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# Voice, Silence, & Testimony: Recovering Feminist Voices in Italian Poetry and Autobiography

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Senior Thesis  
Italian Studies

Voice, Silence, & Testimony:  
Recovering Feminist Voices in Italian Poetry and  
Autobiography

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*Italian Studies*  
*Women's & Gender Studies*

## **Voice, Silence, & Testimony: Recovering Feminist Voices in Italian Poetry and Autobiography**

It is no secret nor a provocative assertion that men's voices, primarily white, European, have prevailed throughout history. These voices tend to represent the inventors, the geniuses, the colonizers, the conquerors, the artists, the poets, and other "winners" of history. They are voices so loud and so pervasive that they effectively drown out any evidence of an utterance made by a subordinate "other." But just because these voices and their narratives have been suppressed by the persistent noise of dominant institutions of power and their associated discourses does not mean that these voices cease to exist and to matter. In fact, it has been the mission of many contemporary feminist literary critics, working in a variety of ways and drawing on a variety of discursive spheres, to identify, recover, and remember female and minority voices. Scholars who have made it their life's work tread these texts within the context of a female literary tradition have found that women "have influenced one another and written for and against each other for centuries" (Marrone, 6).

Two such critics cited in this thesis are Adriana Cavarero and Leigh Gilmore; while Cavarero offers a feminist reading of classic philosophical texts and concepts, Gilmore explores the construction and perception of autobiography as a genre and the subsequent ways women have been both included and excluded from the literary discipline. Both scholars are chiefly concerned, in notably different and interesting ways, with the the concept of female voice. Extending the arguments of Gilmore and Cavarero to the world of Italian poetry, it is possible to recover strong, creative, and female voices that have been silenced for centuries.

Other texts and scholars referenced in this analysis will attempt to analyze the ways in which women have exercised agency, self expression, and political and social existence within genres that have traditionally disciplined forms of self-representation; in other words, this thesis will analyze not just what women are saying in their writing but also how they both work with and against conventional and disciplined forms in their attempt to offer life testimony. These texts, whether in the form of poetry or various types of autobiography, can and often have been for women a site of personal, social, and political resistance; in reading these texts with the objective of discovering a feminist voice, it is possible to identify and recognize moments in which Italian women, not merely and no longer passive recipients of oppression, actively reflect, anticipate, and create the various feminisms of their era.

### **The Autobiographical “I,” The Poetic Subject, and Feminisms**

Before analyzing the concept of voice, which will be the chief focus of this thesis, it might first be helpful to understand *how* these voices can be heard, understood, and remembered specifically within the context of poetic and autobiographical genre. What is primarily at stake in these analyses is the careful grappling with the phenomenon of the first-person within women’s life writing. In other words, what do we do with the “I” which comprises both poetry and autobiography? It is perhaps easiest to understand within the genre of autobiography. What distinguishes autobiography from many other forms of writing is that the “authorial signature” and the narrator are identical (Smith and Watson, 11). This defining detail introduces both the author and the reader into an

“autobiographical pact” where a “contract of identity [...] is sealed by a proper name” (Smith and Watson, 11). In other words, the narrator refers to the writer of the book who is a “real” person in the historical record. The reader assumes the author/narrator to be making “truth claims,” which can ultimately be fact-checked against a historical record. To put it simply, the writing of an autobiography is comparable to confession, where an author “confesses” details of a life to be judged, valued, affirmed, admonished, or forgiven by a reader. An author’s access to “truth” and “value” varies based on their proper name, which is inseparable from their gender, race, and class.

In poetry, the “I” has a perhaps more complicated relationship to the writer and to the subject of the poem. It would be naïve and incorrect to assume that every “I” in a poem refers explicitly and faithfully to the person who writes it. Yet while this poetic “I” may or may not be a clearly stated form of the writer’s self-representation, it is still a form of a representation of *a* self. To put it more clearly, Nietzsche explained the following:

The lyric poet’s images are nothing but the poet himself, and only different objectifications of himself, which is why, as the moving centre of that world, he is able to say “I”: this self is not that of the waking, empirically real man, however, but rather the sole, truly existing and eternal self that dwells at the base of being, through whose depictions the lyric genius sees right through to the very basis of being. (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*)

Thus, Nietzsche would argue, although this poetic “I” may not refer to a particular person in the historical record, it refers to a subject who, in the context of the poem, feels, speaks, and expresses ideas. While we can explore and analyze literal self-representations in autobiography, we have in poetry the opportunity to examine the writer’s creations of subjects and selves. Subsequently, we are able to analyze not only

how and why these selves/subjects are created, but ultimately what these creations and representations say about the writer and the world in which they lived. Despite this subtle and interesting difference between genres, we can use both genres to thoroughly analyze the ways in which women represent both themselves and subjects in ways that challenge and subvert the gender hierarchies of their times.

While the goal of this project in particular is to identify, remember, and reassert the female voices within Italian poetry, it is important that these voices be “heard” in a way that honors rather than questions the agency and intent of both the modern and historical woman. In the introduction to an anthology of feminist Italian poems written by women, Beverly Allen summarizes two main questions that arise in analyzing the texts of women who are separated by centuries: “First, what can be considered feminist in a diverse body of literature collected from seven centuries of writing? Second, is there something that distinguishes the feminism of contemporary poetry as a whole from the worlds of earlier poets?” (Allen, xv). Indeed, for many scholars and their critical projects, and for this critical project in particular, comparing the historical and the contemporary can be a challenging enterprise. We must take into account, as Leigh Gilmore argues, the issue of nostalgia, particularly the belief that there can be a return to a time or place of self that is unexploited or uncorrupted. A second and comparable issue concerns progress; an un-nuanced argument runs the risk of championing the contemporary as a “better” and “correct” version of society. While there is some merit in this argument in comparing the objective social and political conditions of women, what is lost in this argument are the “historical” voices who, in their respective ways, challenged hegemonic norms and expressed various notions of “feminisms” of the time. In championing the contemporary woman over the historical woman, one assumes that

there is or was merit in the original crime of silencing; only now are female voices worth hearing. In attempting to find value in female voices regardless of era, we are able to challenge the naturalness and inherent nature of power hierarchies and disparities and the institutions that perpetuate them. In other words, if we assume that women have always had something worth saying and that they have exercised agency and resistance in a variety of ways throughout history, we can identify this prolonged silence as something socially and politically constructed, as opposed to an inherent deficiency in women. What becomes clear upon analyzing women's texts, poetry and autobiography in particular over a number of centuries is that women, regardless of era, have been actively resisting and challenging the oppressions they faced and, in turn, expressing and anticipating the "feminisms" of their time.

Another obstacle that arises in this type of analysis is the word "feminism." When the word "feminism" is uttered, a very particular set of images and their associated political, social, and cultural contexts are evoked. We think, perhaps, of the second-wave feminism of the 1970's and 80's. Perhaps some think of lesbian separatists in their radical renouncement of all men, or the cliché image of a mass bra-burning. Whether in regards to women's suffrage, second-wave separatist feminism, or the third (or fourth) wave of intersectional feminism today, "feminism" as we typically think of it is an organized, intentional political movement with a set of organized goals and desired outcomes. This paper, however, is less concerned with women's literature arising directly and intentionally out of feminism, though there are some that will be worthy of analysis, and more focused on identifying the "feminisms" in women's poetry over the span of centuries.

In making the subtle distinction between a singular “feminism” and “feminisms,” I aim to do two things: to identify moments of female resistance and to examine the ways in which poetry as an art form engages with the notion that the personal is political. The distinction between feminism and feminisms is thus not to detach the concept from its political implications and associations but to rather detach it from a specific political moment with specific political agendas. The effect of this detachment is the widening of a critical lens which seeks to identify moments in which women across the centuries have identified, lamented, and resisted patriarchy in its multiple forms throughout history. “Whatever the historical context,” Allen argues, “the fact that these poems were written at all may itself be viewed as a feminist act” (Allen, xv).

This, though, is not to suggest that women share an identical and simple, collective struggle inherent to the socially constructed category of “woman.” In her argument, Gilmore is careful to make this distinction given that “generalizations about the nature of women are difficult to sustain when class, race, and sexual orientation are substantively and theoretically incorporated into analysis” (Gilmore, x). To suggest that women’s struggle is a mere product of their biology and to generalize is to ignore differences among women that “are so pervasive, specific, and significant to both political and aesthetic interpretations that any effort to consolidate ‘women’ as a unified group risks homogenizing difference” (Gilmore, xi). Because women, and people in general, have intersecting identities (race, gender, education level, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation), each person experiences oppression in a unique way. To identify women’s voices is to recognize and understand the disproportionate rate at which women and minorities experience patriarchal oppression; but it is also and importantly to recognize that the voice of authority, truth, and individualism is

gendered male (Gilmore, 1). In understanding the challenges and limitations in analyzing the historical woman and redefining “feminisms” it is possible to recover female voices in a way that demonstrates the ways patriarchy has enforced female silence in the span of centuries.

## Part I: Voice and Silence in Feminist Philosophical Theory

### Deciphering Voice

Before we begin analyzing the history of this silencing and the ways in which women resist, it is useful to first define what we mean when we say “voice.” To put it another way, when we lament the mass-silencing of women through history in political, cultural, social, and literary realms, what are we really saying? There is, perhaps, not surprisingly, no single response. Indeed, both Cavarero and Gilmore attempt to answer this question, arriving at comparable, albeit not identical, answers working within two different disciplines.

Philosophy as a discipline, Cavarero repeatedly asserts, is not primarily concerned with the literal, or with subjective reality as the body experiences it, but is rather concerned with the contemplation of ideas as an individual attempts to achieve pure thought and thus “truth,” an achievement which grants the philosopher immortality. In fact, the ultimate goal of a philosopher is to “untie” the soul from the body, to separate the eternal life of the soul from the “mere” life of the body (*In Spite of Plato*, 24). The philosopher in general and one in particular -- Plato -- Cavarero argues, devalues and “devocalizes” the bodily experience of voice, a phenomenon that will be further explored in this thesis. To Cavarero and to other philosophers who challenge the Platonic metaphysical tradition, the separation of the voice from the body undermines the very definition of voice: “a voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices” (*For More Than One Voice*, 1). In other words, the voice is, quite literally, inseparable from the body. It relies on the throat, on saliva, on the tongue and the lungs to make a sound, and

thus voice is, quite logically, cataloged with the body (*For More than Once Voice*, 6). Even many of the scholars that *do* recognize and stress the unique corporeal aspects of the voice, “the hot rhythms of its emissions, the pleasure of the throat and the saliva,” nevertheless do not make the distinction between the general voice and the “plurality of unique voices” (11). What most analyses of speech and voice have ignored, Cavarero argues, is the embodied uniqueness of the human voice, for the voice “certainly comes from a person, unique, unrepeatable, like every person” (7). Although philosophy is a tradition that champions the concept of the individual, its theories and principles are designed to apply to the universal “Man.” Philosophical thought thus tends to universalize its attempt to create traditions of thought which apply to the generic individual who possesses goals and desires that are supposedly inherent to the condition of “Man” itself. What Cavarero and other critics react to is just such a process of homogenization, where individuality is stripped and rendered insignificant in comparison to “Man’s” supposed universal goal of separating the “true” and “real” soul over the mere container of the body. Philosophy’s individualism, Cavarero argues, has no real concern for the individual, especially when that individual possesses a female, or minority, voice.

