

## Displacing Autobiography and Intermediality: Elisa Biagini and Sabrina Mezzaqui

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**ABSTRACT:** *By looking at intermedial works of the poet Elisa Biagini and the artist Sabrina Mezzaqui as well as their most recent collaboration for the Galleria Continua's exhibition c'è qui nell'aria la parolaramo, this article investigates the relationship between poetic texts and textiles. The "intra-action," to use feminist physicist Karen Barad's term, between the language of poetry and that of textile emerges through a paradigm of entanglements that expands the semantic capacity of both words and textiles. The verses displayed by Biagini in Mezzaqui's installations belong to *Da una crepa* (2014), which weaves imaginary dialogues with Emily Dickinson and Paul Celan. *Da una crepa* will be central to this paper's investigation together with *Le ossa non sono poi così solide* exhibited at Museo della Specola in 2010 and poems from Biagini's most recent work, significantly entitled *Filamenti* (2020). In this collection, the thread emerges as a key tool not only to recompose a body that is represented as fragmented and disjointed, but also as a "filo memoria" that can reconstitute an identity understood in highly corporeal terms (especially in the section "Moto perpetuo (un'autobiografia)"). A reflection on identity and autobiography is also central to Mezzaqui's practice, especially in *Appunti per autobiografia del rosso* (2017–2018), where through 33 woven and decorated books, she attempts to weave an autobiography. In both Biagini's and Mezzaqui's intermedial textile poems, the viewer/reader engages with a thread endowed with a strong vitalistic, almost biological power able to weave together identity, biography, and memory.*

**KEYWORDS:** Elisa Biagini, Sabrina Mezzaqui, identity, biography, memory,

When asked what poetry is for her, the poet Elisa Biagini (b. Florence, 1970) responded, "esiste la buona e la cattiva poesia" ("there is good and bad poetry"), and by bad poetry she refers to those "diari che vanno a capo" ("diaries written in verse"), and so also underlining, with a touch of irony, the too widespread and misleading assumption that what defines poetry is the kind of writing that presents itself as lined.

What Biagini means by this is that writing poetry as if one were writing one's own diary—that is, where the writing centers around one's autobiographic experience—can only lead to bad poetry. There is a further assumption about poetry that this apparently almost straightforward comment by Biagini underlines: the fact that in the Italian context, contrary to the Anglo-American one with which she has always been in close dialogue, there is still the idea that lyric poetry is a genre centered around the “I.” Interestingly, however, it is precisely the idea that an overpresence of the “I” is what scholars have highlighted to be a defining characteristic of poetry written by women: its highly autobiographical and diaristic content. This is what Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo wrote almost half a century ago, but that, surprisingly—or not—still resonates in current scholarship:

In altre parole, una caratteristica fondamentale della recente poesia femminile sembra essere l'abbandono così frequente a uno stile di scrittura 'informale', non ricercato per calcolo sperimentale o per volontà di interrompere i normali circuiti comunicativi, ma piuttosto prodotto da una libera fluttuazione psicologica e dall'immersione nel flusso indifferenziato del vitale e del quotidiano. Se vogliamo osare una formula, potremmo parlare di un'identificazione tendenzialmente assoluta del linguaggio poetico con il registro del privato, dell'esperienza personale quotidiana. (52–53)

(In other words, a fundamental feature of recent women's poetry appears to be the so frequent abandonment to an “informal” writing style, which is not sought out of experimental calculation or a desire to interrupt normal communicative circuits, but rather produced by free psychological fluctuation and immersion in the undifferentiated flow of the vital and the everyday. If we dare to use a formula, we could speak of a tendentially absolute identification of the poetic language with the register of the private, of personal everyday experience.)

What these words make clear has very little to do with the actual nature of the poetry written by women, but they are rather foundational of a literary criticism that produces literary sociology. How can one, from this perspective, weave together an autobiography without centering on one's autobiography? At the same time, how could an artist develop a poetics that engages with autobiography and simultaneously challenges the identification between the artist and their self-portraits as well as between the poet and the lyric subject? The works of Elisa Biagini and Sabrina Mezzaqui (b. Bologna, 1964) result from the attempt to challenge this aesthetic paradox: the one that weaves together autobiography and artistic practices with the aim to go beyond the solipsistic nature of the represented subject(s).

This article focuses on the poet Elisa Biagini and the artist Sabrina Mezzaqui: the first point of contact that might seem to have led to a study that brings them together is their shared Italian “citizenship.” This is in line with what Ramazani has

extensively shown on how poetry is read and taught by literary critics. According to Ramazani, literary criticism is, more than often, based on disciplinary nationalisms that characterize the humanities. However, the point of view from which Mezzaqui and Biagini are explored in this study, results from a different disciplinary model where “the intercultural tropes, allusions, and vocabularies of poetry outstrip single-state or single-identity affiliations [in such a way to] exemplify the potential for generative intercultural exploration” (Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics* 31). This is a form of “transnational” imaginative belonging that the works of both Biagini and Mezzaqui present in the way they move across different literary traditions, cultures, languages and that helps them to overcome the solipsistic nature of autobiographical writing. The Italian language is not taken as a point of departure, nor it is rejected as a means for expression; rather, it is investigated as a linguistic container immersed in a strongly interconnected and global outlook. Italian language is thus culturally displaced—although not linguistically displaced—thanks to a set of voices other than the ones of the authors. As the article will show, Biagini and Mezzaqui are in close dialogue with authors such as Simone Weil, Mary Shelley, Paul Celan, Emily Dickinson, Bertolt Brecht. Because of its formal pattering and energetic verbal self-consciousness, poetry typically offers less transparent access to other cultural worlds. The transnational core of Biagini and Mezzaqui finds its strength in not fetishizing or exoticizing foreign connections but rather working the very matter of lyric, intercultural “contact zones,” to use May Louise Pratt’s words (6–7). Clearly however, Mezzaqui’s skillful traversing of uneven cultural, and especially religious, terrain risks a lack of self-awareness of the challenges that this entails. But the works at the center of this article do not present this problem. Given that transnational poetics has been approached through authors mainly writing in English, it is important to see how the theoretical and critical apparatus developed so far can gain from investigating how poetry in Italian belongs to a cross-cultural interconnectedness of lyric poetry.

