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**Ombretta Frau** is Dorothy Rooke McCulloch Professor of Italian at Mount Holyoke College. Her scholarly interests include nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian public intellectuals, and the material culture of literature. She has published some fifty articles on numerous Italian authors, among them Pirandello, Annie Vivanti, Flavia Steno, Contessa Lara, Marchesa Colombi, Jolanda, Mantea, Sfinge, Mara Antelling, Matilde Serao, Dacia Maraini, Palazzeschi, Cerami, and topics such as Italian fascism, motherhood, and gender violence on the internet. With Cristina Gragnani, she co-authored *Sottoboschi letterari* (Firenze UP, 2011) and Pirandello’s *Taccuino di Harvard* (Mondadori, 2002). Her most recent publications include studies on the Giamatti Dante Collection, on Matilde Serao, Italo Calvino, and Luigi Pirandello. She is the 2022 recipient of the Meribeth E. Cameron Faculty Award for Scholarship at Mount Holyoke.

**Juliet Guzzetta** is Associate Professor with joint appointments in the Department of English and the Department of Romance and Classical Studies at Michigan State University. Her first book, *The Theater of Narration: From the Peripheries of History to the Main Stages of Italy* (Northwestern UP, 2021; translation in Italian by Accademia University Press, 2023), explores a form of contemporary solo theater in its historical, political, and performative dimensions. She has published articles and essays in *Theatre History Studies*, *Annali d’Italianistica*, *gender/sexuality/italy*, *Spunti e ricerche*, *Italiana* and several edited volumes, and recently published a translation of Giuliana Musso’s *Dentro. Una storia vera se volete* in the journal *Delos: A Journal of World Translation*. Currently she is co-editing a collection on Italian feminist thought with Graziella Parati titled *Italian Feminisms: Transnational Praxes for Today and Tomorrow*, and working on a monograph that centers Franca Rame’s performances and activism as a model for political discourse, socially committed artistry, and grounded wide-ranging critique.

**Paola Bonifazio** is Professor and Chair of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research interests focus on film and media theory and history, cultural studies, gender studies, and feminist and postfeminist theories. She is author of two books: *Schooling in Modernity: The Politics of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy* (University of Toronto Press, 2014) and *The Photoromance: A Feminist Reading of Popular Culture* (MIT Press, 2020). She is currently working on a monograph on the reception, appropriation, and recycling of the myth and representations of the American West by Italian media, from the first European tour of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* in 1890 to the boom of “spaghetti westerns” on the international market in the 1960s.

**Nicoletta Marini-Maio** is Professor of Italian and Film Studies and John J. and Ann Conser Curley Chair in Global Education at Dickinson College. Her research interests center on Italian political cinema, gender and sexuality in film and media, feminist and postfeminist theory, and auteur cinema. She published *A Very Seductive Body Politic: Silvio Berlusconi in Cinema* (Milan: Mimesis, 2015) and co-edited *Body of State: A Nation Divided* (Fairleigh-Dickinson, 2011), as well as two pedagogical books centered on teaching Italian through theater. She is currently working on the postfeminist transmedia project incarnated by Italian fashion influencer and digital entrepreneur Chiara Ferragni. With Ellen Nerenberg, she is co-author of *La Nazione Winx: Coltivare la futura consumista* (forthcoming, Rubbettino Editore). She is co-founder and Editor of *g/s/i*.

**Abstract:** The Guest Editors introduce the theme of this issue: “Conservative Feminism / Femminismi di destra” in the sociopolitical and cultural context of contemporary Italy. They also discuss the contributions of the Themed Section and explain how they worked on the Invited Perspectives. Marini-Maio details a collaborative piece between a practitioner, an activist, and a scholar in the Collaborations section. Finally, she introduces the articles presented in Open Contributions.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Conservative Feminism, Giorgia Meloni, neofascism, gender

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Editorial

*gender/sexuality/italy* 10, I-II (2023-2024)

## Conservative Feminism / Femminismi di destra

### Journal Editorial

OMBRETTA FRAU, JULIET GUZZETTA

Guest Editors

On January 23, 2023, the American Association for Italian Studies held its first *Giornata di Studio*. The event's theme, inspired by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's historic victory, was Conservative Feminism (Femminismi di destra). It attracted great attention in the North American Italian scholarly community, and it inspired further conversations that resulted in this journal issue's special theme. The Themed Section seeks to explore the characteristics and success of conservative women in contemporary politics, with particular attention to Giorgia Meloni's win exactly one hundred years after Benito Mussolini's ascent to power.