Gilmore’s concept, by comparison, pertains more to the voice as it relates to a literary tradition. The literary voice is a “technical term that indicates the peculiarity of the style of a poet, or more generally, an author” (*For More Than One Voice*, 89). In autobiography in particular, the genre on which Gilmore primarily focuses, the voice is complicated further by the fact that the literary voice is constructed by the literary “I,” which itself is intimately related to the author’s name and signature. In the course of her book, Gilmore challenges the construction of autobiography as genre and the

autobiographical “I” as a reflection of a stable, unified self. The autobiographical “I” depends on a “triangulation” of selves: the historical person, the textual construction, and the author. The problem with this approach, Gilmore argues, is that it assumes there is no interruption or discontinuity in identity. In other words, it ignores the intersectionality of identity and the instability of the “self” (Gilmore, 48-49). If autobiography’s task to “strive to produce ‘truth’” within a culture that “code[s] this truth production through discourses that can be judged as truthful,” the autobiographical “I” is deeply invested in establishing and securing this truth (Gilmore, 19). The limits of the value of autobiography are thus “demonstrated by the conflation of the text with the value of the autobiographer” (17). In other words, if the autobiography is a “true” and “real” reflection of the self, the value of the self, or perhaps better identified as the “name,” determine the value of the book. The value of the text’s voice thus depends on the technologies that dictate truth: “The point is, the relative relevance of truth is decided by those who can determine who is lying, and make their judgment count” (60). Here we find a distinction that has come about between male-authored autobiographies and female-authored ones, which centres on the question of truth-telling. Using this argument, it is not hard to understand why women are so often left out of autobiography and the literary tradition in general. Gilmore explains that when she went to find examples of women’s autobiography, she often found texts in the fiction section because “women are assumed to have ‘made it up’” (8). Gender is thus one technology of truth that is “policed, regulated, and enforced” (19). Institutions of value which reinforce and establish value are thus in a position to “credit some and not others as authors, as persons having a story worth telling -- that is, of possessing a life worth remembering” (36).

What both arguments have in common, no matter how different their approaches, is that people in positions of power have the privilege of assigning value and worth to a voice. In both arguments, women are disproportionate recipients of lack; that is, they are undervalued, ignored, and silenced; women are assumed liars and temptresses who, when they make a sound, utter nonsense or untruths. Both the corporeal and literary voices as explored by the two authors are especially relevant to the poetry and autobiography that is the ultimate focus of this thesis. Poetry, as a tradition that has been primarily intended to be read aloud, is important to understand the relationship between the audible corporeal and the silent literary voice and the subsequent ways both have been analyzed, valued, and subjugated, particularly when these voices are female. Autobiography, on the other hand, is a discipline which charges its author to tell the truth. The value of that truth is thus intricately related to the value and worth of the author, which is itself determined by the systems and institutions of power which deem some voices important and others insignificant. Both authors explore the extent to which “truth” and “lying” are political and social constructs that depend on who is speaking and how. In their respective recollection of technologies which have resulted in these disparities, both Cavarero and Gilmore identify systems of power that have a vested interest in maintaining women’s silence.

### **A History of Silence**

When tracing the history of women’s silence, we can find a convenient beginning in the text of Genesis. Genesis itself consists of two creation myths which differ in one crucial detail: when and how the woman is created. In the first version of the creation

myth, God creates “Man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). “Man” is used here to denote the human species, and does not differentiate between the male and the female; the top hierarchy of creation is “shared by male and female” (Gilmore, 166). The second version of the myth, thought to predate the first, does make such a distinction. Woman is created from man’s rib because “it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). The woman is, in this version of the story, unique neither in matter nor in name. She is made from male flesh and receives a name that is merely a manipulation of “man” (Gilmore, 167). Women are thus no longer part of the first-order creation and are willed into existence as “helpmeet” (from the phrase *an helpe meet* (suitable) *for him* Genesis 2:18): they are, to put it bluntly, a divine afterthought. It may be tempting to think that the differences between stories are small and inconsequential, but the latter story is, one critic argues, “an etiological tale intended to account for the existence of woman, for her subordinate status, and for the attraction she perennially exerts over man” (168). Gilmore further argues that the tale “legitimizes violence against women, coded into the very language of law and human arrangements, for generations to come” (197). Men are given physical primacy over women, who are mere embodiments of a part of man, an embodiment that then goes on to equate the female body with the emergence of sin, as Eve is primarily held responsible for the Fall of Eden. As Adam only sins when he listens to Eve, there is thus an immediate association between the female voice and deception (169). Because the female voice is associated with lies, transgression, and sin, it is easy to see how women’s silence could become a phenomenon so heavily enforced, policed and regulated.

While Gilmore and other critics argue that Genesis is blameworthy in the establishment of a gender hierarchy which in turn creates a power disparity, Genesis is

similarly important in understanding the privileging of semantic speech over the corporal voice. In this analysis, it is not so much *what* Genesis says but rather *how* it is saying it that is of interest. Subtle differences between Hebrew and Christian translations of Genesis illustrate a shift from a perspective which values the primacy of voice over speech to a perspective that is comparably logocentric. The Hebrew tradition gives us the concepts of *ruah* and *quol*. *Ruah* refers to the “living breath of God,” which God breathes into man, initiating life (*For More Than One Voice*, 21). *Quol* refers to a concept of sound in general: the rustle of wind, the rumble of thunder, the sound of breath. In the Hebrew faith, which values an oral tradition above the written one, creation, thus begins with a breath and a voice; there is no explicit or intended meaning expressed with this voice through the medium of language. The voice and the corporeal pleasures associated with it are thus given primacy over the semantic. In fact, in Hebrew versions of the Bible, the reader must add the vowels to the text as he reads while simultaneously moving his body to the rhythm of his own voice (22). In other words, language and meaning depend first on the corporeal voice, which has worth and value independent of them both. The Christian tradition, by contrast, disrupts and reverses this relationship. In the Christian Genesis, God says “Let there be light.” Creation is no longer voice made flesh but now word made flesh. Creation thus depends on and is initiated by the “right joining” of words which ultimately convey semantic meaning. Voice is no longer given primacy and is now destined for the semantic; in other words, the voice is a mere vehicle for language and any sound that does not convey semantic meaning in the form of language is beside the point, mere excess (56).

Genesis is thus an eloquent example that portrays not just the beginning of the silencing of voice but also the specific silencing of female voice. In it we see inklings of a Platonic

tradition which seeks not only to privilege the semantic but also to eradicate voice completely. Cavarero calls this shift in philosophy the strategic “devocalization of logos,” where *logos* refers to speech and speaking and, particularly in the Platonic tradition, the “right” joining of words (56). In fact, it is chiefly under Plato that logos loses its voice, that is, the voice is seen as a mere bodily vehicle for the expression of pure, real thoughts. The distinction between a logo with a voice and voiceless logos is perhaps best illustrated in the concept of “Saying” versus “Said” that Cavarero and other scholars develop and articulate. “Saying” implies a relational construct in which speech is destined for an intended other. “Said,” by contrast, assumes “an autonomous reality, independent of the proximity of the interlocutors in the event of the Saying” (29). In other words, in the “Saying,” what remains of the interaction between the interlocutors is the meaning conveyed in the words themselves; in the “Said,” any meaning that was conveyed in the voice itself and in the relationality of the speaking interaction is lost, leaving behind nothing but the semantic as driven by language. This silencing of the voice, initiated by a belief that the voice is excess and distraction, is enforced and perpetuated by a Platonic tradition that champions a literally mute logos. The most significant and “correct” logos according to Plato and his contemporaries is the dialogue one has with oneself in our heads (56-57). The shift from a literal dialogue to a mute dialogue with oneself thus erases the need for the other, successfully avoiding, Plato would argue, the risks associated with receiving the seductive and pleasurable aspects of a corporeal voice, something Plato was concerned with as he himself received the audibly intoxicating speeches of Socrates (73). This Platonic perspective certainly contradicts earlier traditions, in which thinking was thought to be done by the lungs. In these traditions, speaking was synonymous with thinking and thus the voice occupied a

privileged and important position. The Platonic tradition, troubled by the finite life of the body, relocates the work of thinking in the head where the soul was thought to reside. This was an important relocation, as the soul is “eternal, bodiless, and does not breathe” (67). It is thus the soul that is “the part of man destined to survive death” (67). Whereas lungs rot with the body, the mind, the soul, and the thought of man endure eternally. Plato thus removes thought from the body, devaluing the voice in an attempt to render an individual silent and solitary in his search for “truth.”

Following this devaluation and silencing of the voice, we are left to wonder about the fate of those who continue to speak outside the Platonic tradition of semantic speech. Looking to poetry and a related tradition of singing, we can find forms of expression that interestingly risk collapsing the boundary between “on the one hand, the body and the voice, and on the other, the mind and the speech” (206-207). Because poetry has the power to collapse this boundary, it is perhaps not surprising that Plato takes issue with it and with Homer in particular. If it is true that poetry “can disrupt language with its rhythms, music, and its voice” and is itself linked to the corporeal pleasure of the voice, then Plato and his contemporaries have a vested interest in enforcing and maintaining a poetic silence (133). Meant to be read aloud, poetry is linked to the corporeal pleasure of the voice which is itself linked to femininity. What can be communicated in vocal poetry is thus the semantic, but also the vocal primacy which without the semantic still conveys identity and uniqueness. Breaking down language with phonic pleasures (138). In the Homeric tradition, the female muse knows all because she sees all, and thus relays to the poet all that she knows in its entirety. It is subsequently the job of the poet to make this knowledge “humanly audible” in the form of vast editing and summarizing (96). What worries Plato about poetry is its “musical

and vocal performance, linked to corporeal pleasure” (103). In other words, Plato is troubled by the power of the voice to seduce and distract from one’s quest for a higher truth. Because a poet’s inspiration comes from the Muses, there is a feminine source for the poetic song, and this song is associated with femininity whereas speech is coded as masculine (118). Plato thus seeks to silence an explicitly feminine voice. We can see this silencing in the example of the Homeric sirens. In Homer’s text, the sirens are monstrous figures who sing songs with semantic and narrative value, seducing men with their “sweet song,” a seduction which is “of course, deadly” (104). These Sirens are a far cry from the sirens as we will come to understand them, a beautiful and sexy fusion of human and fish who sing a wordless song with the intention of luring men to their deaths. These sirens become a mere object of male desire, “a body and an inarticulate voice, reduced to raising their melodious voices in a non-semantic seduction” (116). In this shift, there is not only a particular sort of silencing of female speech, but a suggestion that anyone who sings is a siren, “pushing pleasure to the limits of what is bearable” (118). The effect of the Siren’s loss of semantic value and their shift to object of male desire and seduction is the suggestion that there is value and perhaps even safety in the loss of a female voice. In other words, “women should be seen and not heard,” or “silence is golden” (117). Understanding this Platonic history of women’s silence which also polices the poetic tradition as it is deemed feminine, we are thus able to see the extent to which their silence has been enforced and regulated within the realm of Italian poetry in particular.

## **Part II: Voice, Form, and Resistance in the Poetry of Gaspara Stampa and Patrizia Cavalli**

The point of analyzing and exploring feminist theory as developed by Cavarero, Gilmore, and other scholars is to demonstrate the extent to which women's silence has been a phenomenon carefully constructed and heavily policed by those in positions of academic, political, and social power. Again, as a means of resistance and using two different approaches, Cavarero and Gilmore offer reading strategies with which we can rediscover and "re-member" female and feminist voices. Cavarero suggests a strategy that focuses on the unique and relational aspect of voice; the voice, she argues, is always destined for the other and in its utterance automatically conveys plural uniqueness. Gilmore, on the other hand, offers *autobiographics* as a strategy with which one can identify moments of difference, fracture, discontinuity, and subversion in the assertions of identity within multiple genres and discourses. The construction of this identity, however, is similarly relational to voice as Cavarero describes it. Autobiography, and texts that use "I" in general, demand a "confession" of the self in which there is a confessor and someone who judges, punishes, forgives, and/or authenticates that confession (Gilmore, 112). In both of these analyses, the personal is effectively rendered political in that the voice is unique and relational; both communicate an identity that is dynamic, intersectional, relational, and situated in particular social, historical, cultural, and political contexts.

