Voicing Italian Childfree Women on New Media: The Lunàdigas Project

Giusy Di Filippo

Childfree Women

Childlessness and the postponement of parenthood are different aspects of a significant low-fertility trend in Italy that is one of the lowest in the Western world. Multiple social and economic factors have led to a radical transformation of traditional family patterns that have resulted not only in the well-known phenomenon of a reduction in births but also in the increasing average age of women who either marry or have their first child.[1] While other important factors are also shaping a new idea of family—on 25 February 2016 the Italian Senate approved a law providing same-sex couples with most of the rights of marriage, excluding co-parenting (stepchild or joint adoption) and reproductive rights (IVF for lesbian couples)—another significant aspect is emerging in this scenario: childfree women are becoming an increasingly large group in Italy. Recent estimates of permanent childlessness for the female cohorts born around 1965 reveal that childless women constitute approximately 25% of this slice of the population (Tanturri et al. 2015, p. 20).[2] Women

G. Di Filippo (✉)
University of New Hampshire, Durham, USA
e-mail: giusy.difilippo@gmail.com

who are voluntarily childless ('childfree') are categorized in opposition to those who do not currently have children but want children in the future ('temporarily childless') and those who want (or wanted) children but are (were) unable to have them because of fertility problems ('involuntarily childless') (Bloom and Pebley 1982, pp. 204–206).

What all women without children have in common is that their fertility choices are subjected to public scrutiny. The reasons for such attention lie in the fact that women's bodies have become through time 'a direct locus of social control' (Bordo 1993, p. 13). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the maternal body is 'an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of its self and the law of its desire' (2008, p. 125). Along the same trajectory, in her book *In Spite of Plato*, while analyzing the myth of Demeter, the Italian philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, affirms that the myth also underlines the reduction of maternal power, in the male-dominated political and philosophical tradition, to 'a mere reproductive function of the womb,' a '"receptacle" for birth' (1995, p. 67). However, it is also worth noticing that, as Peterson and Engwall affirm: 'There are exceptions to the demand to reproduce,' as 'very young women, women approaching the menopause, lesbian and bisexual women, women with disabilities, single women or women not in an approved heterosexual relationship' (2013, p. 377) can be criticized for their desire of being mothers. As 'normal' childless women fail to be 'the "receptacles" for birth' (Cavarero 1995, p. 67), not only are their wombs empty, but also the women themselves are considered 'empty,' as Mardy Ireland, in her book *Reconceiving Women*, highlights: 'Virtually all these women have historically been viewed by society as in some way empty' (1993, p. 131). Gillespie underlines that despite groundbreaking progress made to contrast a stereotypical, ideal, patriarchal construction of womanhood in the Western world, second-wave feminism—Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970); Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978)—has failed 'to challenge the idea of a fixed, innate or inherent imperative in women for motherhood' (2000, p. 232). Moreover, while progressive social changes have granted women more freedom in their lives in terms of education, relationships, and career, culturally constructed images regarding mothering and non-mothering are still significantly present in twenty-first-century discourse. The provision of food and childcare, which identify women with 'nature',

undoubtedly forces a connection between woman and motherhood and also covertly suggests that childless women are 'unnatural.' According to Gillespie, the social role and the meaning of the term *woman* itself have been considered as an empty space that has been filled with dominant discourses about what is and is not deemed 'naturally appropriate' for women and for women's bodies and their activities. Thus motherhood has become part of a hegemonic ideal of femininity that reconciles nature and patriarchal rules: 'The nurturance of children has historically been seen to be what women *do*, and mothers have been seen to be what women *are*, constituting the central core of normal, healthy feminine identity, women's social role and ultimately the meaning of the term *woman*' (225, emphasis in original).