By looking not only at the individual works by Biagini and Mezzaqui but also their collaborative work, this article investigates how both Biagini and Mezzaqui enable us to look at poetry—and textile poetry, in particular—from a different viewpoint through the entanglement of different media, one that displaces autobiographical narratives in favor of a drive toward collectivity. This view is powerfully in tune with the concept of intra-relating entanglements as theorized by the feminist physicist Karen Barad, which can renew our understanding of how we see media relating to each other. Intra-relation differs from the usual term inter-relation, which presupposes that the objects interacting with each other pre-exist the action, which in our case would be the medium of poetry and that of textile and other artistic forms of expression (Barad, “On Touching” 206–33). “To be entangled,” as Barad writes in the opening of *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, “is not simply to be intertwined with another,

as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (9).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in “On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” Barad highlights that *inter* stands for “among or in the midst of” while *intra* stands for “(from) within” (220).<sup>2</sup> The methodological point I am attempting to develop here aims not to presuppose an already-present and identifiable medium that subsequently interacts with another (e.g., text and textile, lyric and weaving) in a certain work, but rather my method starts from a close reading of a certain work that is singular and observes how the two “abstract” notions of medium emerge from what might seem presupposed and interacting at a later stage (whereas before being abstracted/extracted from their singular entanglement, they intra-act).

It is an emphasis of “intra”-relation, rather than “inter”-relation, that is implicated in works by Biagini and Mezzaqui. These are questions of authority and autobiography, of poetic subjectivities, of past and current conceptualizations of women’s writing and women’s poetry, of the role of corporeality in contemporary poetry, and of how media is interlaced through forms of collaborations. What is even more interesting is the engagement with textility in Mezzaqui and Biagini at a metaphorical and literal levels—something that this article will investigate through three modes of displacement of questions of autobiography and authoriality: on the one hand, questions of dimensionality, involving the intra-action between authoriality and the poetic word; on the other hand, questions of spatiality engaging with the centrality of the body as a means to explore the intra-action between the self and the others in Biagini’s and Mezzaqui’s collaborations.

### Questions of Dimensionality: The Poetic Word

The collaboration between Mezzaqui and Biagini developed after the former, an eager reader of poetry, went to a public reading by Biagini in 2019. They later met once again through a common friend, the textile artist Claudia Losi. Mezzaqui found herself captured by the last lines of Biagini’s poem titled after Emily Dickinson’s line “Impatient of the fewest words” that in 2021 would have provided the title to the Galleria Continua’s exhibition *c’è qui nell’aria la parola-ramo (The Word-Branch that Holds Us Up; 2021)*. The idea for the exhibition came after Biagini gave a reading during an artistic residency of Mezzaqui at the Galleria Continua in San Gimignano. Among the public, there was Carolina Taddei, counselor for culture in San Gimignano. Taddei, who is also the wife of one of the founders of Galleria Continua, Maurizio Rigillo, was intrigued by Biagini’s poetry and invited her to visit the gallery in San Gimignano where she would also carry out an artistic residency. It was Taddei and Rigillo who favored the collaboration between Mezzaqui and Biagini.

The verses by Biagini stitched and displayed in Mezzaqui’s installations belong to Biagini’s collection *Da una crepa (From a Crack)*, which intertwines imaginary

dialogues between the poets Emily Dickinson and Paul Celan. *Da una crepa* is central to this study's investigation, alongside her installations, including her *Open Studios* exhibited at Villa Romana in Florence in 2009 and poems from Biagini's most recent work, significantly entitled *Filamenti (Filaments/Fibers)*. In *Filamenti*, the thread emerges as a key tool not only to recompose a body that is represented as fragmented and disjointed, but also as a "filo memoria" (memory thread) that can reconstitute an identity which is always rendered in highly corporeal terms (especially in the section "Moto perpetuo (un'autobiografia)" ["Perpetual Motion (an autobiography)"]). A reflection on identity and autobiography is also central to Mezzaqui's practice, especially in *Appunti per autobiografia del rosso (Notes for Autobiography of Red; 2017)*. In both Biagini's and Mezzaqui's works, the viewer/reader engages with a thread endowed with a strong vitalistic, almost biological power that is able to weave together identity, biography, and memory.

Mezzaqui's *Autobiografia del rosso* consists of thirty-three books (diaries, memoirs, autobiographies), bound and decorated with red paper and displayed on a desk, that she has selected from her own library and, as she states, "che mi hanno accompagnato nel mio percorso di vita" ("has accompanied me along my path through life"; Mezzaqui, *Vulnerabilità* 5). Mezzaqui also highlights how she uses "la scrittura, mia e altrui, come strumento di meditazione, descrizione, progettazione. La scrittura e la lettura sono pratiche con cui nutro la mia vita e il mio lavoro" (writing, both my own and that of others, as a tool for meditating, and designing. Writing and reading are practices which nourish my life and my work; *Vulnerabilità* 5). In another work, *Groviglio (Entanglement; 2022)*, one finds suspended strings of pearls that enliven the space, and tie together its component parts: an Italian edition of *Human Personality* by Simone Weil (*La persona e il sacro*) bound in black velvet cloth, a large print showing intricately entangled branches and, across from it, as if embroidered, a thought from Simone Weil's *Notebook XVIII*:

Un groviglio di line appare spesso angoscioso in mancanza di ogni significato; quanto, dopo averlo guardato per un po' vi si vede un disegno ordinato rispetto a un significato, il sentimento di angoscia sparisce, la sensibilità è effettivamente modificata rispetto a queste linee. Ugualmente accade per la sventura.

(A tangle of lines often appears disheartening, bereft of any meaning; but after examining it more closely, the eye can make out a well-ordered design with a certain meaning, and the feelings of anguish subside, as the perception of those lines effectively changes. The same thing occurs with momentary setbacks.)

Re-copying words of others in her work is a reading practice that does not so much aim to reveal the supposed presence of a hidden and single meaning but rather naturally renews the object that is read. This emerges clearly in the way the above-mentioned work appears in *Groviglio*: the prose texts by Weil are graphically

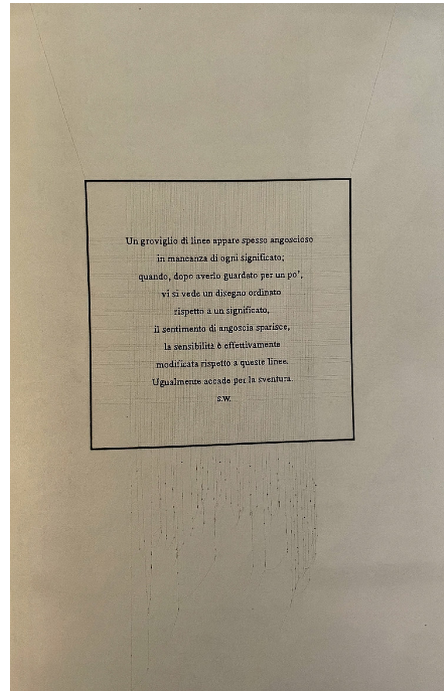


Figure 1. Sabrina Mezzaqui, *Groviglio* (2022). Courtesy of Fondazione Luigi Rovati.

reorganized in such a way as to create a certain rhythmic and rhyming pattern from which a poetic text now emerges through the encounter with the medium in which Mezzaqui accompanies Weil's words.