In addition to using the reading strategies as described in *For More Than One Voice* and in *Autobiographics* in an attempt to discover these unique, relational, and intersectional voices, Gilmore's goal is also to reposition the voices of women, as was accomplished by Cavarero in *In Spite of Plato*. In that text, Cavarero successfully "steals" from the Platonic tradition female mythic figures in an attempt to establish a female symbolic order independent of the patriarchal symbolic order. In the pages that follow, the ways in which two female poets, Gaspara Stampa, a sixteenth century Italian poet, and the contemporary poet Patrizia Cavalli, resist, challenge, lament, or anticipate these particular contexts will be identified as feminisms; the voices themselves will be subsequently reoriented, rediscovered and remembered, as Cavarero's female mythic figures were, as a combination of unique voices and identities which actively resist the enforcement of their silencing and the coding of their utterances as excess, nonsense, and lies. By comparing two female poets separated by centuries, we are able to identify the ways in which women are both similarly and differently disciplined by the powers of genre, canon, and patriarchy over time.

### **Literary and Historical Context**

Before comparing and analyzing the feminisms of Stampa and Cavalli, we must first situate these poets within a longstanding Italian tradition of women identifying, resisting, and challenging the systems of power which oppressed them. Far from being ignorant and uneducated social agents, women across the centuries have offered nuanced and complex understandings of their voices in which they first identify their enforced silence and then claim their right and desire for voice. As early as the 16th

century, poet Isabella Di Morra bargains with an unnamed oppressor as she says, “Every evil i forgive you, //if you will do this only/...--let my sighs come unto the Great King?” (Allen, 15). Morra recognizes the fact that, as a woman, her sadness and complaints will go entirely unheard; thus, she must bargain with someone who yields actual power in order to raise her voice to a position that socially and politically matters. This understanding of silence has been explored by poets throughout the centuries in both explicit and subtle ways.

While it is true that recognizing silence as a trait valued for women amounts to a recognition on their part of gender roles, many poets go beyond the phenomenon of silence to identify the complex, various, and socially constructed gender roles which exist to further perpetuate and enforce their inferiority. As early as the 13th century, we see women lamenting the expectations of gender roles, forced marriage being among the most traumatic and powerless expectations (Allen, 3). Moving forward a few centuries, in a 1953 poem, Marta Fabiana plays with gender roles in creating a subject who dwells in stereotypically feminine spaces: the kitchen and the loom. Fabiana’s subject is expected to sit at the loom, weaving tapestries, not forgetting to keep a “warm cup/for the monsters, there, on the landing./We must be nice, she says./We must be discreet” (Allen, 133). Here we can see the construction of the “right” woman as a “nice” woman. “I am so good all day long,” Aleramo writes, “I understand, I accept, I do not weep” (129). Women are expected to maintain a smile and a varnish at all times; they are simultaneously expected to fulfill their familial expectations. A popular 19th century motto illustrates this disparity in the line “Papa has fun and mama’s tormented” (53). Beyond simply noticing their oppression in the form of silence, women across the centuries have also asserted causes for what they believe perpetuates and insures their

disparity: those in positions of structural and institutional power, men. They then often identify their various gender roles as being socially constructed for the benefit of those in power. In making these identifications, by being conscious of them, women actively challenge and resist the gender hierarchies which subjugate them.

All this is to say that Stampa and Cavalli are not exceptions to the rule of female mediocrity. Quite the contrary, Stampa and Cavalli both write within a rich tradition of women resisting the enforcement of their silence by asserting their voices in a way which is critical of disciplinary mechanisms of gender. In comparing Stampa and Cavalli we are both able to identify the ways in which “feminisms” evolve in character and form over time, and also, perhaps more importantly, we can identify the “female” voice as persistently participating in transgression, subversion, and resistance.

### **Gaspara Stampa**

Born in 1523 in Padua, Gaspara Stampa is widely considered as the greatest female poet of the Renaissance, if not one of the greatest poets of all time. A talented child from an educated, middle-class family, Stampa grew up exposed to the arts and to musical and literary traditions in particular. Most of her poems are sonnets, written in a Petrarchan tradition, on the topic of love, as nearly all of her poems are dedicated to her one time lover, Count Collatino di Collalto (Vernqvist). Their tumultuous and temporary love affair informs much of Stampa’s work, as she focuses on themes of love, waiting, emotional distress, and, in spite of a destructive love, poetic ambition. Writing directly in the tradition of Petrarch, Stampa is a near-perfect example of a poet who simultaneously works with and against the powers of canon and genre. Although

Stampa writes within the conventions of the canon, her identification and criticism of gender roles and her assertion of a strong, ambitious, and talented female voice ultimately subvert a patriarchal tradition which would otherwise insist on her silence.

### **Embodying and Defying Petrarchism**

Growing up as an educated, artistic young woman, Stampa was extremely familiar with the work, tradition, and limitations of Petrarch and Petrarchism. In analyzing Stampa's sonnets, it is not difficult to see that she emulates Petrarch in both form, theme, and language; but if we are to ascertain the ways in which Stampa does indeed deviate from Petrarch, we must first define and analyze the tropes, conventions, styles, and themes associated with both Petrarch and Petrarchism. Petrarch himself wrote mostly in the form of sonnets and *canzoni*, employing a medium level of language by excluding both colloquial expressions and technical words (Contini). Often ruminating on love, Petrarch wrote to his muse, Laura, lamenting the various tropes which dominate his experience of love; such tropes include the characterization of the lover as tongue-tied, "worse in the presence of the beloved," and love as a sufferable, painful process often defined by an unrequited longing (Braden, 115). Another important component of Petrarchism, Gordon Braden argues, is the mute "worshipped woman" (116). In Petrarch's *Canzoniere* 23, John Freccero argues that "silencing Diana is an emblematic gesture; it suppresses a voice and it casts generations of would-be Lauras in a role predicated upon the muteness of its player" (116). Thus, Braden argues, depriving women of speech is "part of the nature, and, indeed, the purpose of Petrarchism" (116).

Writing directly within the tradition of Petrarch, Stampa certainly replicates and embodies the spirit of Petrarchism. For one, she writes almost entirely in Petrarchan sonnet form on the topic of love. Like Petrarch, she often laments a love unrequited, tedious, and painful. Furthermore, there is a similarity between Petrarch and Stampa as they relate to their respective Muses. Whereas Petrarch writes to Laura and addresses various “donne” throughout his poems, Stampa addresses a “conte,” her Count Collalto. Remarking on Stampa’s work in relation to Petrarch’s, Braden writes, “It is on some levels a momentarily innovative sequence, but that innovativeness is inseparable from Stampa’s commitment to Petrarchan convention, of which I think she avails herself more effectively than any other woman poet of the age” (119). In other words, there is little doubt that Stampa commits herself to the form, style, language, and themes of Petrarchism and succeeds in doing so. But while Braden is critical of feminist “over-readings” of Stampa, in the sense that he argues that Stampa does much more to align with Petrarch than to deviate, I argue that these deviations, however subtle and small, are worthy of analysis. As we shall see, in breaking with the canon, Stampa articulates the limitations and shortcomings of Petrarchism.

Stampa certainly distinguishes herself from Petrarch in one convention in particular, that of the silent, worshipped woman of Petrarchism. Stampa defies this convention simply by being a woman who writes within this tradition, but she also subverts this convention and thus the Petrarchan tradition in the way she elevates and privileges the “feminine” experience. The tension between affirming and defying canon is clear from the very beginning of Stampa’s 1554 collection, *Rime*, in which she rewrites and responds to the first sonnet of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*:

<p><i>Stampa</i></p> <p>You who hear in these troubled rhymes,  In these troubled and these dark accents,  the sound of my amorous laments  And sufferings that vanquish all others' –  Wherever valor is esteemed and prized,  I hope to find glory among the well-born:  Glory and not only pardon ; for what  Gives rise to my laments is so sublime.  And I hope some woman will be moved to say:  “Most happy she, who suffered famously  For such a famous cause !  Oh, why can't the fortune that comes  From loving a lord like him be mine,  So such a lady and I might walk side by side ?</p>	<p><i>Petrarch</i></p> <p>All you that hear in scattered rhymes the sound  Of sighs on which I used to feed my heart  In youthful error when I was in part  Another man, and not what I am now,  For the vain hopes, vain sorrows I avow,  The tears and discourse of my varied art,  In any who have played a lover's part  Pity I hope to find, and pardon too.  But now I plainly see how I became  A mocking tale that common people tell,  And in myself my self I put to shame ;  And of my raving all the fruit is shame,  And penitence, and knowing all too well  That when the world loves is a passing dream.</p>
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This sonnet, and the comparison between the two poets, is emblematic of the ways in which Stampa navigates canonical power. The poems are similar in both form and content: two sonnets which deal, more or less, with the issue of pardon. The poems differ importantly, however, in both their tone and their intended audience. Where Petrarch's sonnet evokes a sense of pity, Stampa's is characterized by a strong, persistent ambition and glory (Vernqvist). The comparison of these poems is particularly interesting given that they both exhibit attributes that are more "natural" to the other sex. Petrarch asks for pity, speaks modestly of his vanity, and acknowledges his shame; Stampa, on the other hand, speaks of her desire and pursuit of ambition for glory "among the well-born." While it is expected of women to be kind, humble, and self-deprecating, Stampa refuses this duty by breaking with Petrarch in the particular focus and tone of the poem. In other words, Stampa distances herself from conventional

representation Petrarchan of women as silent, worshipped objects and rather assumes the position of subject, who can love, desire, and suffer in the same way as a man.

Furthermore, unlike Petrarch, the intended audience of the poem is women; Stampa seeks poetic glory and the opportunity to empower other women to seek similar glories. In this way, Stampa seems to criticize the limits of the canon and the Petrarchan tradition especially in regards to ways in which these powers exclude and actively deny woman glory. Stampa thus appropriates the Petrarchan tradition, with its silent, female amorous object, and subverts and manipulates it to both claim voice for herself and for women in general. Whereas Petrarchan sonnets are characterized by motifs of women's beauty and love as a "bittersweet pain" that leaves a lover often longing for death, Stampa's appropriation of Petrarchan poetry features women as the subject of love and no longer just sexual, amorous objects; as such, the motifs, themes, and meanings inherent to Stampa's work illustrate the many ways in which men and women experience love and power in distinct ways. In particular, Stampa identifies and criticizes gender roles and sexist social dynamics which restrict both her ability to be happy in an amorous relationship and her ability to achieve poetic glory.

### **Ambition & Exhaustion**

As is apparent from *Rime I*, Stampa writes not just as a form of self-expression or as a "frivolous" use of time, but as a means through which she hopes to achieve fame and glory. In *Rime VII*, Stampa once again asserts this desire for poetic glory and asks why she as a woman should be denied it. She writes, "If I, who am an abject, low-born woman, /can bear within me such lofty fire,/ Why should I not possess at least a

little/Poetic power to tell it to the world?” She asks, in other words, why poetry is a realm reserved for men when even those cast lowest in the social hierarchy have the necessary “fire” to inspire verse. Stampa thus acknowledges that even with equal talent, drive, and ability, a woman, particularly of a lower class, will not be granted the same amount of glory as a similarly talented man. The poem is particularly powerful in its use of rhetorical questions; whereas we might be accustomed to hearing women, and other minorities, express misfortune, pain, and suffering by statements of fact (“I can’t do this because...”), Stampa’s use of rhetorical questions begs an answer from an “other,” in particular a powerful and oppressive “other.” In this way, she refuses the blame of her and other women’s supposed poetic “inadequacy” and instead implicates systems of power whose only answers to these questions are based in nonsensical prejudice.

