AG AboutGender
International Journal of Gender Studies

Thematic article
AG AboutGender
2026, 15(29), 105-127

Anasuromai, or the scandalous superpower of the *pudenda*. *Feminist, transfeminist and queer interpretations of bodily display*

Andrea Ierna[1], Elisa Venturini[1]

[1] University of Verona, Italy

Abstract

By reconstructing the historical trajectories of *anasuromai* — the ancient apotropaic practice of pulling up garments to publicly expose the external genitalia, typically the vulva — especially in its iconographic dimensions exemplified by the medieval *Sheela-Na-Gigs*, and examining some of its contemporary queer reconfigurations as a playful tool of public protest, our article investigates the disruptive political and aesthetic dimension of public bodily display associated with feminine, feminized and nonbinary bodies. In doing so, and contextualizing it in a wider theoretical discussion, we will focus on two contrasting figures: on one hand, the unsanctified yet monstrous "mother" theorized by Adriana Cavarero's latest philosophy of sexual difference; on the other hand, the non-monstrous but sanctified "sl*t" reclaimed and performed from a postporn and pornactivist positioning by *Non Una Di Meno* movement in Italy (March 8th, 2017, 2018, 2025; Milan and Rome). Drawing on Lorenzo Bernini's framework on the sexual as a social scandal, we ultimately read the *pudenda*'s exposure as a claim to its superpower of disidentification from both compulsory maternity and gender norms, politically embracing the transformative and disruptive charge of the sexual abjection projected and reclaimed by subjectivities that exceed the norms. By tracing these different perspectives on bodily display through the lens of *anasuromai*, our article illuminates the ruptures and convergences shaping feminist, transfeminist and queer coalitions, contributing to the ongoing debates on embodiment, sexuality and political resistance.

Keywords: *Anasuromai*, monstrous maternity, transfeminist activism, queer theory, gender studies.

Corresponding Author: Andrea Ierna, andrea.ierna@univr.it.
DOI: 10.15167/2279-5057/AG2026.15.29.2704

1. Introduction

Our article investigates the disruptive political and aesthetic dimension of public bodily display associated with feminine, feminized and nonbinary bodies around which, within feminist, transfeminist and queer discourse, diverging - and often conflicting - theoretical perspectives and practical political experiments have emerged. Across these trajectories, the sexual projected onto feminine/feminized[1] and nonbinary[2] bodies reveals itself in its profound ambivalence and dichotomous significance: simultaneously subjected to regimes of private care and public abjection, celebrated or condemned, sanctified or monstrified.

In doing so, we reconstruct some of the prominent ancient trajectories and contemporary uses of the *anasuromai* (or *anasyrma*)[3]: the archaic gesture of publicly exposing the *pudenda*[4], lifting one's garments to reveal the external genitalia (typically, the vulva) or buttocks, for apotropaic and defensive purposes. As a practice, the *anasuromai* is in fact attested in different historical periods and in various cultures, bearing meanings that range from the sacred to the comedic, from magical protection to erotic provocation[5]. Among its historical attestations, we focus in particular on the

[1] We distinguish here between the terms "feminine" and "feminized" to mark two distinct theoretical approaches to gendered embodiment. The term "feminine" refers to a feminist tradition — particularly the Italian thought of sexual difference — that explores what is conceived as inherent or ontologically specific to the feminine, often grounded in bodily or symbolic specificity (e.g. the maternal). By contrast, "feminized" aligns more closely with transfeminist and queer frameworks, which emphasize how bodies become gendered through historically and socially contingent practices. In this view, femininity is not an essence but a position socially assigned or politically assumed within regimes of knowledge and power.

[2] With the term "nonbinary" we refer, following Richards et al. (2016), to a heterogeneous set of gender identities and embodiments that do not align exclusively with the categories of female or male. This includes, but is not limited to, identifications that encompass both genders simultaneously, shift between genders over time, position themselves outside of gender altogether, or explicitly contest the ontological presupposition of a binary gender system. In current scientific and clinical discourse, nonbinary therefore functions as an umbrella term designating gendered experiences that exceed, traverse, or destabilize the binary framework.

[3] The term "*anasuromai*", from Ancient Greek, corresponds to the first-person singular of the present indicative of the verb "*anasuro*" (to lift up the garments or to expose and undercover), in the middle-passive voice, and it can therefore be translated as "I uncover myself" or "I undress myself". The term "*anasyrma*", also from Ancient Greek, is instead a neuter noun derived from the combination of "*ana*" (up/back) and "*syrma*" (garment). Both terms have widespread linguistic attestations and have been used interchangeably as synonyms.

[4] In this article, we mainly choose to prefer the latin term "*pudenda*" rather than "genitals" in order to avoid the biologistic implications commonly associated with the latter. This choice also allows us to emphasize the etymological link between *pudenda* and *pudendus* — the gerundive form derived from the verb *pudere*, which translates to: "to be ashamed" — drawing attention to how the body parts in question are historically and culturally defined by their association with shame, rather than just by binary sex characteristics.

[5] Shapes of it can be found in the Greek myth of Baubò who, by showing her vulva, makes Demeter/Ceres laugh to thus console her for the loss of the daughter Persephone/Proserpina, who had gone to marry Hades/Pluto in the Underworld; in Otto van Veen's painting, representative of Flemish Baroque art, The Bravery of the Persian Women (16th century), depicted while warding off the attack of the Median enemies on the battlefield; in the character of the young lady in Jean de La Fontaine's short story *Le Diable de*

medieval sculptures known as *Sheela-Na-Gigs*; among its present manifestations we pay attention to the performances staged by the Italian transfeminist movement *Non Una Di Meno*. This gesture, far from being a simple act of provocation, will serve here as a key to unlock the conflicting symbolic and political investments surrounding feminine, feminized and nonbinary bodies — still caught in the dichotomy that would have them confined to the private or domesticated in public. Confronting the later developments of Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of sexual difference on the "hyper-maternal", and then adopting Lorenzo Bernini's theoretical framework of the sexual as an irredeemable black hole of meaning, and contextualizing both within a wider feminist, transfeminist and queer theoretical debate, our analysis focuses on two contrasting figures: on one side, we encounter the "mother", not sanctified but monstrous; on the other side, the figure of the "sl*t"[6], not monstrous but sanctified.

2. Monstrous mothers in feminist theory: Medusian motives toward Cavarero's hyper maternal

The figure of the mother, whether idealized as sanctified or repelled as monstrous, has long occupied a central place in feminist thought, approached from a range of often conflicting theoretical perspectives. This figure is prominent also in the Italian tradition of the philosophy of sexual difference. In the production of the feminist philosophical community Diotima[7] (Casarino & Righi, 2018), and especially in Luisa Muraro's *The Symbolic Order of the Mother* (2018), the mother is proposed as a foundational symbolic authority for female subjectivity, idealized as generative of kinship from daughter to mother. Adriana Cavarero, previously part of Diotima and still today a prominent thinker of sexual difference (Ierna, 2023), has returned to this figure across multiple texts, including *Horrorism* (2009) and *Inclinations* (2016). However, it is in her recent work *Donne che allattano cuccioli di lupo: Icone dell'ipermaterno* (2023) that Cavarero most

Papefiguière (17th century), who, with a sardonic expression, drives away the devil that swoops down upon her.

[6] We deliberately use the term "sl*t" to engage with its contemporary political reclamation as a slur, particularly within sex worker activism and transfeminist discourse. Simultaneously, in accordance with a transfeminist linguistic grassroots practice, the asterisk acknowledges the term's historically denigratory connotations creating a typographic hacking intervention may help not only in highlighting it but also in reducing potential harm to readers for whom this term carries significant trauma.