This helps to clarify a fundamental point that should not be misunderstood: it is not about whether or not the written words present in Mezzaqui's work were originally a poem. At the same time, it is not about saying that any presence of written words in another medium is thus poetic. It is about the kind of transformative and generative process that the meeting of entangled entities give life to. The two media do not exist as separate entities as their entanglement does not allow the reader to distinguish neither the boundaries nor the identity of each medium.

Similarly, one could see how the German and English poems by Celan and Dickinson are re-stitched in Biagini's *Da una crepa*, in the section "La gita" ("The Outing"). As Riccardo Donati highlights, Celan and Dickinson verses "are recalled not in order to reproduce their images or imitate their style but rather in order to reactivate their meaning and make them explode on the page so as to render them co-present with her own discourse."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Biagini is interested neither in inert quotation nor in postmodern games of allusion. In this sense, they are "micce per scatenare una nuova deflagrazione poetica" ("crumbs to set off a new poetic deflagration"), as we read in the note to "Dare acqua alla pianta del sognare (dialogo con Paul Celan)" ("Watering the Plant of Dreaming [a Dialogue with Paul Celan]"; Donati).

For both Biagini and Mezzaqui, it is precisely this idea of something that happens when coming into contact with another element that is key to understand how it is not a matter of reproducing a medium in a different, displaced, context. Rather, the encounter of media creates a new output that changes them. As Donati highlights when discussing the verses by Celan and Dickinson in Biagini's poetry, they become generative and change in their "explosion." Something similar takes place in the collaborative work between Biagini and Mezzaqui, particularly in the poem that begins with Dickinson's line "Impatient of the fewest words" which inspired the collaboration between Mezzaqui and Biagini (*Da una crepa* 95). This is also the case for the way the poems from *Da una crepa* by Biagini weave together with Mezzaqui's artistic practice in their collaborative *c'è qui nell'aria la parola-ramo*. As Mezzaqui explains:

In questi versi di Elisa c'è veramente il valore salvifico della parola: quando tutto crolla, tutto cede, a volte, ci arrivano delle parole che ci possono salvare, sono delle indicazioni, delle aperture. Mi aveva molto colpito questa sua poesia che è arrivata a me, per la prima volta, non attraverso la parola scritta sulla pagina, ma ascoltando una lettura di Elisa. Quello che ha dato vita alla nostra collaborazione è stato il desiderio di materializzazione della parola: dare un'immagine concreta, materiale, a queste sue parole a cui lei aveva dato voce. (Mezzaqui, interview)

(In these verses of Elisa's there is truly the salvific value of words: when everything collapses, everything gives way, sometimes, words come to us that can save us, they are indications, openings. I was very struck by this poem of hers that came to me, for the first time, not through the written word on the page, but by listening to a reading by Elisa. What gave life to our collaboration was the desire to materialize the word: to give a concrete, material image to these words of yours to which you had given voice.)

As previously mentioned, the poem that inspired the collaboration between Mezzaqui and Biagini transforms and creates something new in its encounter with Mezzaqui's art. To this extent, the poem, as published, reads as follows:

"Impatient of the fewest words"  
(dialogo tra Emily e Paul)

In piedi, sulla soglia,  
il mio occhio nella tua  
mano, la tua lingua  
sul mio orecchio:  
così ci conosciamo  
toccandoci, perché  
la pupilla è sgranata  
per lo sforzo, le papille  
come scartavetrare.



Se l'asse cede, se la  
voce affonda,  
c'è qui,  
nell'aria, la  
parola-ramo  
che ci tiene. (*Da una crepa* 95)

("Impatient of the fewest words"  
[dialogue between Emily and Paul])

Standing, on the threshold,  
my eye in your  
hand, your tongue  
on my ear:  
so we know one another  
by touching each other, because  
my eye is grainy  
from the strain, your tongue  
as though sandpapered  
If the board gives way, if the  
voice founders,  
right here  
in the air, is  
the word-branch  
that holds us up.)



Figure 2. Sabrina Mezzaqui with Elisa Biagini, *La parola-ramo che ci tiene* (2021).  
Courtesy of Sabrina Mezzaqui.





Figure 3. Sabrina Mezzaqui with Elisa Biagini, *La parola-ramo che ci tiene* (2021). Courtesy of Sabrina Mezzaqui.

The poem becomes part of the exhibition but in a different form while undergoing a significant transformation, particularly in its last part. The last room of the exhibition was completely empty and included only a sound performance by Biagini. In this audio of three minutes and thirty-six seconds one can hear Biagini reading the poem as printed above up until its last part where words start to repeat themselves, overlap with each other, to the point that a very different rhythm and texture of the poem from *Da una crepa* emerges. What emerges, then, is that the “original” poem from Biagini, in its becoming part of a coauthored exhibition takes two forms: first, in the opening of the exhibition by having its words materialized and framed in the 77x77 cm box, and then dematerialized and expanded in the audio performance in the closing part of the exhibition.

Mezzaqui’s recent experimentations with group working methods pioneering the calligraphic re-copying of the notebooks of twentieth-century women thinkers as well as her 2014 re-copying of Antonella Anedda’s poetry—with reference to the section *Cucire* [Sewing] from the collection *Salva con nome* (*Save As*)—are key examples that help in understanding how the literary works stimulate a process of self-transformation. The text grows out from the intra-action with other artistic media that Mezzaqui offers with her art. In this way, the text becomes three-dimensional and is spatialized through the creation of an immersive space where the reader/viewer is asked to enter.