Beyond the challenges and limitations that she confronts as a female poet, Stampa also confronts pain, suffering, and subjugation navigating the realm of love as a woman. “Harsh is my fortune,” she writes in *Rime XLVII*, “but harsher still is the fate/ dealt me by my count: he flees from me,/ I follow him; other long for me,/ I cannot look at another man’s face.” In various representations, Roland Barthes explains, women are the sedentary subjects of love who must wait for their male lovers, prone to wandering and abandonment. The phenomena of “waiting” and of enduring absence is not only an amorous one but also a gendered one. If the woman’s duty is to faithfully wait without complaint, Stampa identifies these gendered expectations and criticizes them as a “harsh fate.” She goes on to explain the ambivalence she experiences in this dynamic, feeling both “hate” for the man who loves her and “love” for the same man who “scorns her.” She then seems almost resigned to this toxic exchange, claiming that her “soul longs for such harmful food.” Even as her lover gives her “constant cause for

answer/while others seek to give [her] comfort and peace,” she laments that she still “clings” to her lover. Stampa thus argues that it is women’s fate to persist through this toxic and oppressive exchange because in love one always receives the “opposite of what we deserve,” where men get love and fidelity and women receive pain and absence.

Stampa similarly identifies amorous gender roles in *Rime XLVII*, in which she becomes so exhausted by the duty to wait for her lover that she longs for death:

By now so sick of waiting, I'm by now  
so beaten by the pain (by now the burn  
won't stop and he forgets so quickly how  
I trust in his return and how I yearn),

that I cry out for her to give me rest,  
she of the pallid face and reaper's knife  
so hard the need that grows within my breast.

In these two stanzas, Stampa identifies the different and disparate responsibilities men and women have in an amorous relationship. While the woman must wait and endure the pain and absence associated with living with the lover’s absence, the man does not have to do so much as even recognize her yearning and her desire and trust in his return. The man’s only responsibility, she argues, is to be eventually present, if that. Despite her longing for death, she is denied both the relief of death and of her lover’s return. While her eyes are “always wet” and her villa full of “misery” and “weeping,” her lover can live “smugly up there in his hills.” Yet again, Stampa identifies love as a phenomenon that is subject to sexist and oppressive social relationships which privilege the male and subjugate the woman.

While her poems do contain a sense of resignation in identification and consideration of oppressive amorous gender dynamics, it is noteworthy that Stampa

speaks as an amorous subject as opposed to an object. In identifying and critiquing these dynamics, Stampa resists patriarchy's technology of objectification. While the subject of her poems weeps, *she* writes this suffering and implicates systems of power which cause and perpetuate this harm. In this way, she characterizes her self as an amorous subject who has the power to do something and make something out of this exhausting inequity. Her poems are thus characterized by a sense of self-confidence which "does not consider the male lover as the primary subject of her poems, but Stampa herself" (Vernqvist). In other words, the focus is not so much on the male absence but rather the feminine experience of having to endure this absence; it is not so much a plea for a return but rather an indictment of a social and amorous sickness which sentences women to misery. Her poetry, even as she resembles Petrarchan tradition, is thus an act of resistance which subverts and manipulates convention in an effort to establish a female tradition.

### **Patrizia Cavalli**

Born in Todi in 1949, Patrizia Cavalli is the author of three books of poetry. Her *My Poems Won't Change the World*, is a collection of mostly untitled poems on the theme of love. Although Stampa and Cavalli are separated by several centuries, both of their works express feminisms concerned with amorous gender roles, particularly the relentless care and labor that women are expected to provide for their lover. Unlike Stampa, however, Cavalli's work is characterized by a sense of freedom and playfulness, perhaps evoked by her free verse form and her liberal use of enjambment. Furthermore, beyond identifying and critiquing the oppressive gender dynamics of love, Cavalli's

poetry identifies these dynamics as a performative process which she can control, manipulate, and destroy.

### **Gender Roles, Power Disparities, & Violence**

Like Stampa, Cavalli identifies and critiques amorous power inequities in which men have control, most directly perhaps in the following poem:

I have no seed to scatter through the world  
I cannot flood urinals or  
mattresses. My scanty female seed  
is too little to give offense. What can I  
leave in the streets in houses  
in unfertilized wombs. Words  
multitudes of them  
but already they bear no resemblance to me  
they have forgotten the rage  
and the cursing, they have become young ladies  
a little ill-famed perhaps  
but still young ladies.

In this poem, Cavalli identifies the power and control associated with the male body and the comparative powerlessness and supposed weakness of the female body. Her only power, she claims, is in her words, which she is expected to tame and to revise such that she fulfills the feminine expectation to be kind, soft, and polite. Throughout her poems in general, however, Cavalli refuses to eliminate or diminish the rage of her words, and this in itself is an act of resistance to the gender hierarchies which want to discipline her into docility. In fact, if Stampa and Cavalli are similar in that they both identify oppressive gender roles and toxic gender dynamics, Cavalli distinguishes herself by her confrontational if not violent diction. In one poem in particular, Cavalli juxtaposes an image of implied violence with her expectations of domesticity: “What do I care if your

nose is all swollen./ I have to clean the house.” By pairing expectations of nurturing and cleaning together and suggesting that it is not possible to do both, Cavalli both illustrates and mocks the expectations society reserves for women.

Whereas the image of violence in that poem is only passive and implied, she becomes the active perpetrator of violence in her other poems. Detailing her responsibility to be docile, nurturing and domestically productive, Cavalli writes,

I am the mild and obedient nurse  
to this worn-out love.  
I care for it, cradle it,  
hold my temper;  
I satisfy its few needs,  
make good dinners, go to bed;  
then all of a sudden  
I say to myself: “What if I killed her?”

Cavalli thus identifies within herself a compliance with society’s expectations of her but has a violent desire to kill that part of herself. This poem is particularly compelling because it identifies gender as a performative process, not in the sense that it is “fake” but rather in the sense that gender is comprised of small, repetitive acts that come to be associated with a particular sex. By nurturing and obeying, she is performing “woman,” and, once conscious of this, wants to violently halt the performance. Cavalli thus differentiates herself from Stampa in that she asserts a sense of power and control in response to her own identification of her oppression. In another poem, Cavalli illustrates the extent to which she can control and manipulate amorous gender dynamics: “I became good. And like a goody-goody/I took unlove out to pasture./Go on, eat this up, I’d say, it’ll fatten you up.” After controlling what her lover can and cannot eat, they both become “fat and undone” and she asks in response,

How can I melt it, how can I murder it  
that sleepy parasite who by now  
is used to believing he's the boss?  
Come killers, eat his flesh,  
tear it to pieces, he took himself seriously,  
exterminate him! Not me, I was faking, faking,  
I'll thin myself down whenever I want.  
Look, I'm already thin.

There is, once again, an image of violence which is paired with the characterization of her lover as a parasite. This image is particularly powerful because it suggests that men and society have unhealthy expectations of women that negatively impact women's health and wellbeing. Identifying this parasitic lover, Cavalli wants to murder him and to show him that she is the "boss." Furthermore, Cavalli's use of images of fattening up and slimming down, with the suggestion that she was "faking, faking" are yet another assertion of her own power and control over her love life.

This rumination on power and control paired with a persistent tone of mockery seems to be, for Cavalli, a sort of call-to-action. These poems in their entirety not only identify toxic amorous gender relations but also suggest and depict ways to resist and reject them. In fact, Cavalli suggests in one poem that resisting can be as simple as using the voice which patriarchy tries so hard to deny women. "To get out of prison," she asks, "do you really need/ to know what the door is made of,/the alloy of the bars, the precise hue/of the walls?" Instead of "wasting" time understanding the precise roots and causes of oppressive and oppressive gender hierarchies, Cavalli suggests, "don't wait so long, leave now,/maybe use your voice, become a song." This suggestion is particularly powerful because it makes Cavalli's "feminisms" remarkably accessible; if resisting is as easy as doing what the patriarchy does not want you to do, there is no need to understand the intricacies of feminist theory to be considered feminist.

Both Stampa and Cavalli suggest in their work that resistance to patriarchy starts with naming and identifying oppression. While Stampa's use of Petrarchan form to identify, lament, and critique oppressive gender roles subverts and undermines a male-dominated tradition, Cavalli's playful, mocking tone in conjunction with images of violence destroy stereotypes of women's docility and quiet compliance. Although Cavalli's work is markedly more confrontational and dynamic, it would be a mistake to privilege Cavalli's feminisms over Stampa's; rather, the comparison between these two poets is not about how feminisms have evolved but rather an example of the ways in which women have always used and continue to assert their own voices in a conscious act of confrontation, resistance, and subversion.

### **Part III: Voice, Gender Roles, and Subversion in the Autobiographies of Sibilla Aleramo and Patrizia Cavalli**

Given that there is a long and established history of suppressing female voices within a patriarchal philosophical tradition, we are now able to analyze and understand the ways in which this silencing occurs specifically within the genre of autobiography. I have already used the arguments of Leigh Gilmore, a leading scholar on the topic of autobiography, to examine the concept of literary voice. A female literary voice, she has argued, maintains an unprivileged proximity to “truth,” a proximity which denies women credibility and literary value and results in the enforcement of their silencing. Moving from a general idea of literary voice to a more specific rumination on the ways in which autobiography as genre attempts to discipline and control a woman’s voice, we can identify gender as a “technology” of autobiography. This technology affects not only whether or not women can be perceived as truth-tellers, but also affects the ways in which women *attempt* to voice the truth and, in the process, the ways they aim to represent themselves.

#### **Genre as Discipline**

As we have already identified autobiography as a genre characterized by the “autobiographical pact,” we can now evaluate the extent to which authors are (dis)credited by their relative ability to “sign” the pact. It is the author’s responsibility, Gilmore argues, to answer autobiography’s charge to “strive to produce ‘truth,’” a truth

which is produced by discourses that are culturally dependent. Thus, the ability for an author to produce “truth,” or the ability to “sign” the pact, depends on their culture’s assessment of their ability to tell the truth, an ability which varies based on a culture’s relationship to identity markers such as race, gender, and class. These discourses, value systems, and cultural norms become “mutually reinforcing networks of value which credit some and not others as authors, as persons having a story worth telling-- that is, of possessing a life worth remembering and of being sufficiently representative to have their texts matter” (Gilmore, 36). These “representative lives” have been, historically speaking, white, European, and male. Subsequently, women’s attempts at self-representation are silenced and marginalized from the genre of autobiography because their lives have not been granted the authority and credibility of being worth representing.

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that autobiography as a genre simply excludes women, rather than rigidly and precisely disciplining them. After all, women *do* write, even if they and their writings are systematically neglected. The more interesting question at this point in the analysis is not whether or even *why* women are silenced, but *how* exactly this tradition of silencing affects the ways women write both with and against genre and the canon. Take for example the autobiography of Hannah Tillich, the wife of the famous German philosopher and theologian, Paul Tillich. Her attempt at self-representation was met with much criticism, disdain, and disappointment by those who read her work hoping to get an “inside look” at the “more interesting” life of Paul Tillich (Gilmore, 51). The reaction to her self-representation communicates two vital points related to women’s autobiography. One, that they do not have access to success in this genre because their life is neither representative nor

valuable, and two, their voice is only worthy of being heard when it attempts to capture glimpses of a life and a voice that is valuable and representative. Another poignant example of genre's disciplining power is the autobiography of Sarah Knowles Bolton, an animal rights activist who wrote about animal cruelty. Her book was ultimately rewritten and revised by her son to better capture his mother's position within their family (Gilmore, 50). Although Bolton was an individual with standing and renown within her field, her life was "revised" such that it fit neatly into the narrative patriarchy usually produces; in other words, a book that captures Bolton's life as a professional and activist is secondary to her life as a mother and a wife. This act of revision once again communicates that a woman's position is not one of authority or within a genre, but rather a position of familial duty. The persistence of this policing and discipline means that the "enforced silence of women can be read as the norm even when women manage to write and publish, to speak and achieve influence" (126).

Given the silencing and policing of women's literary voices, the extent to which women feel pressure to "get it right," and to engage in a sort of self-policing as to anticipate, prevent, and avoid the disciplining powers of genre which enforce their neglect (113) is hardly surprising. But what exactly does "getting it right" look like in terms of avoiding the disciplinary power of genre? For one, it means navigating the phenomenon of identity in an appropriate and predictable way. To begin, one must have, as we have already established, a representative life worth representing. For a woman, this means adhering to the tired and predictable tropes associated with acceptable woman: chastity, motherhood and domesticity, and submissiveness to name just a few. Thus, woman can speak and have a voice as long as that voice is saying something that does not threaten the power genre and its associated patriarchal

philosophical tradition. Genre's disciplining power, however, goes beyond *what* identities are to be represented to also control *how* identity itself is characterized.