As childfree women fail to conform to the imposed ideal of femininity, they are scrutinized, considered resistant to their 'stereotypical' responsibilities, viewed with suspicion and sometimes with disgust by society (Bartlett 1994, pp. 161–185; Letherby and Williams 1999, p. 723). Negative stereotyping of childfree women includes their description as selfish, abnormal, immature, bitter and child-haters (Rich et al. 2001, pp. 226–247). Childfree women are also depicted as not being capable of sustaining personal relationships and as over-invested in career or work (Ireland 1993, p. 8). Stereotypes clearly play an important role in reinforcing the inexorable equation of women and motherhood, thus excluding any other possible option in terms of personal identities. Ireland states: 'What has been absent or missing in the inexorable equation of women and motherhood is the social recognition that women, like men, can develop healthy personal identities that do not include the role of parent' (Ireland 1993, p. 14).

The childfree phenomenon is indeed somewhat peculiar in Italian society for the centrality of the family unit, and the obligations and support that family members owe to both nuclear and extended family. This situation has obviously come at a high price for Italian women, who have been—and still are—often relegated to perfect mother and housewife roles. On a symbolic level, as Benedetti points out, maternity in Italy is still 'worshipped in its manifestation as the sacrificial mother of Christ and feared in its representation as Medea's annihilating power' (2007, p. 4). As a consequence, maternity is captured in a trap of symbolic patriarchal associations that have historically and traditionally been understood as

essential parts of stereotypical, patriarchal womanhood in Italian society. On a practical level, familism[3] in Italy has implied and (still) implies a strong division of gender roles, with an increase in women's time spent on housework and childcare that corresponds to a reduction in their time reserved for paid work and free time. While it is beyond the scope of this contribution to analyze in detail how Italian women are pressured into an imperative model of motherhood as a natural state of womanhood, it will be important to underline how in a familist country such as Italy, an increase in women's labor-market participation has often times not coincided with a rise in men's domestic duties, and thus has resulted in a dual burden for women (Tanturri and Mencarini 2004, p. 111).

Recent interventions such as *Perché non abbiamo avuto figli: Donne 'speciali' si raccontano* (2009) by Paola Leonardi and Ferdinanda Vigliani, and more recently *Una su cinque non lo fa: Maternità e altre scelte* (2012) by Eleonora Cirant, and the documentary film *Stato Interessante* (2015) by Alessandra Bruno, which explores the lives of eight women close to their forties and their questioning of entering into motherhood, show an increasing interest in the phenomenon from women's perspectives. In most cases, however, Italian newspapers and newsweekly articles look at the topic of being childfree from a couple's perspective. For example, the headline of the November 14, 2013, issue of the Italian weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, featuring a quote from Elena Pulcini, a social philosophy professor at the University of Florence, focused solely on Italian childfree couples. Pulcini depicted Italian childfree couples as driven by 'a tyrannical desire for self-assertion.' Furthermore, articles are often accompanied by images of beautiful couples on a beach, suggesting that the childfree have free time and disposable cash to spend on exotic vacations.

Internet media plays a pivotal role in addressing the topic from multiple women's perspectives. First, childfree women can connect with each other through Internet support groups and online resources, thus closing the geographic gap that might have prevented a sense of shared, communal identity in the past. While offline contexts represent a 'limiting opportunity for childfree identity co-construction' (2014, p. 168), online contexts, according to Moore, represent a great opportunity for women unable to meet in person for a variety of reasons: 'Online communities allow individuals to come together in large numbers that would be cost- and time-prohibitive in face-to-face settings. Individuals who have made the choice never to have children may never meet a person

who identifies as childfree in their offline life' (2014, p. 168). Secondly, Internet media promotes identity construction for many childfree women (Moore 2014, p. 175). The rise of communities online, including blogs and forums such as *childfreezone.it*, and Facebook groups such as *Childfree Italia* and *Non tutte le donne vogliono i figli*, constitute a space where childfree women have come together as a result of a shared experience. While resisting the dominant narratives around themselves and the invisibility they have faced, and are still facing, childfree women have begun to construct new identities. In doing so, they reveal that the web offers an interactive space that makes counter-discourses possible for them.