Giorgia Meloni's energy and vigor derive, in part, from her humble background as the daughter of a single mother in a historically working-class Rome neighborhood. Meloni's personal narrative tells the story of a very young woman who had a challenging adolescence and was bullied for her physical appearance, who found a welcoming environment in the far-right Fronte della Gioventù, the youth organization of the now dissolved neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano party. A political star was born. A minister at age 31 (the youngest ever in the Italian republic) in one of Silvio Berlusconi's governments, in 2012, together with Ignazio La Russa (the current President of the Senate), and Guido Crosetto (the current Minister of Defense), Meloni co-founded a political party named after the Italian national anthem: Fratelli d'Italia. Meloni quickly became the symbol of the party and, in 2014, its president.

Meloni has always done everything on her own terms. In spite of not having a college degree, she became a fiercely independent charismatic politician who is an eloquent speaker with a remarkable sense of humor and is fluent in several languages. However, she is not free of contradictions. She proclaims her love for the Catholic faith, but, when it came to building her own family, she chose to do so outside of marriage. She identifies as a woman, but prefers using the masculine in her political life and asks to be called "il Presidente del Consiglio" instead of "la Presidente del Consiglio." Meloni's conduct and attitude could only be described as *sui generis*.

The thematic center of this issue of *g/s/i* concerns Meloni's unique brand of "feminism" and asks the following questions: could other (younger) women consider Giorgia Meloni a role model? How do we account for her homophobic, trans-exclusionary, and xenophobic ideas and language? What do we make of her past admiration for Benito Mussolini's dictatorship? What are the historical and literary roots of "conservative feminism" in Italy? We aim to interrogate the elements of contrast between conservative and progressive female political leadership in Italian history and in the contemporary context.

### Themed Section

OMBRETTA FRAU, JULIET GUZZETTA

Guest Editors

This issue's Themed Section results from an open call that subjected submissions to double-anonymous peer review. It contains seven essays that examine the possibility of conservative feminism from different academic and historical points of view. The section opens with guest editors Frau and Guzzetta's study in which they reflect on the development of post-World War II feminism in Italy

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with the goal of considering the possibility for another strain of feminist practice, one that is grounded in conservative thought. Specifically, they look at Giorgia Meloni's political success while trying to determine if (and how) her example could be considered feminist praxis. The two articles that follow look at conservative feminism from a historical and literary perspective: Cristina Gragnani offers an analysis of Anna Franchi's seminal 1902 autobiographical novel *Avanti il divorzio*, to shed light, beyond the novel's feminist message and concrete support of a divorce law, on the limitations of those laws and misogynistic vision of the social theories of the long nineteenth century, from Lombroso to Ferrero, Sighele and Mantegazza. Erin Larkin's study looks at Meloni's "feminism" from a Futurist perspective. Larkin argues that Benedetta Cappa's work could be considered a good antecedent of Melonism since, in her art and in her writings, Benedetta celebrates an ideal woman who was both maternal and self-sacrificing while, at the same time, also seeking a legitimate place within an artistic and literary movement (Futurism) that denied women a space.

In her article, Veronica Frigeni engages in a deep analysis of Family, Natality and Equal Opportunities Minister Eugenia Roccella, a journalist and former Radical Party feminist. Frigeni's study touches upon several controversies surrounding Roccella: her polemical discussions on feminism and abortion rights with Lucia Annunziata and Ida Dominjanni, her stance on surrogacy, and the idea of the "traditional family," an expression that is both racist and homo- and trans-phobic. Frigeni also delves into Roccella's Catholic faith, something she has in common with Meloni, and into her binary and cisgender peculiar brand of twenty-first century "feminism." Diletta Pasetti and Nicoletta Marini-Maio examine Giorgia Meloni's "reversed feminism," analyzing how she appropriates feminist language and distorts Foucault's concept of "reverse discourse" to reinforce patriarchal structures. Pasetti and Marini-Maio unveil how Meloni draws on Marian symbolism, *femminismo della differenza*, and fascist feminism to construct a narrative that glorifies motherhood and individual success while marginalizing non-binary identities and weakening collective empowerment. Their article delves into the contradictions within Meloni's rhetoric, particularly her alignment with exclusionary principles, and exposes the strategic manipulation underlying Meloni's ostensibly empowering discourse.