Take, for example, St. Augustine of Hippo, whose autobiographical work *Confessions* details his struggle with evil and sin throughout his youth and young adulthood. This autobiographical work, written in the year 397, has been used as an autobiographical model for writers for centuries, particularly in regards to the representation of autobiographical identity. First, it is important to note that Augustine establishes the tradition of the exemplary autobiographical subject. It is then the task of the writer to reflect or mirror the exemplariness of his current identity. In other words, the autobiographical subject exudes "*his* universality, *his* representativeness, *his* role as spokesman for the community" (Marrone, 7). Beyond mirroring and representing an exemplary identity, Augustine's autobiographical model suggests that the autobiographical subject must be one that is unified. In the Augustinian model, the autobiographical self is indeed split; on the one hand, a narrating self that reports and details the events which led to the self's position as narrator; on the other, a narrated self who represents the "pre-conversion self," a version of the self who sins and who undergoes trials in pursuit of unification. The narrating self is the "post-conversion self" who then details this process of unification. Although there is a split between these selves, the goal of the Augustinian autobiographer is ultimately this resolution of identity.

As decades and centuries of adherence to this model of autobiography, genre becomes a disciplining power which suggests, if not controls, what lives and identities are worth representing and, if they happen to pass this first test, how they are to be represented. This accumulation of pressure has resulted in an autobiographical tradition

of *bildungsroman*, in which a young male protagonist “undergoes a series of adventures, encounters, and disappointments, all part of the growing up process. As he assimilated certain conventional expectations and prejudices, comes to know himself and his place in society, sure of himself and how he will lead his life” (Marrone, 16). The model of the *bildungsroman*, however, is an inefficient autobiographical prototype for anyone who is not a privileged, exemplary male, as these minorities cannot use the same tools to succeed within a social order that disciplines, controls, and oppresses them in disparate ways. This shortcoming does little, however, to affect genre’s championing of the exemplary, individual male.

The history of privileging some lives while discrediting, devaluing, and ignoring others ensures that autobiography as a genre serves as “reproductions of a particular narrative of history” (Gilmore, 128), a consequence of which is that women, and other subjugated minority identities, are vastly underrepresented within the genre of autobiography. Not only do women possess lives often deemed markedly un-exemplary, unworthy of the master narrative of history, but they also fail to follow the tradition model of the *bildungsroman* because they interact with and are disciplined by the family structure, gender roles, and social order in dramatically different ways. Both the Augustinian model and *bildungsroman* style of autobiography are themselves correlated with and impacted by a patriarchal tradition in that they champion the exemplary, unified individual. Thus, there is a fundamental disconnect between the “assumptions of a genre that embodies male norms and the values of its female protagonists” (Marrone 17). As we will see, women throughout history have resisted and navigated this literary conflict in a variety of ways throughout the centuries.

## Defying Genre

Although we have seen that genre and canon operate in ways that privilege the lives of the powerful few while discouraging and policing the voices of others, it would be a mistake to assume that women have failed to participate in and resist against genre. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that women have been writing both with and against the canon for centuries. For example, women, just as much as men, have been inspired by the Augustinian model of autobiography. Margery Kempe, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila, to name but a few, all wrote spiritual autobiographies in line with the Augustinian tradition (Marrone, 10). Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the epistolary novel was a popular form, as women expressed their thoughts, desires, and lives within the “feminine” and “trivial” practice of letter writing (Marrone, 11). A persistent feature of these novels and other forms of female self-expression and self-representation in these centuries is self-deprecation; in other words, it was a common practice during these times for a woman to write within genres reserved for men while remarking that their texts were comparably inadequate and trivial. However, even as these women acknowledge the weakness of their autobiographical pact in comparison to that of a man, they often write of the issues of their day, such as in travel literature or in responding to their contemporary political issues, with a hope that they will be nonetheless acknowledged and heard (Marrone, 11-13). By way of this tradition of writing within a genre and canon whilst simultaneously writing *against* it by acknowledging its silencing power, female writers of the 16th to 19th centuries “paved the way for 20th century writers to further blur and manipulate the line between fiction and ‘truth’” (Marrone, 11). Put simply, a long history of women’s participation and

resistance within the disciplining mechanisms of genre has established a tradition of female writers identifying and resisting their enforced silence.

But if it is true that women have been writing both with and against the canon for some time, in what ways do these writers specifically defy genre and the silencing power of a patriarchal, philosophical tradition? While the public act of representing a private life of a woman itself can be viewed as a feminist act, I am more concerned with the nuanced ways women writers confront the intersecting disciplinary power of genre and a philosophical tradition. Put succinctly, the patriarchal philosophical tradition devocalizes logos, champions the unified individual male thinker, and relegates women to spaces where they can best serve these exemplary men. Genre then ensures that, if they are to speak at all, women's literary contribution is limited to their roles as mothers, wives, and reproductive vessels. It is thus not surprising that women confront and resist genre and patriarchy by addressing conceptions of identity and selfhood, motherhood, and gender roles.

### **Representative Texts**

This section will explore in depth the ways in which two female Italian writers, Sibilla Aleramo and Luisa Passerini, subvert the genres, gender hierarchies, and social norms to represent the various "feminisms" of their respective eras. While Sibilla Aleramo writes from the perspective of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Luisa Passerini focuses on the impact 1968 had on the lives of activists, decades on from the tumultuous political climate that inspired their political involvement. Although these two texts differ quite dramatically both in their form and content, both authors confront

the many ways in which intersecting systems of power affect their lives as writers, as citizens, and as women.

### **Sibilla Aleramo's *Una Donna***

Born in 1876 as Rina Faccio, Sibilla Aleramo developed as a writer familiar with the work of Collette, Woolf, and Katherine Mansfield and as a contemporary of Ada Negri, Grazia Deledda, and Annie Vivanti (Marrone, 95). Written between 1901 and 1904 and published in 1907, Aleramo's *Una Donna* is often characterized as a pseudo-autobiography, in that it both employs the first-person perspective and also recounts much of Aleramo's actual story with the inclusion of some significant and intentional modifications (Marrone, 92). The story concerns a young, Italian woman navigating familial and social pressures from her times as a free-spirited, confident girl to her miserable and oppressive time as a wife and a mother. Written at the turn of the 20th century, Aleramo was writing in an important transitory moment; while 19th century heroines tended to write of the tragic effects of patriarchal oppression, 20th century heroines began to refuse and resist these structures (Marrone, 91). Throughout, this three-part novel "anticipates the feminists of the 1960's and 1970's who challenge the limits of male language, seeking a uniquely feminine voice" (Marrone, 91). Aleramo thus confronts the social, cultural, and legal conditions of the Italian state and the oppressive family structures and gender hierarchies which secure and perpetuate women's oppression; in the process, Aleramo subverts autobiographical genre both in her use of form and her representations of gender roles, marriage, motherhood, and identity.

## **Form: Subverting Autobiographical Bildungsroman**

In the novel, our nameless protagonist is ripped from her idyllic, happy childhood, which itself is characterized by her freedom, confidence, and closeness with her father, when she is raped by a male co-worker while working in her father's factory and pressured to marry him. After years suffering of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband, the protagonist eventually decides, through much painstaking deliberation, to leave both her husband and child to pursue a career as a writer. Although this character arc in itself is explicitly feminist and is and will be worth analyzing, it would be a mistake to overlook the ways in which Aleramo uses form and style to subvert norms of genre which, similar to gender roles and family structure, oppress and control a female writer. Aleramo's feminism is thus extensive in the sense that rejects entirely the male-coded literary norms that govern autobiography.

On the one hand, *Una Donna* follows the tradition of the male-dominated *bildungsroman* in that it recounts the protagonist throughout various life stages as she meets and attempts to overcome the obstacles presented to her by society. Like the traditional *bildungsroman*, our protagonist's experiences "offer a maturation process in progress whereas the narrating 'I' attests to the achievement of the desired maturity and self-affirmation" (Testaferri, 133). Aleramo thus writes within a genre and canon in the sense that she is writing in a familiar and disciplined form. On the other, unlike a traditional *bildungsroman*, or most autobiographies for that matter, the protagonist of this novel is completely nameless; this decision, critics argue, is an attempt by Aleramo to universalize her own story, to "associate a woman with Everywoman" (Testaferri,

133). This subverts autobiographical genre in that it entirely disregards the “sanctity” and importance of the autobiographical pact. Because Aleramo’s texts include both factual details of her life and fictional creations, she blurs the line between autobiographical nonfiction and the fiction that characterizes a novel. By blurring this distinction and by anonymizing her subject, Aleramo avoids the processes of judgment and discipline which so often deny women the status of truth-tellers.

Aleramo continues to “break” with the *bildungsroman* model inasmuch as her protagonist does not, and in fact cannot, navigate the social world in the same way as a man. In *Donna*, Fiora A. Bassanese succinctly describes the traditional model of a *bildungsroman*:

Briefly put, the classic German *bildungsroman* and its imitators are about leaving childhood, exploring the world, and learning lessons with the specific intent of creating rational, responsible paradigms of human behavior; the hero gradually matures by leaving the security of family and home and venturing into the unknown and often hostile world. In the end, the *bildung* hero has achieved a private identity which allows him to integrate into a social group (generally, the bourgeoisie), by adopting its values. (In Testaferri, 135).

While a traditional *bildungsroman* encapsulates “an optimistic rendering of *male* development and integration into the social fabric,” such an integration or assimilation is impossible for a subject who is denied access, space, and worth within that social fabric” (134). Thus, although Aleramo writes *within* a genre and canon insofar as she imitates the *bildungsroman*, by depicting a female coming-of-age story, Aleramo demonstrates both the limits and challenges of mapping a male-dominated genre onto a female experience and the catastrophic albeit commonplace consequences of navigating the world as a woman. While a traditional *bildungsroman* would depict the protagonist leaving the security of the family in order to confront and overcome the hostile world to

ascertain a complete, social identity, Aleramo's three-part novel suggests a model which more accurately depicts a female "hero's" journey.

It is worth noting that Aleramo's text differs not only from the traditional male *bildungsroman*, but also from more traditional models of female novels of development, such as May Alcott's *Little Women* or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which Bassanese suggests "taught girls the need to subordinate their individuality and will to others in order to become good wives, mothers," thus depicting a "growing down" process rather than the male "growing up" process (135). Aleramo writes *against* genre in the sense that she not only manipulates and distorts the male model of development but also because she rejects examples of an "acceptable" representation of a female model of development. Aleramo's text is thus much better characterized as a novel of awakening, in which the protagonist grows aware of and disillusioned by systems of power which actively work to suppress female autonomy.

### **Gender Roles and Gendered Oppression**

The text itself is divided into three-distinct parts: part one details the protagonist's relationship with her family, her rape and subsequent marriage, her attempted suicide, and her general orientation within an oppressive patriarchal system; following her suicide attempt, part two is more psychologically defined, detailing her inward psychological growth as she attempts to navigate marriage, motherhood, and a tentative career; the final and shortest section concerns her ultimate decision to leave her husband and son in search of a career as a writer.