[7] Diotima is a women's philosophical community, founded in 1983 at the University of Verona (Italy), as a challenge to "be women and think philosophically" and thereby breaking with the supposed and expected universality and neutrality of philosophical discourse. The main points of reference were the philosophical reflections of Luce Irigaray and the theories and concrete experiences of the historical Women's Bookstore in Milan. Diotima, which in the Eighties had strong links to the aims and thought of the women's movement (in particular known as "difference feminism" or "feminism of sexual difference"), is partially still active nowadays — inside and outside the academia and cultural or political institutions.

directly engages with the monstrous maternal, intervening radically in feminist debates on motherhood with a position that is both critical and open to queer critique.

Since Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953), originally published in 1949 — which serves as a critical point of departure for Cavarero — motherhood has been a central concern in theorizing the condition of women (and, by implication, persons assigned female at birth), within a framework shaped by the enduring questions: *What is a Woman?* (Moi, 2001) and how might she liberate herself from the social constraints of her biological condition? Following Cavarero's analysis, feminist theory has long oscillated between two poles: on one hand, an idealization of motherhood, present in both patriarchal traditions and certain strands of feminist thought, where the maternal is cast in "idyllic" and positive terms as symbolically meaningful and epistemologically significant (Cavarero, 2023, p. 90); on the other hand, a critical, horrorific lineage that tends to frame motherhood as a site of alienation, undesirable constraint and reproductive oppression. Cavarero positions herself against both tendencies[8]. Against the sanctified or repulsed maternal, she offers a theory of the monstrosity of motherhood, understood as the symbolic and corporeal excess of the feminine as it manifests in the gestating and birthing body.

This radical reimagining of the maternal as a site of horror finds a significant precursor and contemporary parallel in Barbara Creed's work. Creed coined the term "monstrous-feminine" (1986), later formalizing it in her foundational study *The Monstrous-Feminine*

[8] In feminist theory, the reflection on motherhood and maternal body has been variously constructed, contested, and reimagined. While any typology inevitably risks oversimplifying a rich and heterogeneous field, following Adriana Cavarero's interpretative framework (which in *Donne che allattano cuccioli di lupo* remains more anchored to literary and mythological references rather than theoretical-philosophical), one can broadly identify three major interpretative tendencies in contemporary feminist thought. The first tendency idealizes motherhood, emphasizing its ethical and relational dimensions, particularly through the mother/child and, more specifically, mother/daughter relationship. Representative of this orientation (not explicitly cited by Cavarero) are: Eva Feder Kittay's *Love's Labor* (1999), which develops a feminist ethics of care grounded in maternal dependency relations; Carol Gilligan's seminal work *In a Different Voice* (1982), which articulated the ethics of care as a distinct moral framework, rooted in relationality and interdependence and more prevalent in women due to socio-cognitive developmental reasons (these theses, characterizing her first production, were partially but significantly revised later, distancing herself from essentialist or biological interpretations). The second tendency critically interrogates motherhood as a normative *dispositif* and compulsory destiny, often tied to the naturalization of biological reproduction. Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1953), where motherhood is framed as a constraint that impedes the realization of the human condition and thus calls for a de-biologization of the feminine, this line of critique extends to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), where motherhood is implicated in the heteronormative matrix, and to Donna Haraway's *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), which destabilizes the natural/artificial binary and reimagines reproduction beyond biological determinism. A third tendency, in contrast, approaches the maternal as a site of excess, ambivalence, or symbolic rupture — what one might call a "monstrification" of motherhood. Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982) famously links the maternal body to the unassimilable and the uncanny. This ambivalence is also powerfully rendered in literary and autobiographical texts that Cavarero refers to, such as Elena Ferrante's *Frantumaglia* (2016), where motherhood is portrayed as both foundational and fragmenting; Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G.H.* (2014), which delves into maternal horror and existential dissolution; Annie Ernaux's *Happening* (1999), an unflinching account of unwanted pregnancy and abortion.

(2024), originally published in 1993, whose recent re-edition shows its enduring relevance. Creed argues that monstrous femininity is inextricably linked to anxieties concerning gender and the female body. While her primary focus lies in the cinematic representation of horror, she posits that sexuality remains the defining axis of these archetypes: "from virgin to whore" (Creed, 2024, p. 5), their monstrous femininity is defined through their sexual and reproductive functions. Central to Creed's analysis is Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection (Creed, 2024, pp. 10-16). For Kristeva, the abject is that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, p. 4). In this cultural imaginary, the mother is not merely a figure of domesticated care but a source of horror and fascination — a construction that indirectly relates to Cavarero's own re-elaboration of Kristeva's comments on de Beauvoir's account of motherhood, which is central to Cavarero's concluding thesis of the "hyper-maternal" as a terrifying and uncanny dimension of female corporeality (Cavarero, 2023, p. 103).

Both Cavarero and Creed reference the ancient Greek Gorgon Medusa, who turns men looking at her into stone, as prototypical of monstrous femininity. Medusa's figure — mostly her metonymic head decapitated by Perseus — has been interpreted psychoanalytically by Sigmund Freud and Sándor Ferenczi as directly related to a sexual reading, and not only through the phallic imagery of both the snakes on Medusa's head and the association of petrification with male erection, but also to the exposure of feminine genitals. According to Ferenczi "the head of Medusa is the terrible symbol of the female genital region" (1994, p. 360), and according to Freud, since "to decapitate = to castrate", the decapitated head of Medusa "is thus a terror of castration" that "occurs when a boy (…) catches sight of the female genitals", "essentially those of his mother" (1990, p. 272). Moreover, as Medusa's Head is "worn upon her dress by the virgin goddess Athene", mentioned as Medusa's daughter, the latter becomes "a woman who is unapproachable and repels all sexual desires - since she displays the terrifying genitals of the Mother" (p. 272). Freud further connects the Monstrous Head of Medusa with the apotropaic gesture of showing the genitals[9]:

> If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself. We read in Rabelais of how the Devil took flight when the woman showed him her vulva (Freud, 1990, pp. 272-273)[10].

[9] For an explanation of Freud's reading of "Medusa's Head", as well as its intertwined nature with Ferenczi's notes on Medusa and the apotropaic gesture of showing the genitals, see Albrecht (1999).

[10] The story to which Freud refers here is found in the book known as *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1552) by the humanist writer François Rabelais, which Jean de La Fontaine later reworked *Le Diable de Papefiguière* (see note n. 5).

Fig. 1. Head of Medusa: painting by Michelangelo da Caravaggio (c. 1596/1597). Uffizi Galleries, Florence, Italy[11]

Following this psychoanalytic interpretation, Creed argues that "the Medusan myth is mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator" (2024, pp. 4–5) and "wonders if the experience of horror - of viewing horror films - causes similar alterations in the body of the modern male spectator" (p. 5). Creed also highlights that "Medusa is also regarded by historians of myth as a particularly nasty version of the *vagina dentata*" (p. 121) which symbolizes "woman as castrator" (p. 115), reimagining the power of female genitalia not as castrated, as Freud famously argued, but as castrating — and therefore representative of female sexual power[12]. In *Horrorism*, Cavarero reflects on Medusa as "the mythical face of horror" (2009, p. 3), pairing her with Medea, as a figure of monstrous maternity that "has accompanied and complemented her for millennia" (p. 14): the mother who commits the infanticide of her own offspring (pp. 25-28). Cavarero reads Medusa's monstrosity not psychoanalytically but corporeally: a head "separated from the body", "split off from the womb", with "the traumatic dislocation of the belly outside the frame" (pp. 14-15). Medusa, Cavarero writes, "doesn't generate horror nor does she explain why horror should be linked to generation. In her severed head, directly, she incarnates it" (p. 15). Nonetheless, the hint of the importance within the psychoanalytic tradition of *pudenda*'s exposure for understanding the archetypal monstrous-feminity and maternity is left undeveloped at this stage.

[11] Figure 1 is reproduced from Wikimedia Commons for academic purposes under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.