As Franca Mancinelli writes in *Per una collana di perle: per Sabrina Mezzaqui* (*For a Pearl Necklace: For Sabrina Mezzaqui*):

Alcune frasi della sezione cucire sono state [. . .] riscritte da Sabrina Mezzaqui con la propria grafia e ricamate su un quaderno di stoffa. Scrivere la propria parola con ago e filo significa farla passare attraverso il proprio corpo e viverla punto per punto. È un’opera di dedizione in cui si riversa tutto l’amore e la costanza per portare alla luce. Contenendo una parola nei propri gesti,



Figure 4. Sabrina Mezzaqui, *Cucire* (2014). Courtesy of Sabrina Mezzaqui.

facendosene tramite si apre nel proprio corpo uno spazio a cui non arriva la mente con la sua comprensione. È questo probabilmente il significato di trascrivere, dare le proprie mani alla voce di un altro. . . . Le opere di Sabrina Mezzaqui sono un esercizio di ascolto per accogliere il vuoto e trasformarlo. (Mancinelli)

(The poems of Antonella Anedda’s *Save As* have brought me here. Some sentences from the “Sewing” section have in fact been copied out by Sabrina Mezzaqui in her own hand and embroidered on a cloth notebook. Writing a word with a needle and thread means putting it through your body and experiencing it pinprick by pinprick. It is a work of dedication into which all the love and perseverance needed to bring something to light is poured. By keeping a word in your gestures, by acting as its go-between, a space opens up in your body that the mind cannot reach with its understanding. This is probably what transcribing means—giving one’s hands to another person’s voice, as in an act of trust, as in a prayer. Sabrina Mezzaqui’s artwork, like Antonella Anedda’s poems, come from a practice of attention born to face loss; they are exercises in listening to embrace the void and transform it.)

Both works are accompanied by *12,000 battute* (*12,000 Characters*), a text taken from the pages of a notebook-diary that the artist kept shortly before and during her creation. As Mezzaqui states, “un diario che è un susseguirsi di passi, azioni e pensieri quotidiani, familiari che tracciano un percorso: ho allora contato le battute proprio come si contano i passi . . .” (“The diary records a series of steps, actions and familiar, day-to-day thoughts, all of which amount to a path, and so I have counted the characters, as if they were steps along the way . . .”; *Vulnerabilità* 6).

In a recent interview, Mezzaqui explained how the diaristic-autobiographic trace in her work is precisely what enables an encounter with the Other. According

to Mezzaqui, the diaristic dimension allows the artist to transcend the subjective and not to limit herself to a focus on an individual subject characterized by a disinterest toward others. *The Sacred Wood* by T. S. Eliot offers Mezzaqui a fundamental stepping-stone to start her reflection on the functions of literature in overcoming diarism and subjectivism:

Nel *Bosco sacro* T.S. Eliot sottolinea che nell'arte c'è sempre una tensione di trascendere la propria soggettività, personalità, individualità autobiografica; scrive che non c'è poeta, non c'è artista di nessun'arte che abbia significato compiuto se preso per se solo e che l'evoluzione di un artista è un continuo auto-sacrificio e estinzione di questa soggettività/personalità. Questo risuona molto in me, come tensione naturalmente. . . . Scrivere è una possibilità di lettura della propria vita, di ricerca, di riflessione, di verifica, e nel momento in cui entra all'interno di una forma artistica non è soltanto un gesto di autobiografia, ma rimane anche quella traccia che si intesse con tutto il resto. Questo punto di vista è anche vicino con alcune scuole di pensiero buddista in cui si guarda all'io come qualcosa di vuoto. La domanda è dove sia il confine tra autobiografia e biografia in senso, soprattutto, macroscopico, collettivo. Per me il piano di incontro con l'altro si può trovare proprio grazie alla traccia autobiografica perché credo che se tocco qualcosa che mi riguarda molto da vicino, intimamente, in modo se vogliamo usare questa parola 'veritiero' o 'sincero', allora sarà possibile che possa toccare qualcosa che riguarda anche l'altro, anche te. (Mezzaqui, interview)

(In *The Sacred Wood*, T. S. Eliot emphasizes that in the arts there is always a drive toward transcending one's own autobiographical subjectivity, personality, individuality; he writes that there is no poet, no artist that is meaningful if considered on his own and that the development of an artist is a continuous self-sacrifice and extinction of that individual subjectivity/personality. This resonates very much with me, as a tension of course. . . . Writing provides the opportunity to read one's own life, to research, to reflect, to verify, and the moment it enters into an artistic form it goes beyond being an autobiographical gesture, but instead keeps in itself a trace that is interwoven with everything else. This point of view is also close to some Buddhist schools of thought in which one looks at the self as something empty. The question is where is the boundary between autobiography and biography in the, above all, macroscopic, collective sense? For me, the space of encounter with the other can be found precisely through the autobiographical trace, as I believe that if I touch something that concerns me very closely, intimately, in a way that is, if we want to use this word "truthful" or "sincere," then it will be possible for me to touch something that also concerns the other, you.)

What most of Mezzaqui's work shares is the idea that there is an artistic practice grounded in repetition: the intermittent, and yet never-ending, repetition of the same gesture of a hand that stitches a poem on cloth. From this repetition, a

certain rhythm emerges, one, however, that does not propose the same object that the repeating gesture is creating, but something different. Most importantly, this creative gesture contains forms of impermanence; it unravels those threads that the repeating gesture is then entangling. In so doing, repetition functions as the cornerstone of Mezzaqui's aesthetic: something that pre-exists in poetry and in weaving but is also empowered in their entanglement. This is at the basis of two recent works: the Tibetan prayer flags *Terravecchia-Toccacieloscolora* (*Oldland-Touchskydiscolour*; 2020) within the exhibition *Una boccata d'arte* (*A Puff of Art*), a project by Fondazione Elpis in collaboration with Galleria Continua, exhibited shortly after the second lockdown in Matera, and the mandala of *L'abilità di mutare con le circostanze* (*The Ability to Change Circumstances*; 2021) as part of *Art City Bologna* that were created in the morning and unmade at the end of the day. For Mezzaqui, the act of doing and undoing, weaving and unweaving, making and unmaking are at the root of artistic creation:

Il fare e disfare che richiama come dici tu il fare-disfare di Penelope è una delle mie idee-sorgente. Mi ricordo che quando studiavo in Accademia ero rimasta molto affascinata dal fatto che nel Barocco—che è un periodo che io non amo particolarmente, è un po' troppo per me—alla corte del Re in Francia artigiani e artisti lavorano per mesi per preparare una festa e poi in una notte si consumava e si distruggeva tutto, dalle scenografie ai fuochi di artificio, tutto. Per me questa idea si è trasformata nel tempo anche in modo più letterale, per esempio nel fare dei mandala richiamando la tradizione tibetana: un oggetto, un disegno, una forma che richiede grande cura nella preparazione, tempo, pazienza, ma che proprio all'interno della complessiva ritualità creativa, coinvolge il fatto che poi sparisca. (Mezzaqui, interview)

(The doing and undoing that recalls, as you say, Penelope's doing-undoing/weaving-unweaving, is one of my core idea-sources. I remember that when I was studying at the Academy I was really fascinated by the fact that in the Baroque—which is a period I don't particularly like, it's a bit too much for me—at the court of the King in France artisans and artists worked for months to prepare a feast and then in one night everything was consumed and destroyed, from the sets to the fireworks, everything. For me, this idea has also been transformed over time in a more literal way, for example in the offering of mandalas, recalling the Tibetan tradition: an object, a design, a shape that requires great care in preparation, time, patience, but which, within the overall creative ritual, involves the fact that it then disappears.)

Another element that the making-unmaking intrinsic to mandala-offering practice and that metaphorically pervades most of Mezzaqui's work is the idea that the reason why the mandalas are unmade is because one should not feel possession over one's own creation, or anything for that matter, but rather value the process

that led to the final result. This devaluing of finality and linear progress, in order to privilege the practice and gestures of the making, is central to a practice based on craft, which also includes the craft of poetry. From this viewpoint, in fact, the material with which mandalas are traditionally made is colored sand. In the non-permanence implied in the value that Mezzaqui gives to the making-unmaking of her poetics, one finds a vision that does not value the reproduction of the identical. The rituality involved in her artistic craft would seem to imply the reproduction of the identical: sameness persists through the ritualistic and repetitive gestures of art making. However, repetition and ritualistic elements create difference—a central aspect of lyric poetry too through the rhetorical device of the anaphora:

La ripetizione, intimamente legata al ritmo, fa parte della pratica del mio lavoro: è qualcosa che sostiene tutto. È una sorta di tensione che poi si scopre non essere mai portatrice dell'identico. Per assaporare queste differenze sottili e lievi, dobbiamo passare attraverso la ripetizione, la serialità. La ripetizione permette cogliere la differenza di qualsiasi istante. Questo forse ha a che fare con il nostro modo di percezione del mondo. (Mezzaqui, interview)

(Repetition, intimately linked to rhythm, is part of the practice of my work: it is something that sustains everything. It is a kind of tension that then turns out never to be the bearer of the identical. To savor these subtle and slight differences, we have to go through repetition, seriality. Repetition allows us to grasp the difference of any given moment. This perhaps has to do with the way we perceive the world.)

Just as in Mezzaqui's *Autobiografia del rosso* and its thirty-three books, in *Terravecchia-Toccacieloscolora*, one finds around a thousand flags presenting thirty-three poems by three poets: Mariangela Gualtieri, Franco Arminio, and Chandra Livia Candiani.



Figure 5. Sabrina Mezzaqui, *Terravecchia-Toccacieloscolora* (2020). Courtesy of Sabrina Mezzaqui.

Another key aspect of this work lies in the concept behind the Tibetan flags, which are often placed at the peak of a mountain so that from high above they can emanate and expand the words present in each flag downward onto the surrounding valleys. This is a characteristic that Mezzaqui repropose by placing the flags in the Terravecchia quarter at the summit of Pisticci, a small village near Matera. The flags are not supposed to carry the prayers to gods, but rather the words, by being blown away by the wind, will spread themselves and pervade all the surrounding space. In addition, the content of the transcribed poems is put into dialogue with the installation. For instance, the poem by Mariangela Gualtieri from her collection *Quando non morivo* (*When I Wasn't Dying*; 2019) vividly illustrates the practical work behind the installation as well as the interplay between different media within this act of transcription and translation of poetry within the space.

Subito si cuce questo niente da dire  
ad una voce che batte. Vuole  
palpitare ancora, forte, forte forte  
dire sono—sono qui—e sentire che c'è  
fra stella e ramo e piuma e pelo e mano  
un unico danzare approfondito, e dialogo  
di particelle mai assopite, mai morte mai finite.

Siamo questo traslare  
cambiare posto e nome.

Siamo un essere qui, perenne navigare  
di sostanze da nome a nome. Siamo. (18)

(Suddenly, we see this nothing to be pronounced  
To a hammering voice. It wants to beat  
Again, again, again, and again  
it wants to say I am—I am here—and hear  
That there's a hand between star and branch and feather  
A single and profound dance, a chat of  
awakened particles, never dead nor extinguished.

We lay in this translation,  
this change in place and name.

We lay here, in this never-ending crossing  
of matter from name to name. We are.)<sup>4</sup>

Not only does Gualtieri refer to the act of sewing the written words within a three-dimensional space (“si cuce questo niente da dire . . . / fra stella e ramo e piuma . . .”) but she also states the necessity of providing the poetic word with a physical and bodily dimension (“un unico danzare approfondito, e dialogo / di particelle”). Eventually, the poetic subject is made to coincide with this act of transcribing

and translating: “siamo questo traslare / cambiare posto e nome. / Siamo essere qui, perenne navigare / di sostanze da nome a nome. Siamo.” Nurtured by the dialogue between different media, this poetic practice stimulates a reflection on questions of identity, thanks to a reference to the possibility of hovering between different names and, thus, different identities. Mezzaqui’s intermedial artistic practice moves from a segmented vision of the lyric “I,” almost imprisoned within the dimension of an autobiographical transcription, toward a deterritorialization of the experience of the self into the collective dimension of the others. The intra-action between different media reflects the way in which authorial identity is displaced and expanded through the entanglement of many other voices, quotes, and textual references. In so doing, the poetic word is chosen as the channel through which Mezzaqui art can come into being, as the next section will demonstrate, through many forms of collaborations with poets.

### Questions of Dimensionality: The Body

We must imagine Mezzaqui’s work as a poetic practice moving on the edge between a material—and thus spatialized—dimension and the immaterial dimension of poetry. On the other hand, Biagini’s poetry develops a counter movement based on this dyad: biography and the written word. The collaborative process that allows Biagini and Mezzaqui to create together completing this dichotomic space between materiality and immateriality is the insertion of the physical presence of the reader/viewer in their work. In their practice and intermedial dialogues, both artists strongly reaffirm the centrality of the body, the only medium allowing for a transcription of both the biographical and physical auscultation of the poetic subject.