In part one, we are introduced to a protagonist who seems to possess all the necessary attributes of a male *bildungsroman* subject. Independent, strong, and intelligent, our protagonist enjoys the company of friends who “unquestionably accepted [her] leadership,” had games, sweets, and books and the undying affection of both her mother and her father. She was, however, particularly close with her father, who was her main role model and who vehemently encouraged her to study (Aleramo, 1-5). He even granted her the authority and opportunity to work in his factory instead of staying home with her mother, where she explains she felt “like a young man recently come of age who is full of arrogant complaints about the servants” (Aleramo, 17). Throughout the beginning of this first chapter, Aleramo’s subject carefully distances herself from her mother’s body, depicting her as possessing untrustworthy judgments, reciting out of date poetry, and as blameworthy for the fights between her parents. The distance between her and her mother only increases as her mother’s mental health steadily declines and she attempts suicide, trapped by her marriage and perhaps seeing “hope” in a deadly transgression of space, by jumping out of a window. Although the protagonist is heartbroken and pities her mother, she rejects her almost completely as a “frightened child, trapped in the memory of her own mistakes” (25). Still a child enjoying the freedom of her androgyny; in other words, she is free to embody “masculine” traits and behaviors, such as an unrestrained and encouraged intelligence, a sharp wit, an aversion for all things related to domesticity and girlhood, a comfort among men in the factory life, and her rejection of her mother and the life she represents. In this androgyny, our protagonist does not yet identify the ways in which her mother’s agency is constrained by forces beyond her control.

This freedom and androgyny is threatened, however, as the protagonist matures and begins to be recognized within the social world as a woman. Working within her father's factory, Aleramo meets a man who was "the first person to recognize my femininity" (Aleramo, 29). The subject, confident and defiant, tried to show the man that she attached "little importance to what he said," would laugh and almost mock him, and would assure others insisting that she "could never be happy" if she weren't allowed to continue to work" (29). Finding herself disillusioned by her father and increasingly vulnerable, the protagonist's place in the social order is "secured" or "corrected" when the man she trusted raped her. Aleramo's subject is thus a representation of what happens to a woman when she occupies a space which does not "belong" to her. Although she had enjoyed the masculine and public space of the factory as a girl, the subject's rape is a disciplinary act which aims to return her to where she "belongs," as a submissive figure in the private realm of the home and the family. If she is disillusioned by her father's actions, her image of herself is completely devastated, apparent in the opening of Chapter four, in which she asks, "Did this man own me?" (36).

No longer the carefree confident child she was, the subject begins to understand what it means to navigate the social world as a woman. Particularly, she begins to understand that womanhood is a phenomenon of confinement: confined to the home, to her husband and father's will, to the safety of her own, isolated thoughts in the "silence" of her little room (43). She begins to see herself in the women and in the spaces she initially rejected, whether in her new empathy and understanding of her mother, or in witnessing her mother-in-law always "crouched beside their great stove, its flame sometimes the only light in the kitchen darkness of the ground floor" (47).

The first part of *Una Donna* confronts, subverts and challenges the gender hierarchies and family structure that discipline where and how women can act within designated spaces. By depicting the subject's evolution from a happy, independent, confident child to a mere shadow of herself as a submissive, quiet, and miserable wife, Aleramo illustrates the extent to which women are forced by family structure, legal systems, and hypocrisy to denounce their agency and autonomy in order to "care" for the men in their lives. Aleramo similarly depicts what can and will happen when a woman attempts to transgress codes of respectability and femininity by asserting their own independence and intelligence. Unlike a male "hero," who goes out into the world to struggle and overcome, our female "hero" is ripped from one oppressive family structure in an even more violent, restrictive, and oppressive one. Aleramo thus suggests that only opportunities afforded to women consist in roles as caregivers within a family.

But while the plot of *Una Donna* is feminist in its own right, Aleramo's literary protest extends from the plot to a subversion of both autobiographical genre itself. Aleramo manipulates a traditional autobiographical form to illustrate the extent to which it fails to capture a "real" feminine experience. While traditional models of autobiography suggest that a "real" feminine experience relates only to the woman's role as a wife and a mother, *Una Donna* as a text shows that there are many ways to be a woman and many ways to be an autobiographical subject; Aleramo's text thus embraces nuance, ambivalence, and fracture in a way that traditional autobiographical novels typically ignore. In this embrace of nuance and difference, Aleramo aims not only to subvert literary norms, but also to rework and redefine what "womanhood" truly means.

## **Work and Sodomitical Motherhood**

Aleramo's identification and articulation of the gender roles and gendered consequences associated with femininity is feminist in itself, especially when one considers that this text was written in the early 20th century. Beyond the identification and condemnation of gender roles, however, is Aleramo's compelling and uniquely subversive representation of motherhood. Aleramo depicts a character grappling with what many women still have to grapple with today: balancing a career with the obligation of a family.

Growing more and more depressed and like her mother every day, she becomes pregnant, has a child, and finds brief respite and purpose in the womanly duty of caring for another human being. This duty, however, does not fulfill her, as she literally runs out of milk and cannot satisfy her child in the way she had hoped: "I was increasingly unable to look around me, to want anything or to do anything... the mother and the woman in me couldn't live together... I began to see myself as an unbalanced, incomplete person" (Aleramo, 67). Increasingly depressed, the subject, too, attempts suicide. This attempted suicide marks the transition to part two, where the subject is "awakened," turning to, as is quite common in *bildungsroman*, books and writing and her newfound career to better analyze and understand herself and her situation. She finds a newfound hope and purpose in this reading and writing, asking herself, "What did I want to be? Not a journalist... not an artist. A book. *The book*. Surely I did not want to write that... Surely it was possible for a woman to take the core of her experience and create a masterpiece from it - the equivalent of a life" (Aleramo, 123).

In this passage, Aleramo seems to directly address technologies of genre and canon which explicitly exclude women from attempting to represent their lives. Both she

and her subject recognize some lack of representation of women in autobiography and, noticing that lack, find purpose in being the ones to fill the void. It is not until her husband announces that they will be returning to the oppressive provincial town that she must confront her conflicting roles as writer and mother. In this confrontation, Aleramo is forced to consider what she is willing to sacrifice for the sake of her family. In this way, Aleramo directly acknowledges the extent to which sacrifice becomes an inextricable component of femininity, where women are expected to give up everything in order to tend to their families. Aleramo of course ultimately decides *not* to make this sacrifice, choosing not to lose herself as a woman to serve others. Aleramo's representation of motherhood can be related to Susan Fraiman and Maggie Nelson's concept of sodomitical motherhood:

Fraiman aims to return the mother's pleasure to the scene, and to foreground her access--"even as a mother"-- to 'non-normative, non procreative sexuality, to sexuality in excess of the dutifully instrumental.' The woman with success access and excess is the sodomitical mother. (Nelson, 69)

While Fraiman and Nelson's analysis relates specifically to the experience of queer motherhood, I think the connection is an apt one. Nelson writes of the expectation of mothers to completely denounce their sexuality, sense of self, and independence as soon as they have children. A sodomitical motherhood, in regards to Aleramo's text, has much more to do with the concepts of care, labor, sacrifice, and duty than it does specifically with any rumination on sexuality. A sodomitical mother in this sense insists on a reciprocity between mother and child that does not result in either suffering harm or neglect; it suggests that there is perhaps more to a woman's life than the satisfaction she is supposed to take in raising and nourishing a child. In part three, Aleramo

confronts the traditional expectations associated with motherhood: “Why do we idealize sacrifice in mothers? Who gave us this inhuman idea that mothers should negate their own wishes and desire? The acceptance of servitude has been handed down from mother to daughter for so many centuries that it is now a monstrous chain which fetters them” (Aleramo, 193). Aleramo thus advocates for a type of motherhood that is more reciprocal, more relational, more “sodomitical” in the sense that she advocates for a feminist self-dignity which refuses the destruction of the self for the sake of the other. “Yet what would happen,” Aleramo asks, “if this dreadful cycle was broken, once and for all. What if mothers refused to deny their womanhood and gave their children instead an example of a life lived according to the needs of self-respect?” (194). Aleramo thus makes her subject into the sort of female, mythic figure that Cavarero describes in *In Spite of Plato*; Aleramo reclaims her subject from the clutches of patriarchal oppression and sends her off into the world not as a unified subject situated comfortably within a predictable social order, but as a fully fledged subject-in-the-making who “opts for authenticity and loss,” who challenges the oppressive restrictions of patriarchy, and who leaves her former self behind in exchange for an authentic “I” (Testaferri, 147).

### **Identity, Collectivity, & Genre: *Passerini’s Autobiography of a Generation***

Written nearly a century later, Luisa Passerini’s *Autobiography of a Generation* similarly challenges and resists the disciplining powers of genre, canon, and a philosophical, patriarchal tradition. An oral historian, writer, and professor of history, her seven published books all focus on memory, identity, and subjectivity both within a personal context as well as cultural, historical, and social contexts, particularly with

regards to fascism, the working class, and activist movements

(<http://oralhistory.columbia.edu/luisa-passerini/>). Passerini published *Autobiography of a Generation*, a memoir/collective autobiography that recounts her own experiences as a feminist activist in engagement with the collective memory related to the tumultuous year of 1968. Throughout her work, Passerini explores the collective memory of a movement, which itself challenged and resisted the status quo, and subverts patriarchy and genre, which discipline both literary and personal identity. In her subversion and manipulation of autobiographical genre, her exploration of identity construction and collectivity memory, and her representations of femininity, motherhood, and gendered labor, Passerini's complex, fluid self-representation ultimately undermines and resists the power of patriarchy, canon, and genre.

### **Confronting Form and Genre**

Passerini's text begins the task of confronting both form and genre as immediately as its title, *Autobiography of a Generation*. Passerini confronts autobiographical convention immediately in that she rejects autobiography's charge to represent an exemplary life. Rather, Passerini begins by suggesting that her life is one that cannot be understood in isolation, but is rather one informed by the experiences, knowledges, and lives of those she relates to. The product is thus a work that resists facile categorization; it is a memoir, a diary, an academic work on memory and subjectivity, a collective autobiography about the activists of 1968. This subversion of genre and canon extends beyond the cover page into the overall structure and form of the text itself. Unlike Aleramo, Passerini breaks almost completely with the

*bildungsroman* tradition of Augustine, in which the story chronologically follows one main character. Passerini's text consists of seven chapters of alternating voice and perspective. In the odd chapters, Passerini assumes the first-person voice typical of traditional autobiographical examination; the chapters read like diary entries, with Passerini detailing her experiences in "analysis," her love life, and her struggles in academia. These diary-like entries alternate with sections entirely in italics, which are Passerini's words from interviews in which she recalls her childhood and her years as an activist. In the even chapters, Passerini's assumes a third-person, analytical, and academic voice. Throughout these chapters, she includes several interviews with activists of 1968 as she attempts to analyze these collective experiences and discover threads and patterns of meaning.

Beyond the nearly total collapse between the personal and the collective, Passerini's form and structure subverts autobiographical genre inasmuch as it undermines that which is central to it: namely, the power of "truth." Throughout the more personal and conventionally autobiographical portions of the text, Passerini blurs the distinction between dream and reality. In the diary entries, she slips in and out of descriptions of everyday experiences and those of her dreams, which she believes are critical to the project of her analysis: "Why is it important to remember even just a fragment of a dream? Because thus I enter the day feeling that my reality is dual, and that I have various strata within me. I, the other, and the void, there are at least three of us" (Passerini, 117). Like Aleramo, Passerini maintains a fragile boundary between fiction and nonfiction, resisting autobiography's charge to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Instead, "truth," is a relative, abstract, and fluid term informed by "surreal" experiences. Furthermore, unlike Aleramo, Passerini's text does not follow a

neat, chronology; instead, passages oscillate from the past, the present, and hope for the future. This oscillation breaks with autobiographical convention of following a main character, a hero, through various life stages and obstacles.