[12] Freud interprets the snakes as substitute penises and the petrifying gaze as a reassurance that the male subject still possesses a penis; Creed, however, argues that this reading neglects another symbolic logic within the myth. Medusa also figures the devouring and threatening female body, while the snakes signify not only the phallus but also the vagina, sexual ambivalence, and bisexuality. Creed therefore retains Freud's language of castration and fetishism while expanding it beyond the paradigm of feminine lack (Creed, 2024, pp. 115-130).

A corporeal reading of monstrous maternity related to the public display of the female genitals is explored later than *Horrorism* (2009) in *Donne che allattano cuccioli di lupo* (2023), where Cavarero argues that the maternal body generates life by disintegrating — by exceeding and undoing the boundaries of stable identity and form. This excess, she contends, is experientially grounded for women in the biological: in the "biological flesh" that "swells and rips apart" during gestation and giving birth (2023, p. 46). For Cavarero, this experience of generating — which she restricts to cisgender female bodies[13] — marks a rupture within the symbolic order: a radical corporeal event that cannot be assimilated to the androcentric symbolic order, yet converges toward a form of "symbolic naturalism" (Ierna, 2025) in its understanding of sexual difference[14]. It is, in her own words, a "horrific" (*tremenda*) experience (Cavarero, 2023, p. 7) that dismantles the domesticated and idyllic imagery of motherhood and reclaims it as a site of critical and subversive potential. In this perspective, the mother — starting from the scandalous sexual dimension of her condition — deviates from the canonical paradigm of political thought that defines her in terms of domesticated care. Yet even while embracing the critical potential of a monstrous maternal, Cavarero upholds a conception of the feminized sexual body that remains overly narrow, ascribing meaning exclusively to the bodies of cisgender women. Freud's reading of Medusa, however, points toward a different possibility: not only toward a feminine rewriting of the kind Hélène Cixous pursues in her seminal text "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976)[15], but toward an understanding of monstrous femininity as closely tied not merely to the symbolization of female *pudenda*, but more precisely to the apotropaic gesture of displaying them[16] - the very gesture that will be central to our analysis.

[13] Even if Cavarero usually refers to "women", we chose to use the expression "cisgender women" not accidentally: from our perspective, naming the adjective "cisgender" is necessary precisely because not naming it contributes to the ongoing social deletion of its positionality — treating it as an unmarked, unquestioned norm. As Ansara & Berger show, this is where the distinction between cisgender and cisgenderism becomes analytically crucial (2016). While "cisgender" simply identifies those who are not "transgender", "cisgenderism" designates the ideological framework that normalizes this position by invalidating people's own accounts of their genders and bodies. It does so through practices of pathologization and misgendering, but also through the very structuring of a cis/trans binary as the only imaginable horizon. This binary classification — presented as exhaustive — produces new forms of exclusion, rendering unintelligible, and therefore marginalized, nonbinary and intersex people, whose experiences do not fit either pole.

[14] For a more in-depth analysis of the role played by the androcentric symbolic order in the emergence of the sexual difference paradigm, its entanglement with naturalistic certainties, and the challenges posed by a queer symbolic framework to both the symbolic and biological foundations of sexual difference, see Ierna (2025), which also discusses the symbolic naturalism prominent in the last book written by Adriana Cavarero and Olivia Guaraldo (2024).

[15] Cixous overturns the Freudian coding of Medusa as a figure of castration and horror. Medusa becomes a living, laughing figure through which Cixous reclaims feminine embodiment from phallocentric discourse. The shift is decisive: bodily difference is no longer organized around castration anxiety, but around the affirmative productivity of feminine desire and *écriture féminine* as a resistant form of expression.

[16] We use the term *pudenda* instead of female genitals because even in freudian framework there is an understanding of the apotropaic function of genitals exposure that crosses both female and male genitals:

3. Lips lifted: The *Sheela-Na-Gigs* in the genealogy of *pudenda*'s exposure

As anticipated, in *Donne che allattano cuccioli di lupo*, Cavarero — following her long-standing hermeneutical methodology (1995) — grounds her reflection in the symbolic elaboration of mythological female figures, which in this case significantly include, alongside the Bacchantes, Niobe, and Baubò, the *Sheela-Na-Gigs*: figures enacting *anasuromai*, just as implicitly symbolized by the psychoanalytic reading of the terrifying Medusa's head which refers to this gestures — yet again are read by Cavarero in relation to a monstrous maternity. As Barbara Freitag's masterwork demonstrates (2004), *Sheela-Na-Gigs* are anthropomorphic sculptures representing women exposing their genitals, often depicted with exaggerated vulvas within gaping, cosmic vaginas, and characterized by mocking expressions. Found predominantly on medieval religious buildings — mainly parish churches, but also monastic sites, castles, holy wells, bridges and town walls in a rural and agricultural context — across Ireland, Britain, Scotland and Wales, most surviving examples date from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. Nonetheless several scholars[17] have argued for older pagan roots predating the Norman influence, with some examples possibly dating as far back as the sixth century and connections traceable to pre-Christian Celtic culture[18] — and, more broadly, to analogous figural traditions across different historical periods and cultures (Gimbutas, 1999)[19]. Despite their broad geographical and temporal distribution and some secondary iconographic variants[20], *Sheela-Na-Gigs* share a set of consistent and repetitive features — they all appear naked, bald, and breastless, typically displayed in a frontal standing or squatting posture — converging in their insistent

"The erect male organ also has an apotropaic (designed to avert evil) effect (…) To display the penis (or any of its surrogates) is to say: 'I am not afraid of you. I defy you. I have a penis" (Freud, 1990, p. 273).

[17] To further explore the issue, see McMahon & Roberts (2000).

[18] As Freitag (2004) reconstructs, the dating of *Sheela-Na-Gigs* remains one of the most critical issues in the field. Nor do those Sheelas found on church buildings provide much certainty: most churches are composite structures, with later medieval edifices erected over earlier foundations and frequently incorporating architectural and decorative elements from pre-existing buildings. Consequently, even when the surviving structure can be assigned to a known period, the full history of the site — and of any sculpture embedded within it — is likely to extend considerably further back in time.

[19] As Marija Gimbutas (1999) argues, the *Sheela-Na-Gigs* phenomenon can be situated within a broader cross-cultural tradition of female figures displaying their vulva, with analogues ranging from similar sacred *anasuromai* rituals attested in ancient Egyptian temples as described by Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus to the Hindu goddess Kali and other goddess figures in India and Southeast Asia.

[20] As both Freitag (2004) and Rhoades (2010) observe, despite sharing consistent iconographic features, *Sheela-Na-Gigs* display considerable variation in size — ranging from approximately 9 to 90 cm in height — as well as in craftsmanship and posture. While the majority appear to be the work of amateur carvers, some examples display a confident mastery attributable to skilled craftsmen. Similarly, their formal treatment differs: some figures are accompanied by architectural detail, while others adopt a more stylized approach with a simplified anatomical rendering. The positioning of the hands also varies: in some cases the vulva is held open with one or both hands, while in others the hands are placed over the clitoris in a gesture that has been interpreted as simulating masturbation.

emphasis on the vulva, geometrically represented as a *vesica piscis*[21] and depicted at an oversized scale, "calling extra attention to themselves because of size or detail" (Rhoades, 2010, p. 189). As Jorgen Andersen (1977, p. 100) points out, "a reference to the *pudenda* remains a characteristic of *sheelas* at all times", offering a message diametrically opposed to that of the Virgin Mary: a female figure with a supernatural vulva explicitly and uncannily displayed.