The centrality of the body—often interpreted as the expression of a narcissistic fixation—is revealed here as a key part of encouraging an engagement with the “other.” This is carried out by both artists through the sensory experience of listening, understood both in its literary as well as in its metaphorical meaning of a gesture of opening and giving attention toward another entity. It is an activation of one’s body toward others’ bodies, an activation that involves the entanglement of all senses that respond simultaneously together to the same stimuli. Here lies a textile poetics of entanglement, where the corporeality of both subject and the stimuli exerted by the objects play a key role in the *making* of these works.

For several scholars, from Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo to Guido Mazzoni,<sup>5</sup> poetry written by women is limited by one of its many features: it does not engage with the broader community and its socio-cultural, literary present, but with the individualistic, biographic, domestic, female subjectivity. In other words, women poets are not successful in negotiating the frictions between the individual and the collective at the core of lyric poetry. In a recent interview, Guido Mazzoni has stated, “La



centralità del tema del corpo non comporta un'uscita dal soggettivismo: tutt'altro. . . . Non c'è niente di più egocentrico" ("The centrality of the theme of the body does not imply an exit from subjectivism: far from it. . . . There is nothing more egocentric"; (Mazzoni, "Dialoghi"). Recently, Isabella Daddi, in an interview with the poet Franca Mancinelli has highlighted how Mazzoni's critical position is not an isolated case but rather belongs to that critical discourse that

si è rivolt[o] contro la centralità del corpo intesa come risultato di una tendenza al monadismo dell'Io, riferendosi con questo a una scrittura che ruota attorno al proprio ombelico, le cui strutture sono svuotate di significato, dove [come scrive Mazzoni in *Sulla poesia moderna*] "l'io regredisce a schemi di pensiero narcisistici, nega l'alterità del mondo o la riduce ad argomento di un breve monologo in prima persona." (Daddi)

(turned against the centrality of the body which is seen as resulting from a tendency toward ego monadism, referring by this to that kind of writing that revolves around one's own navel, whose structures are emptied of meaning, where [as Mazzoni writes in *Sulla poesia moderna*] "the ego regresses to narcissistic patterns of thought, denies the otherness of the world or reduces it to the subject of a brief first-person monologue.")

There is nothing further away from the egocentric than the way corporeality and the presence of a fragmented body works in Biagini's poetry. But this is of course not only the case with Biagini's poetry; it is also true of a large corpus of women poets whose work gives the body a central role. To the above comment by Daddi, the poet Franca Mancinelli highlights how the presence of a body is not only a necessity but is fundamental to not falling toward egocentric poetic gestures: "La parola senza corpo è vittima dell'ego, delle sue gabbie e proiezioni. Chi scrive poesia è chiamato a dare corpo alle parole, a offrirsi interamente alla realtà, che attraverso le parole, accade" ("the word without a body falls victim to the ego, its cages and projects. The poet is called upon to give body to words, to offer oneself entirely to reality, which through words, happens"; Daddi). It is an open body attentive to listening, listening as a political gesture that involves a relation between an "I" and an Other.

The centrality of the body in Biagini's poetry and textile installations is not a limit, but precisely what enables the poem to weave a collective and community-orientated discourse that values the senses, particularly listening as a way to be with others, human and nonhuman, alive and dead. This is not a community limited to women. For Biagini, lyric poetry is everywhere and can find new forms through the engagement with other media, other artistic communities and their languages through collaborations, including textiles. Whereas for Mazzoni, lyric poetry is nowhere if not in the hands of a few. "Ignari soggetti di non-sapere" ("Unsuspecting subjects of non-knowledge"), as the feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero says, are not just women in this case, but become everyone else beneath that individual "I" (35). There

is no community and without the cohabitation between singularity and plurality, room and house, individual and community, there is no poetry.

To this corresponds the creation of a poetic body that it is expanded thanks to the poetic word. In Biagini's poetry, one finds the gradual atomization of a body seen in its single fragments and parts—it is not by accident that all her collections are crossed by metonymic chains and etymological figures. As she writes in the preface of the English translation of *Da una crepa*, there is a political and ethical dimension of the body, which becomes a key medium for the encounter and active exchange—dialogue—with the other, and not a limitation that prevents this:

The writer's responsibility . . . is to draw a map, to connect the dots that form a common body, to give voice to a thought that bears the imprint of that body, of a word that covers the absence between self and other. And the fundamentally political act is precisely this insistent search for an intimate you that we know is yet abysmally far away, for the body of this you, the only one that can give fullness to our being. The leaning toward, the dialogue, the shifting of our center of gravity through the word—that is the endeavor of poetry. (Biagini, *Plant* 11)

Reality, as Donati suggests, is read starting precisely from within and through the body: “our being-a-body, to the multiple emotional, social and political levels by way of which individuality is constructed, and by way of which each of us determines his or her own position in the world” (13). Biagini concludes her preface by highlighting a key aspect of lyric poetry, and that—as Culler reminds us in *Theory of the Lyric*—is not always shared among critics or taught accordingly, that is, poetry is not mimesis (representation of reality) but is a creation of reality (35–36):

So that this may happen, the poet must constantly invent a new language in order to “translate” her daily discoveries to others; she must “recompose the shattered,” not represent but recreate it. Her mirror-language will design new meeting places, evoke the elsewhere that is the other.

To write is to recall what never happened. (Biagini, *Plant* 11)

In *Da una crepa*, there are four main parts that emerge from her body-poetry: ears, mouth, hands, and eyes.

A listening ear (“the ear’s whirring”) seems to be the eyes of this body-poetry:

Questo torcersi di  
piedi, come il cammino  
in sogno, come  
il racconto in  
un orecchio  
già di vetro. (15)

(This twisting  
of feet, like walking

in sleep, like  
 the story in  
 an ear already glass.)

With the mouth we inevitably meet voice, breathing, (which sometimes we read “is flooded” “stumbles” “gets caught on”, and a breath (“a breath mended with the darkest thread” to quote another line):

Quando la bocca  
 sputa la parola,  
 c'è un tempo, un  
 tra 'me e te',  
 che è una zolla  
 affettata dalla lama,  
 verme che poi  
 ritrova vita. (*Da una crepa* 14)

(When the mouth  
 spits the word,  
 there's a rhythm, between  
 “me and you”  
 that's a clump  
 sliced by a blade,  
 a worm that then  
 finds life again.)

