship among the oppressed to expose the violence and fallacy of normativity. In doing so, their feminist memoirs are more than just a collection of personal stories; they serve as a powerful political statement, preparing people for a present where fixed and homologized identities are increasingly outdated.

---

[62] In this regard, for example, consider the characterizations of Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927).