Fig. 2. *Sheela-Na-Gig*: A 12th-century attestation. Kilpeck church, Herefordshire, England

Fig. 3. *Sheela-Na-Gig*: A 12th-century attestation. Cavan County Museum, Ulster, Ireland[22]

The history of this subversive gesture is thus mirrored by a history of erasure: some *Sheelas* have indeed been removed from their original positions and replaced, others have been

[21] The Latin expression *vesica piscis* denotes a mandorla-shaped figure formed by the intersection of two circles of equal radius, symbolically representing the female genitalia: a mystical form widespread both in Christian sacred architecture and in pagan mystical culture. As McMahon & Roberts argue, the *vesica piscis* also stands for the points "at which separate forces or worlds simultaneously meet and divide" (2000, p. 84): an interpretation that reads the vulva as a symbol of crossroads and liminality, which the *Sheela-Na-Gigs*, as further explored in the text, significantly represent.

[22] Figures 2 and 3 are reproduced from Wikimedia Commons for academic purposes under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.

defaced or destroyed, and many have been stolen — a systematic intervention that reflects the broader cultural mechanisms through which the apotropaic and scandalous power of the *pudenda*'s exposure has historically been received as disturbing and inappropriate, prompting repeated attempts to neutralize or contain it. While a significant number of figures were still in place during the nineteenth century, Victorian morality proved particularly damaging in this regard — a tendency that, since their scholarly discovery in the mid-nineteenth century, has been reflected in the repeated dismissal and neglect of these figures as insignificant, if not outright repulsive[23].

Returning to Cavarero's reading of the *Sheelas*, the philosopher associates these sculptures with ancient ritual figures linked to the cults of the Mother Goddess and Earth Mother. Cavarero describes the Sheela as "a squatting women displaying an outsized vulva, often gaped by her own hands", arguing that she comes to figure "the mother's body, a body which opens itself up to give birth to another body, another singular living being that has moved and grown in her womb and now comes out through her vagina" (Cavarero, 2023, p. 29). However, according to both lore and scholarship, *Sheelas* have several co-existing interpretations, resisting any univocal meanings of the "hyper-visibility" of the gesture that they stage (p. 30): they may symbolize the powers of birth, death, aggressive eroticism, as they could serve as signs of protection or of warning. This remarkable apotropaic function is further reinforced by the characteristic placement of the *Sheelas* at liminal sites: frequently carved on the doors and windows of churches, at quoin stones, crossroads, and entrances, these figures occupy threshold spaces that, in folk belief, require and provide special protection. As Miriam Robbins Dexter and Starr Goode observe, they function as "a guardian of liminality, a protectress of the portals" (2002, p. 56): a protective role resonates with a broader folk and witchcraft tradition in which the display of the vulva was directly associated with warding off evil. However, as Georgia Rhoades (2010) - whom Cavarero herself cites as the key theoretical reference regarding the *Sheelas* - points out, the meaning of these figures (other than their apotropaic function) nonetheless remains open and polysemic and, as Luz Mar González-Arias (2007) similarly observes, the *Sheelas* remain culturally productive precisely because of this instability: their corporeal iconography has functioned as a shifting signifier whose meanings have been continuously reactivated and reinterpreted according to the specific cultural and political needs of different historical contexts.

In our view, Cavarero's reading, which interprets the *Sheelas* straightforwardly as women, overlooks the ambiguity of their gendered presentation, neglecting to acknowledge that their only sex marker is the vulva and underestimating other significant gender-non-normative features (as noted above, these figures are typically bald, breastless, and somatically alien). Lacking the stereotypical traits of cisgender femininity, they may instead resemble witches, liminal creatures, or even queer figures — we might suggest — more than representing motherhood. In this sense, the *Sheela-Na-Gigs* perform an *anasuromai* in which the "garment" lifted are the labial lips themselves gesturing toward an alternative symbolic and political imaginary that exceeds the framework of sexual difference (Huffer, 2013). Etymologically, too - although the origin of the term

[23] For a more in-depth reconstruction of the phenomenon, see Freitag (2004, pp. 10-31).

remains uncertain - the figure of the *Sheela* seems to evoke the scandalous side of feminine sexuality. In colloquial English, "gig" or "giggie" has been used to refer to the vulva; in Irish "jig", as well as in French ("gigue"), is referred to an orgiastic dance, with pre-Christian roots; in ancient Mesopotamia, "gig" named the sacred prostitutes who served in temples (Walker, 1983, pp. 931–932). Even today, the English term "gig" is still used within Anglophone transgender and queer communities to refer to bookings of drag performances, suggesting the ongoing vitality of the term's scandalous and performative charge. From our perspective, therefore, the genital display enacted by the *Sheela-Na-Gigs* resists reduction to Cavarero's notion of the "hyper-maternal". Rather than invoking the monstrous capacity of giving birth, the gesture aligns more closely with a playful and disturbing dimension of the sexual rooted in scandal, laughter, and transgression — a dimension entirely inherited, and resignified, by performances staged by the Italian *Non Una Di Meno* movement, to which we will now turn.

4. Sanctified sl*ts in transfeminist performances: *Non Una Di Meno* politicization of *anasuromai*

This reading, which interprets the *anasuromai* enacted by the *Sheela-na-Gigs* as an apotropaic gesture reclaiming the disruptive dimension of the *pudenda*'s exposure beyond the maternal, in recent years has been embraced by various movements, collectives, and individuals as a tool of intersectional feminist and transfeminist struggle[24]. This interpretative lineage is also echoed by *Non Una Di Meno*[25] in Italy, particularly through

[24] To cite some significant examples: in the 2000s, in Nigeria, *anasuromai* was used by groups of women marching naked against American oil companies responsible for the Niger River Delta's pollution in an ecofeminist and decolonial context; in 2017, at the National Women's March held in Washington D.C., the gesture was evoked by the artistic initiative The *Pussyhat Project*, which created and distributed thousands of pink hats with cat-like ears representing vulvas to protest the sexist remarks of U.S. President Donald Trump in the context of the Access Hollywood political scandal (specifically, referring to the videotape, recorded in 2005 but became public in 2016 during the Presidential Campaigns, where Trump states "Grab them [women] by the pussy. You can do anything"). The Pussy Riot — the Russian punk rock band and political collective — also frequently resort to nudity as a form of public protest against anti-democratic policies and authoritarianism in their home country. In response to the already cited Trump's statements, in 2016, they released the song "Straight Outta Vagina" in which, while performing a sort of *anasuromai*, they declare "My vagina is tough and dangerous (...) / Cause vagina's got a lot to say". In 2020, in Portland, during antiracist Black Lives Matter demonstrations, *anasuromai* was enacted by an anonymous artist and sex worker, later defined by the media as "Naked Athena": the woman remained completely naked and vulnerable, with legs spread, for ten long minutes in front of a line of armed police officers.

[25] *Non Una Di Meno* (NUDM) is a global, transnational, and transgenerational transfeminist movement. Originally born in March 2015 in Argentina to denounce the brutal escalation of femicides, lesbicides, and transfeminicides and to protest the structural and systemic nature of patriarchal violence, it soon spread to numerous Latin American and Southern European countries.

its local hubs in Milan and Rome, where transfeminist movement practices re-imagine the female, feminine and queer body as a vehicle for political protest in urban space.

The movement's use of *anasuromai* has been especially powerful as a reclamation of freely expressed feminine and queer forms of nudity and sexuality. On March 8th — International Women's Rights Day — in both 2017 and 2018, a collective of artists active within the movement staged *anasuromai* performances in the public space, targeting highly symbolic, and truly crowded, sites of patriarchal (state-institutional and fascist) power.