Le mie, le tue  
 labbra, sono  
 le feritoie  
 dove cadono  
 monete, chiavi  
 di porte che  
 si aprono altrove. (*Da una crepa* 22)

(My lips, yours  
 are slits  
 through which drop  
 loose change, house keys  
 that open doors  
 elsewhere.)

The mouth is related to the question of the tongue, a tongue that rolls, unrolls, trips up, all of these images recall the movement of a “thread”:

La lingua vola ovunque, rotola,  
*gettala via, gettala via,*  
*e così la riavrà:*

sarà un frullare d'orecchio,  
un'ala che s'apre a misurare il cielo. (*Da una crepa* 13)

(The tongue flies anyplace, rolls off,  
*cast it away, cast it away*  
*and you shall have it back;*  
it will be a whirling in your ear,  
a wing that opens to measure the sky.)

And finally, hands, hands that are also writing: hands-poetry that have “under the nails the black of the word scratched away today.”

*È tutto diverso, da come tu pensi, da come io penso,*  
eppure sotto la pelle c'è luce  
intermittente, s'attiva alla  
tua unghia-consonante, al dito  
allungato della voce (*Da una crepa* 20)

(*It's all different: from how you think, from how I think,*  
even so under the skin there's  
intermittent light, switched on by  
your finger-nail consonant, the extended finger  
of your voice.)

Breath too, which gives rhythm to the word when it takes a voice, emerges in all its physicality and, in addition, it presents itself figuratively through images of stitching and the presence of a thread:

*Sullo spigolo del*  
*congedo* mi sbuccio  
il respirare.  
Il fiato  
rammendato col  
filo più scuro  
d'abbandono. (*Da una crepa* 25)

(I scrape  
my breath  
*on the edge*  
*of leaving.*  
Breath  
repaired by a darker thread:  
abandonment.)

Although in an English translation *respirare* and *fiato* can be translated with the same word—*breath*—they have slightly different meaning in Italian. *Respirare* is the rhythmic movement of intake and emission of air by which the process of

breathing takes place; while *fiato* is the air that escapes from the mouth and nose during the act of breathing. From this viewpoint it is interesting to note how it is the latter that is said to be *rammendato*, which literally means *mending*. In other words, the *sbucciare* (peeling) of the breath is then followed by a reparatory moment through the image of stitching. The image of peeling and mending reverberates with the movement of making-unmaking, weaving-unraveling so interlaced with textile practices, as also mentioned in the above extracts of the interview with Mezzaqui.

The eyes are the organs destined to give birth to this fragmentation of the body into its single and interconnected entities. In this sense, they operate like scissors able to separate each singular detail of this expanded poetic body:

*Con gli occhi-  
forbici ti ritaglio  
il profilo, ti fermo  
con la lama di tempo  
che mai fa ruggine. (Da una crepa 16)*

*(With the eye-  
scissors I cut  
your profile, fixing you  
with the blade of time  
that never rusts.)*

The presence of the fragmented body parts becomes for Biagini a possibility to create a more “porous” and thus expanded subjectivity in a constant act of stitching and re-stitching. This emerges when she states that:

[L]a questione del frammento, della frammentazione del corpo come anche del testo: è la condizione che permette al dialogo di aprirsi e di ricucirsi in modo nuovo sulla pagina insieme al bianco, al corpo del testo, e alle singole ombre proiettate da queste parti, da questi atomi del corpo. Il processo di scrittura diventa quindi un atto di ricucitura volto a ricostruire un tutto dove la mia storia diventa la tua storia. Ecco, io in questo ci credo molto e di nuovo insisto sull’atto dell’ascolto nella sua accezione politica. (Biagini, interview)<sup>6</sup>

(The question of the fragment is also linked to this, fragmentation both of the body and the text: it is the state that allows the dialogue to open up and be stitched again in a new way on the page together with the white, the body of the text, and the single shadows projected by these parts, these atoms of the body. And so the process of writing becomes an act of stitching designed to rebuild a whole, where my story becomes your story. Well, I believe in this a lot and again I insist on the act of listening in its political sense.)

Fragmentation is synonymous with dialogue but also with plurality and togetherness for Biagini.

This aspect also resonates with Mezzaqui and Biagini's collaborations that are seen as an attempt to mediate between the poetic word, the material/bodily dimension, and autobiography. What is interesting to highlight in their collaborative work is the creation of a truly immersive installation in which the reader of the poem also becomes the viewer who gets caught within the physical space of the installation. In so doing, reading becomes a three-dimensional act in which it is possible to recognize an interaction of different media—poetry and textile, mainly—that amplifies two key tropes of poetry that are now spatialized within the installation.

The first one is synesthesia through which Biagini intensified the involvement of more than one sense and the intra-action or movement between them: the entanglement of various media in the installation stimulates a similar sensory experience in the reader/viewer offering a more complex and nuanced intra-medial experience. The word becomes a tactile space to cross, to see, to touch, to smell, to hear:

Si parla buio  
 che appiccica il  
 respiro, si parla  
 vetro che buca  
 la carta:  
*ascolta*  
*con la bocca,*  
 guardati nel tuo specchio  
 con l'orecchio. (*Da una crepa* 30)

(We speak darkness  
 that sticks to breath  
 we speak glass  
 that makes holes  
 in paper:  
*listen*  
*with your mouth,*  
 look in the mirror  
 with your ear.)

The second trope employed in Biagini's poetry and in her collaboration with Mezzaqui is synecdoche, the part for the whole. The installation in relation to the installed space creates a game of Chinese boxes between content and container, between the part and the whole, between words and material fragments. In front of this, the reader/viewer/observer undergoes a continuous displacement between space and their body. This is something that brilliantly materializes some of the intuition at the very core of what lyric poetry is. In particular, it suggests an investigation into how the lyric subject attempts to establish a dialogue with the dimension of the Others.



Figure 6. Courtesy of Sabrina Mezzaqui.

The poetic word becomes “the branch that holds us”—a physical handhold to which the body can cling. Another text from *Da una crepa* that explains this synchronicity between parts and fragments of the body and space is:

È la pausa dell’orologio  
scarico, il *cuore dentato*  
a cui il bavero  
resta impigliato,  
tu, bottone infilzato. (*Da una crepa* 31)

(It’s the stop  
of the run-down watch, the *heart cog*  
on which the collar  
catches,  
you, stuck button.)