Amanda Minervini's article analyzes the complex issue of gender pronouns and gender identity, and revolves, in part, around Giorgia Meloni's preference for the masculine in her political life. While on the one hand, Meloni celebrates her femininity, her being a woman and a mother, on the other hand, in her professional career, she chooses the masculine, and was even elected Italy's man of the year. Finally, Jordi Valentini examines the right's appropriation of J.R.R. Tolkien's writings through the 1970s magazine *Eonyn* and its celebration of anti-feminism, one that Meloni has publicly embraced and that is part of her political activism. From critiques of abortion and decadence in modern society, to the elevation of independent, successful and conservative women's models such as German photographer Leni Riefenstahl, *Eonyn* offers an anti-modern and anti-democratic vision which, Valentini argues, is perfect for Meloni.

### Invited Perspectives

OMBRETTA FRAU, JULIET GUZZETTA

PAOLA BONIFAZIO, section editor

For this section, we envisioned rounding out the themed essays in a different register. Given the high stakes for the idea of a conservative feminism in this present moment, we wanted to hear from public intellectuals with a presence outside the academy who could bring a variety of perspectives, and we

also wanted to have the possibility to converse with them and create a dialogic exchange. To an extent, our idea was also more broadly to encourage engagement with an open mind, including to listen to those whose opinions might initially seem unconvincing because they come from an opposing school of thought, or to challenge those whose opinions are more familiar in a way that might also challenge our own understandings of a position. We hope this section both performs and models conversations that will continue beyond these virtual pages.

We first approached Dacia Maraini as one of the leading cultural and intellectual figures of at least the last six decades in Italy, celebrated for her fiction as well as regular reflections on current events, all while keeping women and gender at the fore of her analyses. We knew Nathasha Edirippulige Fernando as an astute and rigorous reader of race and society from her podcast *Sulla razza* which she co-hosts with Nadeesha Uyangoda and Maria Catena Mancuso. Flavia Perina has represented serious positions from the right both as a career politician and as an editor and journalist. A frequent visitor on national talk shows for her breadth of knowledge, her analyses are careful and multidimensional. Marina Terragni, activist, journalist, and public intellectual, is perhaps our most nonconformist interlocutor. She has been criticized for pushing the conversation into uncomfortable territories that are not considered politically correct, but frequently it is those more heightened exchanges that can most clearly distill one's own position.

We settled on six questions for our invitees. Bridging the formality of the written response with the impromptu and spontaneous spirit of an interview, the idea was that we could share our reactions to each question, and would then offer our writers to have the last response. The first question starts off right away with a consideration of party politics in feminism, while the last gestures toward the kind of inclusive practice of feminism that we see as crucial to progress. The four questions in the middle consider a variety of positions specific to Giorgia Meloni herself (e.g., can one consider her a feminist? What to make of her preference for masculine pronouns while she also asserts her identity as a woman and mother?). Our conversations revealed some surprising sites of agreement across all four discussions, and perhaps most of all, they reveal the complexity and breadth of perspective available to us as we continue to assess the relationships between women, society, culture, and politics.

## Collaborations

### NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

This issue's collaborative piece brings together the perspectives of Geneviève Makaping, Elia Moutamid, and Simone Brioni as they discuss the process behind the creation of the documentary *Maka* (2023). Building upon earlier reflections on the production of a collaborative and hybrid film project—a research endeavor that simultaneously addresses the collaboration that birthed it—this essay follows a special section of *The Italianist* published in 2022, which featured contributions by Simone Brioni, Linde Luijnenburg, Rachel Johnson, and Caterina Romeo.

*Maka* narrates the life of Geneviève Makaping, the first Black woman to become the editor of a daily newspaper in Italy. Inspired by her autobiography, *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi?* (2001), the film tells the story of her migration from Cameroon across the desert, her arrival in Calabria in 1982 following the tragic death of her traveling companion, her success as a journalist and TV host, and her recent relocation to Mantua, where she currently teaches. Makaping's journey serves as a lens to reconsider Italian national belonging and the transformation of the perception of Blackness in Italy over the last forty years. Through the intertwined narrative of Makaping's story, Brioni's writing, and Moutamid's cinematographic vision, the film offers a reimagined perspective of contemporary Italy through the eyes of a Black woman.