Fig. 4. This is our body revolution: *anasuromai* performance by *Non Una Di Meno*. March 8th, 2017, Piazza Duca d'Aosta, Milan, Italy. Photograph by the *Macao* collective

Fig. 5 dilDVX: *Anasuromai* performance by *Non Una Di Meno*. March 8th, 2018, Foro italico, Rome, Italy. Photograph by the *Non Una Di Meno* Roma[26]

In Milan, the action took place in Piazza Duca D'Aosta, in front of the Central Station and the Pirelli skyscraper, seat of the Lombardy Regional Council. The performance involved participants lifting their skirts side by side, each revealing a single white-stitched letter on the back, collectively spelling the phrase "body revolution". In Rome, the first action

[26]As with the previous figures, figures 4 and 5 are likewise reproduced here as public domain images for academic purposes.

was held in 2017 in front of the Altare della Patria in Piazza Venezia, which activists symbolically renamed the "Altar of Patriarchy". The following year, in 2018, the *anasuromai* was performed again, this time at the Foro Italico, in front of the massive marble obelisk erected in 1929 and dedicated to Benito Mussolini, bearing the inscription in block letters "Mussolini Dvx". Echoing the Milan action, the activists — dressed in black — lifted their skirts to reveal the word "dilDUX" in pink: a satirical reversal of the phallocentric symbolism of the obelisk, imaginatively transforming it into a dildo. In images shared on social media to claim the action — and mock the monument's fascist austerity — the obelisk is also altered to be hot pink.

On 8th March 2025, in Milan, during the transfeminist global strike demonstration, *Non Una Di Meno* led the march with the first explicitly declared FLINTA* front: not merely a strategic gesture of inclusion and exclusion, nor simply the creation of a temporary safer and braver space[27], but a powerful act of political gathering through which women and sexual and gender minorities[28] collectively reclaim their "right to appear" (Butler, 2015) in public urban space asserting their corporeal reality against regimes of invisibilization or erasure. By centering their common yet differentiated experiences of oppression, vulnerability, and precariousness, this bodily assembly simultaneously performs a double movement: it exposes the scandal of feminized and nonbinary bodies rendered invisible or abjected by heteropatriarchal and cisgenderist institutions, while at the same time redefining the very concept of "community" and "the People" — and with them, the democratic frames through which lives are recognized as livable and grievable and as "bodies that matter". In this context, at the beginning of the route and nearby Piazza Duca d'Aosta, *anasuromai* was performed again. Protected by the separatist front and supported by the participants loudly clapping and shouting, some activists — dressed conspicuously in pink, with faces covered by striking ski masks and other face coverings — temporarily formed a circle and exposed their *pudenda* in public, collectively screaming the word "*anasuromai*!". The message, written on the back of the skirts, this time was: "our rage, our power".

In all three actions, the genitals are revealed in various forms: sometimes fully nude, sometimes covered with underwear, sometimes represented through artificial anatomies

[27] With the expression "safer/braver space", we refer here to the long-standing political practice of creating separatist spaces that has proliferated within feminist, transfeminist, and LGBTQIA+ communities. The adjective "safer" emphasizes that the construction of "safe" spaces entails an ongoing and permanent practice of critical questioning, in which potential danger is mitigated but never entirely eliminated — acknowledging that absolute safety is impossible within systems structured by oppression. "Braver", conversely, highlights that the creation of these spaces necessarily involves an act of courage that is simultaneously singular and collective: both the individual risk of visibility and the shared commitment to building commons against hostile institutional and social forces. For further exploration of these reflections, see maree brown (2024); Bonu Rosenkranz (2025).

[28] By "gender and sexual minorities" we refer not to a numerical minority but to a political one - a structural position relative to the dominant normativity of sex/gender binary, heterosexuality, and cisgenderism; a positionality which is often consciously assumed and politically reclaimed.

using colorful prosthetics and feather boas, evoking a DIY[29], *riott grrrl* and postpunk aesthetic[30]. The 2017 and 2018 performances are also accompanied by a powerful political manifesto, published online on independent blogs, which declares:

> We want to lift our skirts, and we want to do it together and, together, we want to laugh [just like Medusa!][31] with all the strength of our rage (...). To a binary system that compresses bodies into a mythical norm, we respond with the power of the multiplicity of our forms, strengthened by our differences. So, the body is not a destiny, but a tool of resistance, pleasure and revolution[32].

In the statement accompanying the 2025 strike, the movement also challenges the institutional narrative around urban security policy, emphasizing how the exploitation of women's bodies and the rhetoric of their "protection" (especially from the danger of rape, narratively depicted mainly as the threat of the "racialized Stranger") has long been instrumentalized to justify not their liberation but instead the control, repression, and normalization of their sexuality. Through a performative gesture that temporarily reconfigures urban space, *Non Una Di Meno* reveals how security policies subject feminine/feminized bodies and subjectivities to a paradoxical dichotomy: positioning respectable ones (cisgender, heterosexual, white; good mothers, honest workers, innocent girls) as victims needing protection, while simultaneously sanctioning those subjectivities that refuse or escape imposed standards of sexual respectability and gender norms (Tulumello & Bertoni, 2019). In this way, the rhetoric of women's protection functions as a mechanism of normalization and control, reproducing hierarchies among feminized and nonbinary subjectivities while obscuring the structural and institutional violence embedded in security measures themselves. As Ilenia Caleo (2021a; 2021b) points out, crossing activism and artistic practices, through these actions, *Non Una Di Meno*

[29] The acronym “DIY” (“Do It Yourself”), refers to the subcultural artistic and craft practice of creating objects (clothing and costumes, installations, pins) and cultural self-productions (fanzines, political manifestos, posters, banners, music) as a form of creative and political resistance, using everyday or recycled materials.

[30] The expression indicates the aesthetic reference to the *Riot Grrrl* movement which, between the 1980s and 1990s, first emerged in the United States, particularly in the Pacific Northwest region and Washington State, and subsequently spread internationally, predominantly in Europe. The denomination itself - which combines the term “Riot” (meaning “rebellion”) with the neologism “Grrrl” (evocative both of the term “girl”, as opposed to the more serious and respectable “woman”, and of a canine growl) - expresses the anger and rebellious determination of young female activists in claiming space and voice, particularly in the strictly male and sexist punk and post-punk music scene, as well as their distancing from more academic and bourgeois feminism.

[31] The expression “just like Medusa!”, which we have integrated by partly reformulating the original quote (as indicated by the square brackets) serves to establish a connection with Section 2, where the figure of Medusa is analyzed. It thus refers to the reappropriation of the Gorgon figure recently embraced by the Italian *Non Una Di Meno* movement, particularly by its local Milan’s hub, on the occasion of March 8th, 2026 through the campaign titled “Medusa. Petrify the patriarchy”, which invited the activists to attend the demonstration wearing masks and costumes referencing the monstrous mythological figure.

[32] Cited in https://ambrosia.noblogs.org/post/tag/ana-suromai/. Authors’ translation.

explore the imaginative political possibility of the performance, in which urban space - read a dispositif of normalization (Foucault, 2004; Preciado, 2013) - is at the same time temporarily disrupted and recreated anew as new corporealities are produced. In accordance with movement epistemologies rooted in a solid grassroots tradition, *Non Una Di Meno*'s *anasuromai* actions can therefore be read as a form of transfeminist and queer political performance that is simultaneously ludic and confrontational. As Shepard's solid theorization points out, the issue of sexuality is in fact never secondarily for social protest and play is not peripheral to political struggle but constitutive of it: a "pleasure resource" (Shepard, 2010, p. 21) and a "liberatory impulse" (p. 14) that sustains collective cohesion while conveying political messages through acts of street theatre and bodily intervention. Crucially, a queer politics of play operates as a rejection of the normative enclosures that regulate and pathologize non-reproductive sexualities, shifting the terms of public debate and moving queer narratives away from shame and pathology toward a space of collective possibility.