### Poetics of Displacement

What has emerged is that both Mezzaqui’s and Biagini’s poetics result from the idea of the body as opening up to the encounter with otherness. Poetry, in the moment that it opens up to the meeting with the other, where *other* also refers to other forms of artistic expression—that is, other media—does not replicate itself, but becomes something else, something *new* emerges from it. This view is powerfully in tune with the concept of intra-relating entanglements as theorized by Barad, which can renew our understanding of how we see media relating to each other.

Intra-action differs from the usual term inter-action, which presupposes that the objects interacting with each other pre-exist the action, which in our case would be the medium of poetry and that of textile and other artistic forms of expression



(Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” 801–33). Similarly, in “On Touching,” Barad highlights that *inter* stands for “among or in the midst of” while *intra* stands for “(from) within” (3). The methodological point I am attempting to develop here aims not to presuppose an already-present and identifiable medium that subsequently interacts with another (e.g., text and textile, lyric and weaving) in a certain work, but rather my method starts from a close reading of a certain work that is singular and observes how the two “abstract” notions of medium emerge from what might seem presupposed and interacting at a later stage (whereas before being abstracted/extracted from their singular entanglement, they intra-act). It is an emphasis of “intra”-relation, rather than “inter”-relation that is implicated in works by Biagini and Mezzaqui.

“To experience a poem as a poem is not to treat it as an event of meaning, but as an event of and in language, with language understood as a material medium as well as a semantic resource” (Attridge 2). Here, Derek Attridge encourages questions on poetry seen in its relations to materiality and other media. In both Biagini and Mezzaqui, the tridimensional materiality of poetry emerges through the entanglement of the poetic word, textiles, and a sensorial and semantic body. This entanglement on a material level is the result of a shared view and aims to displace the authority of individual/authorial voices in temporal, geographical, and cultural ways. In Mezzaqui, for instance, contemporary Italian poems, in particular those of Biagini, Anedda, and Gualtieri, intra-act with others far away. In addition, works such as the Bible, the Koran, the Torah, the Tao or the institutionalized language of dictionaries are disowned by their religious opposition in a continuous artistic vision that does not position them horizontally or vertically but rather intra-act in Mezzaqui’s poetics, highlighting “conduits, intersections, circuits, and articulations” (De Cesari, Rigney 6) not defined by religious, temporal, nor national borders.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Biagini, we see a similar transnational multi-scalar dimension in the way such authors as Emily Dickinson, Paul Celan, May Shelley, Bertolt Brecht, and Franco Fortini dialogue with each other across literary genres, disciplines, cultures, and languages. The authorial entanglements that both Biagini and Mezzaqui put at the core of their artistic creations is the result of a broader ethical vision; according to the two artists, in the moment we do not recognize and proactively welcome the presence and voice of others, we lose our individual identity. From an artistic viewpoint, the displacement of authoriality and autobiography weakens the myth that poses the voice/presence of the poet/artist at the core of the creative process. Biagini and Mezzaqui works attempt to value the collective dimension of their artistic practice, something that moves from a reference to diarism and autobiography and leads toward the centrality of the ethical shareability of their art. As we are reminded by Biagini in a recent interview, “Siamo legati da questi fili, non possiamo slegarci: nel momento in cui ci sleghiamo cessiamo di esistere. È la nostra presunzione di autonomia e di superiorità che chiaramente è fallace” (“We are bound by these threads;

we cannot untie ourselves: the moment we untie ourselves we cease to exist. It is our presumption of autonomy and superiority that is clearly fallacious"; Bellomo).

There is a generative force in the entanglement of media that results from forms of collaboration between the poet Biagini and the artist Mezzaqui, a force that regenerates and renews the poetic word, but requires a viewpoint of artistic forms of expressions that rejects formal hierarchies. For Biagini, everything begins from the *parola* (word) but that poetic element of the word opens up to new forms and through the encounter with other media it can become three-dimensional and thus enriches a new meaning that has always been there but has not yet emerged from the page: for this to happen, it needs to entangle itself with other languages, other media, an Other form of authoriality and autobiography.

## Notes

1. On the notion of "entanglement" and the closely connected notion of "agential realism" and how Barad conceptualizes the relationship between discursive practices and the material world, see Barad (*Meeting*, 71–94, 132–85; "Agential Realism," "Reconceiving," and "Re(con)figuring").
2. Mitchell challenges the supposed superiority of language as an integral part of the formation of cognition. Similarly, Hemmings highlights the same issue: "Learning through seeing (and this includes reading) is somehow felt to be a superior or more legitimate way of knowing the world" (3).
3. The full note reads: "Esperimento di dialogo attivo con un poeta amato: testi costruiti intorno a singoli versi del poeta tedesco, allontanati dal contesto originario e usati come micce per scatenare una nuova deflagrazione poetica" [An active experimntal dialogue with a beloved poet; texts constructed around single verses from the German poet, taking distance from the original context and used as crumbs to ignite a new poetic explosion]. Biagini, *Da una crepa*, p. 10. Biagini, *Plant of Dreaming*, p. 25.
4. Translation by Roberto Binetti.
5. On the creation of a "semantics of otherness" used to define women's poetry by Italian literary critics, see Binetti. As Binetti highlights, "Drawing on the reception of Mengaldo's essay and anthology, it is possible to connect the limited presence of women poets in poetic anthologies to the definition used to label them. A strong narrative must be reinforced through time and developed by several actors. This is precisely what happened with many Italian literary critics after Mengaldo. Many of the images used to describe women's literature formed, eventually, an actual semantic field dealing with the idea of 'otherness.'" Literary critics who adopted a Mengaldian posture with regard to Italian women's poetry include Cucchi and Giovanardi, Galaverni, Lorenzini, Testa, Manacorda, Vitiello, Mazzoni (*Sulla poesia moderna*), Piccini, Crocco, and Afribo. Among critics within the Italian academic context who tried to challenge this critical posture, it is worth mentioning Fusini and Gramaglia, Frabotta (*Donne in poesia, Letteratura*, and "Il canone"), Bordini et al. for the section related to women's poetry, di Nola, and Policastro.
6. Part of the interview is available at <http://www.nonsolomuse.com> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FvtcJslKnY>.
7. On the "transnational turn" in Italian studies, see Bond, Burdett and Polezzi, Burdett et al., and Bassi and Riccò.

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