An even more significant break, however, is Passerini's complete exposure of the autobiographical writing process. In other words, equally important to her own experiences and those of other activists is the process of writing itself. Initially, Passerini speaks of the discomfort associated with attempting to write her life story: "A strange situation, being asked for one's life story: in a certain sense one is always awaiting this opportunity, but it is both too much and too little for what there is to say" (Passerini, 4). Her discomfort and doubt are not allayed as she persists in the writing process. Afraid of falling short of professional identity in writing "bad literature," she wonders "if silence isn't better" (Passerini, 163). In this quotation, Passerini exposes what it means to write as a woman; vulnerable to criticism, judgment, and doubt, Passerini anticipates the silencing power of patriarchy, genre, canon, academia, and almost silences herself as a result. "I am continually divided," she explains, "in one sense or another: at my work table I re-read my writing and find it shameful, full of pettiness; I go away from it and in the course of the day some good passages come back to me, and it seems to me, on the whole, interesting" (163). While autobiography as genre navigates the tension and challenges associated with the public act of writing a private life, Passerini further problematizes this boundary. She rejects the responsibility of the autobiographer to be a unified, coherent subject and rather exposes this writing process as one fraught with uncertainty, doubt, and even shame. This doubt extends to an uncertainty about what this text will even be about, if about anything at all; as she concludes the text, she asks, "Will it become a book? And if not, what is it?" (162). But since it ultimately is

something resembling an autobiography, Passerini attempts to define the ways in which the autobiographical genre is beginning to shift generationally:

For this generation what we might call the right of autobiography -- to give a sense, or more than one sense, to its own past, or at least be able to leaf through it, to unfold it--assumed a particular meaningfulness...one also glimpses, next to the tones of mourning, bewilderment, of uncertainty, those of the reunification between living and narrating with the necessary detachment that allows for self-representation without shirking the painful and unresolved points” (155)

The task of writing is thus not one of self-reflection, as is the case with Augustinian convention, but rather, as Gilmore would argue, one of self-construction. While there is an element of “reunification” in the writing process, Passerini is cognizant that this reunification cannot occur at the expense of “shirking the painful and unresolved points” (155). She similarly sees that the writing process is a constructive, somewhat artificial process and not merely a simple recollection of “true” events: “Anyway I told myself the story like this; then the fact of having told myself the story is no longer a simple story; it’s the life I make because I told it to myself that way” (155). Passerini’s writing process, her form, and structure is thus one that embraces doubt, artificiality, fracture, and discontinuity, concepts which persistently characterize her identity, the identities of other activists, and the nature of 1968 itself.

### **Politics, Collectivity, & Identity Construction**

As a collective autobiography would suggest, Passerini constructs her own identity in conjunction with the voices, experiences, and identities of fellow activists. In the process, Passerini collapses the boundaries between the personal, the political, the

collective, the private and the public. “If I had not heard the life stories of the generation of ’68,” Passerini explains, “I would not have been able to write about myself; those stories have nourished mine, giving it the strength to get to its feet and speak” (124). Thus, to adequately understand how Passerini represents herself and why this representation either subverts or reinforces patriarchal and autobiographical convention, it is first necessary to understand the experiences of other activists and the overall “spirit” of 1968.

Throughout the “even” chapters, Passerini analyzes the activism of 1968 within Italy, particularly with regards to the student movements at Turin University. In these movements, students confronted academic authorities as “privatistic and authoritarian” entities in an attempt to “throw completely open for debate the didactic structure and the scientific and cultural content of university teaching and the criteria on which examinations are based” (60). They critiqued, much as activists do today, the supposed neutrality of science and the separation between the personal and the political; thus, in their movement, they advocated for radical, inclusive democracy, a complete collapse between the personal and the political, communal discussions and communal living, and “revolutionary” acts in everyday life and behavior, such as behaving provocatively, telling lies, swearing, and reading scandalous poets (43). Their activism was characterized by a sense of mockery and play which criticized power discrepancies in the production of knowledges and in the demarcation of social and academic spaces. This humor and mockery resulted in the “translation of the world of academic authority into the everyday language of the young... a termination of an attitude of insincere dependence no longer responding to a deep respect for the knowledge transmitted and its values” (78). The overall idea “was to destroy. Abolish the connection between

sexuality and love, reject the family, violate fidelity. The student life, afternoons wasted” (44). In short, this movement sought to be revolutionary, democratic, inclusive, destructive, and accessible.

Just as important to the movement itself are the activists themselves and the precise ways they related to and participated in it. A common sentiment among activists was the desire and necessity to break with the traditions, behaviors, and politics of their parents, explored in detail in Passerini’s second chapter, “Choosing to be Orphans.” Throughout this chapter, former activists expressed the extent to which they felt alienated by the family and by the world in general: We felt thrust into a hostile world; we were few in number, characterized by our suffering and our extraneousness to the blind masses. We too felt our alienation from the world and the desire to make the world disappear” (44). There are representations of affectionate but absent fathers, domineering and overwhelming mothers in contrast to other passive, un-opinionated mothers. Confronting the politics and behaviors of their parents, the generation of 1968 was “one of opposition” defined by a tension between continuity and discontinuity (27). They were “discontinuous” in the sense that their movement was a break from prior and subsequent tradition, but “continuous” in the sense that it aligned itself with a proletarian tradition of rebellion, seeking contracts with trade unions and the working class (27-28).

But if this is an obvious and necessary characteristic of every movement, there are numerous other examples to suggest that this movement in particular was one fraught with contradiction, fragmentation, and discontinuity, especially when analyzed with the power of hindsight. In comparing and analyzing the various stories of ’68, Passerini explains that identities of this era were formed by contradictions, by the

practice of rejecting, repudiating, and transgressing. Further, she, and other activists, have become critical of the inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and discontinuities they have identified in hindsight. Paradoxically, for a movement founded on contradiction, one activist explained, despite its call for radical inclusivity and participation, it didn't "like much to be contradicted" (79). The movement thus risked delving into the practices and habits of the authoritarianism that they sought to destroy. Further, they cite the shortcomings and the emotional costs of the complete collapse between the public and the private. A product of this collapse was intended liberation, a phenomenon which also fostered a sense of ambivalence; for Passerini, the emotional consequences associated with free love ultimately took a toll. Further, because this movement heavily stressed the destructive and subversive capacity of everyday, personal behavior, the pressures of constantly "performing," whether by actively staging protests and demonstrations, handing out pamphlets and fliers, or living out the personal principles of the movements in a public way, led many activists, like Passerini, to burnout and exhaustion. Others, feeling defenseless, disorganized, and angry ultimately resorted to taking up arms. Women in the movement describe their complicated, ambivalent experience; while they felt empowered by a great, common undertaking, sexism within the movement prevented them from establishing healthy relationships with each other and from pursuing positions of power within the movement itself. In short, as idyllic as its mission was, the movement had its limits and flaws. Its legacy is characterized by contradictions, hypocrisies, fragmentations, and imperfections.

It is also this very sense of contradiction, fragmentation, and imperfection which comprises Passerini's own identity. A far cry from the unified, unproblematic, and complete Augustinian subject, Passerini's personal self-representation is a reflection of

the disorder she observes in the collective. There is, in other words, a tension, if not a collapse, between the personal and collective identity, recalling the work of both Gilmore and Cavarero in that identity is represented as relational, fluid, and fragmentary.

Throughout the book, Passerini describes her relationship with her therapist, G., and her attempt to find herself in analysis after experiencing a “total loss of identity” (13). She goes through analysis because she is “feeling like someone who must undergo a trial,” and who, at the end of this trial, will hopefully be able to make sense of these challenges and tribulations (41). In this sense, Passerini confronts the prospect of analysis as a conventional autobiographical subject; there is the belief that she will pass through a trial and emerge as a unified and complete subject. She ultimately discovers, however, that this model and convention is unrealistic for the modern subject. “I am no longer anything specific,” she explains, “I am a mix of full and empty, a slippery and uneven footbridge on the river. I am not my work, nor a love affair, nor a political project. In this inner theater there is not one who directs but an entire unhinged company of performers, with their gags and crass quips” (56). Passerini thus realizes that she will not find herself in any self-analysis in isolation, but in an understanding of an “unhinged company of performers.” Her personal identity is thus defined and informed by a relationship with collective identity, both of which are as permanent and stable as the position of an atomic particle (116). It is the embracing of this relationship that will open roads for “changing the world and reducing injustice,” she argues. But even in this realization there is not a neat or easy resolution. Whereas she once hoped for identity unification, she now realizes that “what seemed like a trial wasn’t,” and that the process of analyzing herself and others was not an “apprenticeship that opens the

door to something else, above all not to its opposite, happy and reciprocal love” (158). Rather, this process of self-reflection and self-representation was an experience that had value in and of itself, a process which did not so much unify the self as construct a complex and fluid relationship between the self and the other. Just as the collective was fraught with contradiction and fragmentation, so, too, is Passerini herself. This representation of identity ultimately undermines and totally rejects the philosophical and patriarchal conception of the individual, who is at his or her best and most powerful when understanding the self in his/her own silence.

### **Motherhood and Femininity**

Finally, while Passerini has more directly and aggressively transgressed the boundaries of genre and patriarchy than Aleramo, it is noteworthy that both authors engage with the concept of motherhood in very similar ways. Specifically, they both engage in the habit and tradition of the “philosophical matricide” that Cavarero describes. In other words, they both express a certain disgust and desire to be entirely different from their mothers. In describing her relationship with her mother, Passerini laments, “I have no roots, I have no memory of any origins that resemble me. My mother is an absence. I have only negative memories of her: someone who gets irked because she can’t get my hair straight to curl with her curling iron...someone who argues meticulously with her mother, my grandmother” (4). If she has any roots at all, she explains, they are “withered,” “mutilated,” and “atrophied” (4). Like Aleramo, and female activists of the 1960’s, Passerini engaged in an act of “matricide” that blamed, alienated, and wholly rejected the mother figure. As the text progresses, however, and

Passerini continues in analysis and as she delves deeper into the comparisons between her life and the lives of other activists, she moves closer and closer to the body and the memory of her mother. She, like other activists, comes to grips with the ways in which her activism and politics have affected and shaped her relationship with her mother. Whereas Passerini, Aleramo, and other activists once rejected the weakness and silence of their own mothers, they ultimately return to the mother's body with a newfound recognition of the conflicts, obstacles, and oppression associated with the "feminine experience." Rediscovering her mother's body, Passerini remembers her mother's "slender, strong hips, the solidity of the abdomen that carried me and to which I can entrust myself. I feel that she cared about me. I rediscover the security of being loved" (117).

With a new relationship with the mother's body comes also a new understanding and experience of gender. In her rejection of her mother, she embraced the power of androgyny; when moving closer to her mother, she returns to femininity and the dresses and jewelry her mother would have loved. In this respect, Passerini is subversive in that she represents gender as a performative, fluid phenomenon. Although she finds herself increasingly identifying with her mother and a feminine gender, she rejects the roles and expectations associated with femininity: "Enough of the revisitation of fixed roles: mother/puelles/heroine/Griselda, enough. Slim down, lighten up" (162). Both Aleramo and Passerini confront a philosophical, patriarchal tradition which orders them to hate and reject their mothers and to tacitly accept the oppressive consequences of motherhood and femininity. In this confrontation, they redefine and rework what "woman" can mean for women who claim both power and voice.

Beyond motherhood and femininity, Aleramo and Passerini refuse the silence and passivity expected of them; beyond asserting their voice by simply engaging in the act of writing, both authors articulate and develop their feminisms such that their voices subvert, transgress, and critique the systems of power which perpetuate their oppression. Although both authors are separated by nearly a century and certainly influenced by vastly different politics and “feminisms,” they both use autobiography as an avenue through which to express resistance. In these expressions, both authors manipulate genre, canon, and convention to illustrate how patriarchy has limited, constrained, and harmed them throughout their lives.

## Conclusion and Implications

Throughout this thesis I have aimed to accomplish a few principal goals: One, I have identified the phenomenon of women's silence as a result of disciplinary power systems which implicate gender, genre, and patriarchy as perpetrators of gendered oppression.

Second, I have sought not only to recover but to *uncover* feminist voices both historical and contemporary. In this re-discovery I have sought to identify women as participating in a long and rich history of resisting and challenging their oppression.

Third, I have advocated for the identification and analysis of "feminisms," a term which analyzes the way women have resisted patriarchy whilst acknowledging that "feminism" looks very different depending on sociocultural, political, and economic contexts.