In this context, *anasuromai* figures the female, feminized and nonbinary body as reclaimed and sanctified through the performative display of sexuality — what would otherwise be slut-shamed for the partial or full exposure of the *pudenda*. This figure stands in radical contrast to the monstrous mother of sexual difference thought, drawing instead on a theoretical framework derived from the postporn movement[33], which makes use of the public display of reclaimed sexual bodies through pornactivist performative practices[34] that seem to declare: "We will appear publicly and break down this barrier between what

[33] Postporn is an artistic, cultural and political phenomenon rooted in 1970s pro-sex feminism that emerged and particularly spread between the 1990s and 2010/2015s across Spain and Latin America. Operating as a heterogeneous subculture, it produces and circulates experimental pornography through self-managed and independent circuits, deliberately refusing mainstream distribution channels: on one hand, to expose and critique the codes embedded in mainstream pornography (patriarchal, heteronormative, cisnormative, ableist, and racist) and, on the other, to subvert the very codification of sexuality itself. In doing so, it creates alternative sexual imaginaries that center bodies and subjectivities historically excluded from dominant erotic representation (non-heterosexual, queer, trans, and nonbinary people, gender-nonconforming bodies, fat bodies, and aging bodies). For a further recognition and exploration of postporn, see Engaña Rojas (2017). For a specific overview of the spread of post-pornography in the Italian context, tracing the affective and political links forged at both activist and theoretical levels, see instead the afterword by Rachele Borghi and Slavina in the already cited Egaña Rojas (2017). The essay — constructed as a dialogue between the two activists and researchers, interviewed by the visual artist Helena Falabino — underlines how, in Italy, post-porn activism and transfeminist movements such as *Non Una Di Meno* share not only a common political genealogy and a set of aesthetic and performative practices, but also overlapping activist spaces and key figures, who have been simultaneously prominent in both contexts (Latin, Spanish and Italian). On the same topic see also Cossutta (2013) and Borghi (2019).

[34] Porn activism refers to the explicitly political and radically confrontational use of postporn. Characterized by a close correlation with urban space, porn activism seeks to subvert heteronormative and sexist structures by rendering visible nude, self-determined, and defiantly indecorous bodies through public performances and workshops staged in plazas, streets, and self-managed social venues.

can be seen and what cannot be seen"[35]. In doing so, the movement corporeally demonstrates how gender is not an inherent property of bodies but also — as Teresa De Lauretis (1987) would have recalled — a question of technologies: a set of effects produced on bodies, behaviors, and social relations imposed through a complex political technology. At the same time, the political charge of these actions can be further illuminated through Mary Russo's theorization of the female grotesque (1995): a depository of the unnatural, the frivolous and the irrational; an archetypal bodily metaphor that tends to look like the cavernous anatomical female body and a category defined precisely by its excess over the norms. The positioning of female grotesque — as earthly, superficial and marginal — resonates not only with the geographical and symbolical liminality associated with the *Sheelas* illustrated above, but also with the concept of a carnival and ironic apotropaic function carried by *anasuromai* representation. To paraphrase and actualize the words of Lisa Bitel (1996, p. 229): "Sexy [ancient and contemporary] *Sheelas*… the joke was on women, for the menace of the sheelas was just silly; still, menace it was, for the figures were reminders of fruitful, womanly evil (…), frightening, amusing (…) and erotic at all once". Rather than grounding political potential in biological reproduction, what we call the "sanctified sl*t" mobilizes sexual visibility, irony, and performative disobedience as tools of temporary resistance[36]: if the "monstrous mother" transgresses through the excess of life (*zoe*), the "sanctified sl*t" resists through the sexual force of their refusal to be contained.

5. The sexual as a social scandal with Lorenzo Bernini's antisocial queer theory

At a theoretical level, the politicization of sexual scandal as performed in contemporary transfeminist movements resonates with the work of queer theorist Lorenzo Bernini, who offers a compelling account of how sexuality continues to function as a disruptive and irredeemable force in contemporary societies. Bernini's central thesis is that sexuality is always, in some way, scandalous, and that this scandal cannot be fully neutralized — not even in contemporary secular or hedonistic societies. This claim finds echoes in a range of social phenomena: from the lives and activism of sex workers to the trauma experienced by those subjected to involuntary sexual exposure, such as in cases of the non-consensual dissemination of intimate material. But what makes sex work so fundamentally different from other forms of labor? Why is "revenge porn"[37] so intolerable that it can drive a

[35] The quote — reported by Engaña Rojas (2017, p. 251) — is derived from the Spanish lab Quimera Rosa, commenting on the performative action of collective female public masturbation titled "Paja Colectiva", which took place in Valencia in 2009.

[36] To further explore the conceptualization of sexual desire from a post-porn perspective and the pornactivist and performative use of the body as a protest tool in public space, see Venturini (2025).

[37] We invoke the problematic term "revenge porn" to refer to the non-consensual dissemination of intimate material, a term that has become widespread in both media and institutional discourse. However, the

political candidate, like Benjamin Griveaux[38], to abandon his campaign over a leaked masturbation video, or a young woman, Tiziana Cantone[39], to take her own life after the viral circulation of a sex tape?

According to Bernini, "however lay, liberal, liberalist and hedonist we may be, for us sex continues to be a personal prior to a social scandal" (Bernini, 2021, p. 302). Even in contemporary neoliberal and hyper-hedonistic societies that present themselves as liberated, sex remains something to be confined to the private sphere, disciplined though shame and modesty or redeemed and idealized within the (hetero-cis)reproductive family frameworks exemplified by the "Child"[40] or through the pursuit of pleasure or at least capitalized as a form of individual self-fulfillment. On one hand, sexuality is publicly legitimized only in its reproductive and futurist function, on the other, in today's culture of pleasure, it is also idealized under the aegis of an imperative of "enjoyment" in discourses that oppose that function, where pleasure is celebrated and sex, precisely because of his irredeemable anti-social character, is commodified. Bernini challenges both these frameworks — reproductive and hedonistic — distinguishing between common understandings of sex — as "sex-passion", "sex-desire", "sex-orgasm", "sex-reproduction" — and sex as such. These common terms, he suggests, name "experiences" of the sexual that do not capture "sex" itself, nor its political core (Bernini, 2023a, pp.159-160)[41].

To articulate this, Bernini turns to Sigmund Freud's distinction between *Instinkt* (instinct) and *Trieb* (drive), where the latter identifies something different from

inadequacy of this terminology is revealing, since such crimes are not perpetrated as acts of vengeance — a framing that fundamentally displaces responsibility onto victims — and the material in question is not "pornography" in the strict sense, given that pornography theoretically presupposes consensual production and distribution. This terminological failure exposes the deeper contradiction we aim to sustain in this article: sexuality is simultaneously pathologized as scandalous and obscene while remaining deeply embedded in discursive and visual culture at every level of society. For further exploration, see Semenzin & Bainotti (2023).

[38] Benjamin Griveaux is a French entrepreneur and ex-politician, who has been a member of Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche party and government spokesperson from 2017 to 2019. In February 2020, he withdrew from the Paris mayoral race following the public disclosure of private sexual videos.

[39] Tiziana Cantone was an Italian woman who died by suicide in September 2016, months after private intimate and sexual videos of her were shared without her consent and became viral online in 2015. Cantone's case, and the prolonged legal battle that she and her mother undertook for the removal of the videos, became emblematic of non-consensual intimate image abuse in Italy. Her case contributed to broader public pressure for legislation that culminated in the approval, in 2019, of the crime of non-consensual dissemination of intimate material (introduced through the "Codice Rosso" decree), which criminalized the unauthorized distribution of intimate images or videos.

[40] As Lee Edelman argues in *No Future* (2004) — a key reference for Bernini (2018, pp. 102-112) — in what he famously calls the "fascism of the baby's face" the Child becomes the symbolic figure through which sex is redeemed: vulnerable, innocent, and, at the same time, the ultimate end that disciplines and requalifies sexuality by making it its purpose. Within the framework of reproductive futurism, the "Child" is the goal, and sex is merely the means. Therefore, sex is only legitimized insofar as it produces the "Child", while anything else is excess, a threatening perversion.