Set in Mantua and its surroundings, the film uses archival footage and contemporary images to trace a biographical path that spans Cameroon, France, Calabria, and Lombardy. More than a portrait of an extraordinary protagonist, *Maka* explores the complex dynamics of looking and being seen, as well as the power of cinema to shape or challenge a racist imagination. The collaborative effort involved in making *Maka* was an exploration, both collective and personal, into the language used to talk about otherness, the privilege of being a citizen in one's country of residence, and the experience of being subjected to unwanted or curious gazes.

The documentary is characterized by its deeply collaborative nature, with each voice contributing to a shared vision. Moutamid emphasizes how working on *Maka* differed from his previous films, particularly in its dialogic creation process, where much of the script evolved during post-production and editing, reflecting their ongoing discussions and collaborative insights. Brioni discusses how the project was rooted in his long-standing interest in diasporic writing and collaboration, noting that the production was enriched by the contributions of multiple languages, including Italian, English, and local dialects.

Makaping's powerful reflections, Moutamid's directorial vision, and Brioni's academic insights converge in *Maka*, resulting in a compelling documentary that interrogates themes of migration, race, identity, and belonging within the Italian context. The film stands as a testament to the transformative potential of collaborative storytelling, as well as an invitation to reconsider narratives of race and migration in contemporary Italy through multiple, interwoven lenses.

## Open Contributions

NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

This section of the journal brings together two distinct yet complementary articles that offer innovative perspectives on their respective subjects. Despite focusing on different historical periods—one exploring medieval literature and the other analyzing contemporary LGBTQ+ performances and festivals—both articles challenge conventional readings and deepen our understanding of cultural expressions and identities. By uncovering lesser-known narratives and questioning traditional interpretations, these works highlight the transformative potential of exploring underrepresented voices and contexts, inviting readers to reconsider approaches to both past and present. Collectively, they underscore the value of diverse methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches in enriching cultural studies.

Brittany Asaro's article "The Redemption of Eve: The *Decameron* as New Genesis" provides a fresh and nuanced analysis of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, arguing that it serves as a reinterpretation of Genesis and offers an innovative perspective on the themes of creation, fall, and gender roles. The author contends that, contrary to readings that view the *Decameron* as a purely secular work, Boccaccio actually reimagines biblical narratives by rewriting Christian stories, particularly Genesis. The article's original contribution lies in positioning the *Decameron* as a "new Genesis" and considering its frame story as a gloss on the biblical text that challenges the conventional portrayal of Eve and, by extension, women. This reinterpretation suggests that the *Decameron* is not merely an exploration of rebirth following the plague but also an intentional re-reading that empowers women as creators and interpreters of a new world.

The essay unfolds in four sections, each highlighting how Boccaccio reconstructs the biblical Creation and Fall, elevates women as authors, critiques traditional sexist interpretations, and offers the *Decameron* as an alternative sacred text for female readers. By drawing connections between the plague and the Fall, the article uniquely frames Boccaccio's work as a deliberate effort to redefine

gender dynamics, emphasizing women's central role in the emergence of a more equitable society. The analysis underscores how *Decameron* reframes misogynistic readings of Genesis and situates women as the rightful readers and interpreters of humanity's origins, marking a bold departure from medieval Christian norms and proposing an inclusive, gender-redefined vision of society in the aftermath of the plague.

Dianora Hollmann's article "A case in transformation: Gender Bender festival, from cinema to dance" examines the transformation of the interdisciplinary Gender Bender festival in Bologna, Italy, from its original focus on cinema to a stronger emphasis on contemporary dance. Since its inception in 2003, the festival centered on film programming, but a pivotal shift began in 2014 when dance became a prominent disciplinary section. The author analyzes how this shift was influenced by curatorial decisions and the Italian cultural policy landscape, particularly the funding provided for live arts through FUS (Unique Show-Business Fund), which ultimately drove the festival to prioritize dance over theatre and cinema. By exploring the festival's connection to both the film festival circuit and contemporary dance networks, the article highlights Gender Bender's dual positioning and evolving identity as an interdisciplinary event.

A key contribution of this study is its use of both archival materials from the Cassero LGBTI+ Center and interviews with festival organizers to explore the deeper reasons behind this programming transformation. The article uniquely situates the Gender Bender festival within the broader context of LGBT and queer film festivals, detailing its implicit engagement with the LGBTQ+ community while focusing on expanding its audience and reimagining identity representation through dance. This interdisciplinary approach provides insights into the festival's adaptation to funding structures, the formation of cultural networks, and its role in shaping new identity discourses in both the Italian and European context.