In continuing to recover voices and disrupt a pervasive history of women's silence, it is possible to embrace and to apply different forms of "feminisms," feminisms which embrace the uniqueness and value of an individual voice, which refuse to silence minorities and the benefit of the majority. In following the examples set by these female Italian poets through several centuries, we, too, can feel the urgency of our current situation:

The moon comes out from the clouds the streets return  
it is already day it is already tomorrow  
let not tomorrow the new day come without us  
who must free ourselves today  
and can improvise no longer (111).

## **Part IV: A Body in Portraits**

*Poems by Cat Yoke*

### **Introduction:**

My name is Cat Yoke and I am a 22-year-old senior at Wellesley College double-majoring in Italian Studies and Women's & Gender Studies, with a concentration on Health & The Body. I have been writing poetry since I was sixteen years old, and have taken the opportunity to write a small collection of poetry to supplement my senior thesis, so that I might pursue, one last time before graduation, my interest in the intersections of Italian, art, feminist theory, activism, and social justice. In other words, I am intrigued in art's capacity to facilitate social change and believe that there can be immense power in collapsing the boundaries between the personal and the political, the public and the private, and art and academia. Its lines comprised by personal experiences, academic ruminations, and an urgency for meaningful activism, this small collection reaches for this collapse in a hope to assert art as activism.

In the poems that follow, I focus on several phenomena I have studied, observed, and analyzed throughout my time at Wellesley College. Such concepts include internalized sexism, the suppression of female voices, sexual violence, social determinants of health, erasure, and care labor. While some poems relate explicitly to these concepts, other poems only loosely relate to these themes. Because I concentrated on Health & The Body throughout my Women's and Gender Studies major and throughout my time at Wellesley in general, I ground my poetry in representations and illustrations of the body. In these representations, I aim to do a few things. First, I hope to illustrate the extent to which disciplinary systems of powers act upon and oppress

actual individuals who feel and experience this oppression in distinct and unique ways. In this way, I seek to resist the use of bodies as statistics which erase the lived experiences of individuals and which dull our instinct for empathy, compassion, and action. Second, I aim to capture the body as a vehicle through which we seek to understand ourselves and the world around us. In other words, what can understanding my body help me understand about the world? In what ways are our bodies regulated, disciplined, controlled? How can listening to my body become an act of resistance? Third, I aim to critique and implicate systems of power which use and discipline bodies in acts of profitable destruction. In expressing these analyses throughout, I hope to make my own voice heard in a way that is both impactful and meaningful.

*On my mother's body*

The first time my mother gave her body to me  
she was slit at the base of her abdomen  
as they groped for my small, warm, purple body.  
I couldn't leave her alone,  
she drew herself a bath and undressed,  
kissed my forehead, and got in.  
She closed her eyes and sunk up to her neck.  
Her naked body didn't burn me.  
I had to learn shame.

The first time my mother took my body  
she was standing in the mirror frowning,  
frantically grabbing at her belly, her hips.  
When I see myself I learn to look away.  
"Don't worry," she always says, "You'll lose it?"  
*My body?* I think in a voice  
that mimics hope,  
a voice which is not  
and has never been hope.  
I fill out. I thin down.  
I cover myself up.

Now my mother comes to me in a dream,  
we are treading water and I am young.  
She swims to me and, silent,  
places her hand on the small of my back.  
She wants me to float. She is trying  
to teach me to be weightless,  
I give my body to my mother's hand  
and she suspends me.  
Suddenly, I am sinking,  
she and the shore are gone.  
I am fighting the swell of the sea  
a breaking wave, a cold knife  
a mere inches from my mother's skin.

*On voice*

In poetry class  
we talk about mountains  
and the men who climb them.  
*Did she drive him to suicide?*  
An old man in the back of the class  
wears a tweed sport coat  
and answers his own question,  
nodding slowly and pressing  
his white, cracked lips together.  
My professor coughs, licks his thumb  
And turns the page.

We move on  
back to the mountains  
I think about all the blood  
draining from my fingertips  
and the heavy, wet socks  
peeling off my burning feet.  
The girl next to me doesn't know  
why you'd work so hard  
for zero displacement  
and the man in the back is insisting  
Adrienne Rich has something to do  
with her husband's death.

When she speaks again  
the woman next to her leans back  
and says, "Wow."  
The man in the back  
is unmoved  
and rips at his hearing aid  
before placing it on his desk.  
He's clicking and unclicking his pen  
he's humming louder  
than he realizes, thinking  
about his sweet, late wife  
and the women who have driven men  
to mountain climbing  
and worse, this classroom now

full of girls gaping  
at meaning  
like fish.

*Bug Bites in June*

Your father sucks on a cigarette  
and lets the white smoke pour  
from his tired, lazy lips.  
You are halfway  
through your homework  
and the tip of your pencil  
gives out for the third time.  
A sigh, someone  
sinking  
deeper into their fatigue  
and the rain  
smacking  
a crudely made skylight,  
the night swallowing  
your backyard whole.

"OK listen"  
your father says  
to no one in particular,  
you rip  
at the six or seven mosquito bites  
on the doughy flesh of your thigh,  
the bend of your knees,  
your throat.  
Still  
there you'll be  
long after the rain's gone,  
cross-legged and clawing at yourself,  
wheezes echoing  
off your blue walls,  
your cold hand halfway  
up your shirt.

Stop breathing funny,  
You might tell yourself,  
when your father's heavy footsteps  
are on the basement stairs

and your mother's whispers  
are in the doorway.  
"You're making it worse"  
she promises,  
"You're making it bleed."

Night drains into light  
the same way summer  
dissolves  
like most days do,  
all of a sudden  
and with the clatter  
of ice,  
the last cold sip  
of a rum and coke.  
If it's any consolation,  
the days get shorter  
from here on out.  
If there's a silver lining  
it could be anywhere  
between this bruised evening sky  
and the orange glow smothered  
beneath your father's white,  
worn out sneakers.

## *Obituary*

My father is fifty-four and cradling  
a photo of his wrinkled father,  
pacing the kitchen island snapping  
a swiss army knife open and shut.  
I think of whisky, straight and on the rocks  
and my grandfather sinking deeper  
into his lilac, cigarette soaked couch.

Does my father remember the cicadas  
belly-up and almost sizzling  
on that Alabama sidewalk?  
Does he break his own heart  
every time he remembers that yellow hallway,  
that decade spent with his arm shaking and cocked,  
the several pregnant seconds it took to walk away?

No.  
He will shut that knife and drape  
one arm around his aging son.  
Together they will hover  
over the same illusion,  
tracing the deep ridges in pop's cheek  
and, seeing their mothers,  
remember to hate them.

*Tap, Tap*

I'm cold laying on my side then a rip  
of parchment paper slipping on fake leather  
all the white makes my skin crawl  
the way it smells clean in the maze  
of cobwebs tucked away neatly  
by Winnie the pooh drooling into honey  
asking me on a scale of one to ten  
How much?  
I am eighteen and numb by now  
my mom snaps gum in the corner  
her foot tapping to the flicker of fluorescents  
like the sun peering  
through off-white blinds in Alabama.  
I was eight and laying supine  
sweaty hands on my eyelids  
counting to twenty and springing  
from a suede couch to bliss pretending  
to be braver than I was and than I am  
on my side still  
awake  
not feeling  
the silver glint of pain  
pushing into my spine and pulsing  
you might feel a little pressure.

*Purge*

my mother cleans the house bottom to top  
chasing cat fur against gravity, entropy  
doubling like dust settling as soon  
as it is wiped away  
my mother mumbles  
*clean your room*  
but I won't  
like the drip, the taps  
in mother's  
marble sink  
her eyebrows warping to warn  
*you better think hard and fast*  
but I am empty and still  
at the window  
trembling like the ice moans  
across the yard.

## *Alabama*

black flies conspire in the dust  
of windowsills  
in Birmingham, Alabama.  
sweet tea lays stagnant  
in the cracks of the driveway.  
broken glass and ants squirm in tar,  
my mother runs away barefoot  
into echoes of daylight.  
black flies in Birmingham, Alabama  
know secrets  
in the rotted railing at Nana's  
house.  
tornado sirens whine, my mother  
shakes, grabs her pills  
my father sits at the edge  
of the bed, rips at his cheeks and says  
I can't  
tell if I'm  
alive or dead  
I shift on a black ottoman  
arms crossed, untouchable.

July in Alabama is a fluttered panic  
of tiny wings trying to beat the heat  
buzzing and biting and hovering.  
Batting them away, I expect  
I won't talk to  
shadows when it's  
my turn  
to bring the kids to Alabama  
for the summer.  
July recedes and I know  
I ought to shut the door  
so bugs don't get in  
among shattered things at supper,  
acute catastrophes  
my father's  
calloused hand on my wrist  
when he asked if he was crazy and I couldn't  
say no and my mother was barefoot and gone.

*A Poem to My Brother's Son*

Tonight, the moonlight seeping  
Through my dirty window  
Is an echo of a time  
we waited for lightning bugs  
And collected grass stains on the shins  
Of pants we weren't supposed to wear outside.  
I can't begin  
To tell you how many Septembers I spent  
Swung on top your father's shoulders  
When I was just a kid  
And my brother was a man  
Beginning to understand what it meant  
To bruise.

Do you know how many different moons  
Have lingered just like this?  
If I didn't know better I'd say  
This is the same light leading  
Your father home to the heap  
Of bones in the corner muttering  
*I need my brother,*  
Or maybe just the echo of the days  
I put the car in drive and fled  
Toward a pair of broken blue eyes.  
Dear firefly,  
I hope it's a long time  
Before you understand the thousand ways  
A wave can collapse on itself.  
Dear firefly,  
You'll need to know  
that home  
Is tucked away  
In the soft curve  
Of someone's neck,  
in the small pauses  
between lullabies,  
which could be a quiet song  
or maybe just the swollen space between  
"I love you exponentially"  
and  
"I know."

## Late Summer, Early Fall

his knees faded red to the push  
of pebbles against flesh  
a palm wrapped around the wood handle  
of a magnifying glass hovering  
over wisps of leaves bursting  
into light.

we were sweating on asphalt  
in September  
running past the snap  
of sticks until

Michael grabbed my wrist  
pulling me from flight  
to say *look at this*  
biting his cheek as he waited  
for the crackle of our laughter.  
the charred edges of yellow  
and orange rested at the bend  
of our knees, rested at the bottom

of a picture I can't find, a moment  
covered in fingerprints, forgotten  
until the phone call.

I wore a black dress  
to his funeral and cried  
to hallelujah, the slice  
of photo album pages  
fluttering  
past each other, then pictures  
at my feet like leaves  
my mother's wrinkled forehead  
and questions, an armful of  
moments pressed to my chest  
*I can't find it.*

we met Michael at the lake  
the summer before he died.  
in the sunlight  
it was hard to see

the atoms slipping from the boy  
clinging to a sturdy rope  
knotted to an oak  
then sinking beneath ripples  
of blue  
cheeks full of air, eyes wide  
and bulging to watch how light  
moves slower underwater  
slower still when your eyes  
are shut  
and everything is an echo  
of what it was.

## Camouflage

My father's fingertips never bleed  
on the hook.

A worm dies mechanically  
in the middle of a pond  
father and son throwing lines  
to the green, murky ripple

the boy's legs on the shoulders  
of our father three summers ago

tiny palms wrapped around a five o'clock chin  
now a palm swallowing a stone  
before the rapid flick of a wrist

watching it scrape  
across glass  
hard pats to the back  
*hell of a toss, son*  
the rock realizing its own weight

shattering through, plummeting  
scrapes turning to shards of ripples that didn't  
even begin  
to lollop against  
the edge of the boat wrapped around

camouflage, whiskey, a broken oar  
his oars slicing through.

my father's small white knuckles still  
throwing lines to no gulps of fish

the row boat, my father pulled onto shore  
my brother disappearing like worm blood  
ribboning out in the blue.

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