[41] Such functionalist interpretations (the "sex-positivity" movement and its associated narrative), he contends, ignore the negative aspects of the sexual — the very aspects that emerge in "revenge porn", as well as in episodes of violence against women or homophobic, lesbophobic, biphobic, and transphobic violence.

autoconservative, reproductive and heteronormative instinct. The drive goes against the individual conservative instinct (individual satisfaction as part of the hedonistic pleasure culture) and the species' conservative instinct (reproduction as part of reproductive futurism politics). Building on Jacques Lacan's concept of *jouissance* (enjoyment beyond pleasure) and Jean Laplanche's work on the "sexual drive" as a death-driven force, as well as drawing from a long tradition of philosophical literature ranging from Michel Foucault to Mario Mieli (Bernini, 2020), Bernini defines the "sexual" as a kind of anti-social pull: not toward literal death, but toward a metaphorical disintegration of the self in which the subject loses the mastery of themselves and their relation to others, a surrender of ego, agency and authority — what he calls a "black hole of communication and meaning" (Bernini, 2023a, p. 157).

The drive, for Bernini, is always perverse in the Freudian sense of deviating from heterocisnormative genital sexuality. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, sexual development is marked by successive stages: oral (tied to breastfeeding), anal (tied to defecation), and genital (tied to coitus and reproductive heterosexuality). As the child enters puberty, sexual meaning becomes consolidated around genitality, phallic signification, and reproductive teleology. In contrast, the sexual drive resists this trajectory, remaining detached from "mature" genital-centered reproduction. Genitals, in this framework, are not fixed in meaning but are capable of being resignified through the drive: no longer instruments of reproduction, they become sites of dissipation, play, and excess — as much as the black hole (Bernini, 2023b).

The uncanny character of the "sexual", because of its radical (social) negativity, is expelled from the political and only re-integrated into the social contract in sublimated, disciplined, and redeemed forms (Bernini, 2018). This dissipative sexuality, by virtue of its excess — its superpower — exposes the scandal of the sexual, and, at the same time, make its opposites intelligible: a depoliticized sexuality, hidden in the private sphere and made visible only when aligned with the norms of respectability. In this way, scandal becomes a site of truth, revealing both what sexual is, and what society insists it must not be.

In contemporary Western societies, what predominates is a "depoliticized and privatized interpretation of sexuality" (Bernini, 2023a, p. 42) — a tendency often embraced and reinforced by the mainstream LGBTQIA+ movement, which has historically focused its political agenda for legal recognition and social inclusion on the demands for marriage rights, effectively reducing sexual politics to matters of private law and individual concerns. Whether through reproductive futurism or hyper-hedonism, sex is stripped of its scandalous force and recast as something else, concealing the continued exclusion and stigmatization of those who transgress its normative nationalist frameworks by embodying its unassimilable force[42]. Among them are undomesticated (therefore

[42] As Lisa Duggan and Jasbir Puar have shown, this tendency is embedded within broader processes of "homonormativity" and "homonationalism". Duggan (2004) theorizes homonormativity as the neoliberal depoliticization of queer life, whereby LGBTQIA+ claims become aligned with privatized, domestic, and consumption-based norms, thus shifting sexual politics toward assimilationist models of recognition. Puar's account of homonationalism (2007) deepens this critique by demonstrating how certain queer subjects — predominantly white, cis-gender, and middle-class — are selectively incorporated into nationalist and

monstrous and castrating) women, queer/non-binary/trans* people and sex workers, who continue to embody, in the public sphere, a non-normalized and therefore non-redeemable dimension of the sexual.

6. Conclusions

Fully aware of the conflicts and divergences that currently emerge — both theoretically and in practice — among feminist, transfeminist, and queer thought and activism, and equally aware of the sex-negative, trans-exclusionary and rightward-leaning outcomes that some strands of 1970s feminism have come to represent today, in this article we have chosen to confront these very rupture points[43]. We have explored feminist and transfeminist perspectives on the scandal of shameless display of *pudenda* - our dear *anasuromai*, and its uncanny, scandalous superpower — starting from *Non Una Di Meno*'s actions in Italy. Our claim is that, through its *anasuromai* actions and what Shepard (2010) would define the use of play and pleasure as a political resource, *Non Una Di Meno* in Italy embraces the indecorous dimension of the "sexual" theorized by Bernini, as well as its uncanny un-domesticated feature as themed by Cavarero and Creed. By re-signifying the archaic gesture of exposing the *pudenda* in public from a postporn and pornactivist queer perspective, the movement distances itself from biologically essentialist interpretations rooted in fertility and motherhood - here represented by Cavarero. The "hyper-maternal" that Cavarero reads in the *anasuromai* represented by the Sheela's figure, even if monstrous and non-idealized, risks reducing the sexuality represented by female and feminized bodies to a limiting and trans-exclusionary biological interpretation, ultimately converging with conservative, traditionalist, and "anti-gender" right-wing rhetorics[44].

securitarian imaginaries, where their conditional inclusion is mobilized to produce distinctions between "acceptable" Western sexual citizenship and racialized or non-Western others. This last dynamic resonates with what Sara Farris conceptualised as "femonationalism" (2017), namely the instrumentalization and phagocytosis of issues related to gender equality and women's rights by nationalist and racist rhetorics, mobilized especially in relation to the Islamic world or, more generally, in relation to migrant and non-Western subjectivities under the guise of protecting women's rights. In parallel, the critique of homonormativity intersects with emerging analyses of "transnormativity" by Austin Johnson (2015; 2016), which can highlight how trans* and nonbinary subjectivities are differentially regulated through norms that privilege legible, binary-affirming, and institutionally sanctioned medical transitions. Collectively, these frameworks reveal how contemporary regimes of recognition operate by extending recognition — predominantly legal and articulated through the language of rights — to certain subjects while intensifying the exclusion or disciplining of others, especially those not racially aligned with the imagined white and cisnormative national future.

[43] For further elaboration, see Irene Villa's examination (2024) of lesbian and feminist debates from the 1970s onward. Villa traces feminist theory's genealogy and internal conflicts through the politicization of lesbian sexuality, revealing how contemporary transfeminist and queer positions respond to and diverge from earlier feminist frameworks.

[44] For further analysis on the anti-gender movement in the rise of right-wing nationalism and populism, see Garbagnoli (2017), Graff & Korolczuk (2022), Prearo (2024), Butler (2024).

While starting from the same public exposure of the *pudenda* that grounds Cavarero's reading of *anasuromai*, *Non Una Di Meno*'s performative practice reclaims that gesture as a superpower of disidentification and reclamation of a disruptive feminine/queer sexuality: a rejection of both compulsory motherhood and gender norms — which much more aligns with the *Sheelas*' apotropaic function. Moreover, by claiming the political use of performance and tactical frivolity as a tool of protest and urban intervention, *Non Una Di Meno* denounces, on one hand, the powerful ways in which the logic of security and respectability acts upon feminine, feminized and nonbinary bodies — sexualized bodies that are expected to remain either confined to the private sphere or "domesticated" in public. On the other hand, the movement demonstrates how it is possible to inhabit, and politicize, the scandal of the sexual, without redeeming it through motherhood — even if monstrous — but rather, quite literally, by putting it on stage. In doing so, the Italian transfeminist movement performs an action capable of destabilizing the very polarizations around sexualized feminine, feminized and nonbinary bodies we introduced at the outset of this article — we could recall: subjects of private care or public abjection, sanctified or monstrified. Without redeeming the sexual in a reproductive function, nor idealizing it in pleasure, *Non Una Di Meno* claims instead its disturbing negativity, turning these dichotomies into unresolved frictions that do not collapse into either side, but rather preserve and re-politicize their full complexity. In conclusion, by adopting Bernini's theoretical framework - which conceives sex as a social "scandal" — and contrasting it with the "hyper-maternal" logic found in Cavarero's later philosophy, focusing on the transfeminist and queer reinterpretation and political use of *anasuromai* (and its monstruosity) in the public space, this article offers a re-reading of the sexual as a starting point for collectively confronting the public abjection projected on free, indecorous, and unredeemed sexuality.

References

Albrecht, T. (1999). Apotropaic Reading: Freud's "Medusa's Head". *Literature and Psychology*, 45 (4), 1-30.

Andersen, J. (1977). *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger.

Ansara, Y. G. & Berger, I. (2016). Cisgenderism, in N. Naples N., R. C. Hoogland, M. Wickramasinghe & W. C. A. Wong (ED.). *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (pp. 1–3). Hoboken: Wiley.

Beauvoir, S. de (1953). *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Bernini, L. (2018). *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bernini, L. (2020). *Queer Theories: An Introduction. From Mario Mieli to the Antisocial Turn*. London: Routledge.

Bernini, L. (2021). The Irredeemable Sexual. Or: What If Post-porn Were Doomed to Failure? In Il Colorificio (Ed.), *L'ano solare. A year long programme on sex and self-display* (pp. 302-204). Torino: Axis Axis.

Bernini, L. (2023a). *Gender: Dieci interventi sul sessuale e sul politico*. Busto Arsizio: People.

Bernini, L. (2023b). *The Sexual/Political: Freud with Marx, Fanon, Foucault*. London: Routledge.

Bitel, L. M. (1996). *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Bonu Rosenkranz, G. (2025). *Ci muove il desiderio: Una storia di femminismi e spazi più sicuri*. Milano: Meltemi.

Borghi, R. (2019). Lo spazio-corpo come laboratorio. The body strikes back, in C. Belingardi, F. Castelli & S. Olcuire (Eds.). *La libertà è una passeggiata. Donne e spazi urbani tra violenza strutturale e autodeterminazione* (pp. 119-134). Roma: Iaph Italia.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Butler, J. (2024). *Who's Afraid of Gender*. London: Allen Lane.

Caleo, I. (2021a). *Performance, materia, affetti: Una cartografia femminista*. Roma: Bulzoni.

Caleo, I. (2021b). Disruptives Choreographies. Produzione di corporeità, materialità vagabonde e performance della presenza. *Tracce Urbane*, 9, 70-93. doi: 10.13133/2532-6562/17366.

Casarino, C. & Righi, A. (2018). *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cavarero, A. & Guaraldo, O. (2024). *Donna si nasce (e qualche volta lo si diventa)*. Milano: Mondadori.

Cavarero, A. (1995). *In Spite of Plato: Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Cavarero, A. (2009). *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2016). *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2023). *Donne che allattano cuccioli di lupo. Icone dell'ipermaterno*. Roma: Castelvecchi.

Cixous, H. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*, *1*(4), 875-893.

Cossutta, C. (2013). Sapessi com'è strano in post porno a Milano (e in Italia). Uno sguardo sulle donne che producono e godono della post-pornografia. *About Gender*, *3*(5), 390-399. doi:10.15167/2279-5057/ag.2014.3.5.189.

Creed, B. (1986). Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection. *Screen*, *27*(1), 44–71. doi:10.1093/screen/27.1.44.

Creed, B. (2024). *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.

De Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dexter, M. R. & Goode, S. (2002). The Sheela-na-gigs: Sexuality and the Goddess in Ancient Ireland. *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, *4*(2), 50-75.

Duggan, L. (2004). *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Edelman, L. (2004). *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Egaña Rojas, L. (2017). *Atrincheradas en la carne: Lecturas en torno a las prácticas postpornográficas*. Manresa: Bellaterra.

Ernaux, A. (2019). *Happening*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.

Farris, S. R. (2017). *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ferenczi, S. (1994). On the Symbolism of the Head of Medusa. In S. Ferenczi, J. Rickman & J. I. Suttie (Eds.), *Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psycho-Analysis* (p. 360). London: Karnac.

Ferrante, E. (2016). *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*. New York: Europa Editions.

Foucault, M. (2004). *Security, Territory and Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Freitag, B. (2004). *Sheela-Na-Gigs: Unravelling an Enigma*. New York: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1990). Medusa's Head, in E. Young-Bruehl (Ed.), *Freud on Women: A Reader* (pp. 272-273). New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Garbagnoli, S. (2017). Italy as a lighthouse: Anti-gender protests between the "anthropological question" and national identity, in R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.). *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizations Against Equality* (pp. 151-173). New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gimbutas, M. (1999). *The Living Goddesses*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gonzalez Arias, L. M. (2007). 'Wide open... to mirth and wonder': Sheela-na-gigs as Multiple Signifiers of the Female Body in Ireland. In H. P. Boyle & C. St. Peter (Eds.). *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts* (pp. 102-18). Cork: Cork University Press.

Graff, A. & Korolczuck, E. (2022). *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Movement*. New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D. J. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Routledge.

Huffer, L. (2013). *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ierna, A. (2023). Sulla filosofia in quanto istituzione sessuata. Ripraticare l'ordine del discorso filosofico attraverso la differenza sessuale in Adriana Cavarero. *Nóema*, *1*(14), 83-106. https://riviste.unimi.it/indez//21559.

Ierna, A. (2025). La realtà pratica della differenza sessuale oltre il naturalismo simbolico. Adriana Cavarero, Judith Butler e Anne Fausto-Sterling con Carlo Sini. *Politica & Società*, 3, 327-350. doi:10.4476/118740.

Johnson, J. A. (2015). Normative Accountability: How the Medical Model Influences Transgender Identities and Experiences. *Sociology Compass*, *9*(9), 803–813. doi:10.1111/soc4.12297.

Johnson, J. A. (2016). Transnormativity: A New Concept and Its Validation through Documentary Film About Transgender Men. *Sociological Inquiry*, *86*(4), 465-491. doi: 10.1111/soin.12127.

Kittay, E. (1999). *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*. London: Routledge.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lispector, C. (2014). *The Passion According to G.H*. London: Penguin Classics.

maree brown, a. (2021). *We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*. Chico: AKA Press.

McMahon, J. & Roberts, J. (2000). *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland and Britain*. Dublin: Mercier Press.
Moi, T. (2001). *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Muraro, L. (2018). *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Prearo, M. (2024). *Anti-Gender Mobilization, Religion and Politics. An Italian Case Study*. New York: Routledge.
Preciado, P. B. (2013). *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs and the Biopolitics in the Pharmogracopornographic Era*. New York: The Feminist Press.
Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Rhoades, G. (2010). Decoding the Sheela-na-gig. *Feminist Formations*, *22*(2), 167-194. doi:10.1353/ff.2010.0004.
Richards, C., Bouman, W. P., Seal, L., Barker, M. J., Nieder, T. O. & T'Sjoen, G. (2016). Non-binary or genderqueer genders. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *28*(1), 95–102. doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1106446.
Russo, M. (1995). *The Female Grotesque: Risks, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge.
Semenzin, S. & Bainotti, L. (2023). The non-consensual dissemination of intimate images on Telegram: The Italian case. In S. Berridge S. & K. Boyle (ED.). *Gender, Media & Violence* (pp. 391-400). London: Routledge.
Shepard, B. (2010). *Queer Political Performance and Protest*. New York: Routledge.
Tulumello, S. & Bertoni, F. (2019). Nessun decoro sui nostri corpi: sicurezza, produzione di margini e movimenti indecoros*. *Tracce Urbane*, 5, 90-109. https://doi.org/10.13133/2532-6562_3.5.14561.
Venturini, E. (2025). *Tutta nostra la città: Prospettive trans*femministequeer per sovvertire lo spazio urbano*. Sesto San Giovanni: Asterisco.
Villa, I. (2024). *La minaccia color lavanda. Il lesbismo nella teoria femminista e queer*. Pisa: ETS.
Walker, B. (1983). *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: HarperOne.