The webdoc called *Lunàdigas* by Nicoletta Nesler and Marilisa Piga is a representative example of this kind of space. In January 2015 Nesler and Piga made their webdoc available on the Internet, and, starting in January 2016, have made it part of a larger project that blends together the webdoc itself, a section called 'Monologhi Impossibili,' another section that includes an archive for press reviews on the project and, finally, a blog. The project also includes a section for a movie that is currently in production, a section about the authors and a section called 'Multimedia.' While functioning as a plot outline for a movie currently in production, the webdoc is mainly intended to give voice to many Italian women—although some men are also part of the webdoc—who have deliberately chosen not to be mothers.

In this essay, drawing from Mardy Ireland's definition of 'potential space' for women and from Burbules's definition of 'rhetorical place', I argue that with their project, Nesler and Piga seek to finally open up a 'potential space/place' on the Internet that permits an interpretation of non-maternal identities as equivalent alternatives to maternal identities in the Italian context. I also argue that such potential space represents not only a space, but also what Burbules defines as a web-based rhetorical place, where authors, interviewees, and users can find themselves part of a shared communal identity while further developing what Ong has defined as 'second orality.' Furthermore, drawing from Cavarero's definition of women's power, I also contend that this project paves the way for the struggle to return that power to women. Women's power, according to the philosopher, also resides in the choice of non-reproduction.

Ireland offers an insightful historical examination of the development of female identity without motherhood from a psychoanalytic point of

view. Using what she learned from over one hundred interviews with women, she outlines three types of women who are not mothers: the 'traditional woman: childless,' the 'transitional woman: childfree and childless,' and the 'transformational woman: childfree:'

> The traditional woman highlights the process of mourning the loss of a potential identity and/or relationship. The transitional woman embodies the struggle to become aware of the interplay of conscious and unconscious aspects of identity. The transformative woman illustrates the commitment of individual effort that this awareness requires in order to pursue a life of one's own. (1993, p. 91)

While envisioning the potential of the redefinition of non-maternal identities, Ireland also claims the importance of the redefinition of the missing maternal part—the absence—as 'a potential space' for women:

> Because society has so long associated the feminine with the maternal, it is sometimes difficult to view other developmental paths as anything other than substitutes for that which is missing. The redefinition of 'absence' as 'potential space' permits an interpretation of female identity development in which non-maternal identities are equivalent alternatives to, and not substitutions for, maternal identities. (1993, p. 127)

Although at first it would seem that only what Mardy Ireland would call 'transformative women' are part of the *Lunàdigas* project, it is interesting to note that all three types of women described by the author are represented; I would further argue that most of them are 'transformative' to different degrees.

Along Ireland's same trajectory, Italian philosopher Cavarero, while reviewing the Demeter myth as an allegory for the appropriation of women's sexuality and their power to give birth, highlights women's power to withhold that same power, to refuse to generate. According to the Italian philosopher, maternity is: 'A sovereign figure of female subjectivity, who decides, in the concrete singularity of every woman, whether or not to generate. For this sovereign figure, the act of generating is a prerogative rooted in her power—and therefore in her choice—to carry it out' (Cavarero 1995, p. 64). If maternity is undoubtedly culturally and discursively constructed by the symbolic patriarchal order, what Cavarero underlines is that Western androcentricity has ultimately deprived women of the possibility of their fertility choices.

The potential space described by Ireland also becomes a powerful rhetorical web/online place. Burbules draws attention to what makes the web a rhetorical place rather than a rhetorical space. He highlights: 'Calling the Web a rhetorical space captures the idea of movement within it, the possibility of discovering meaningful connections between elements found there; but it does not capture the distinctive way in which users try to make the Web familiar, to make it *their* space— to make it a *place*' (2006, p. 78) (emphasis in the original). Drawing from this distinction, I would suggest that Lunàdigas not only opens up a 'potential space' for non-maternal identities but also becomes a childfree women's rhetorical place as: 'when users are in a place, they always know where they are, and what it means to be there' (p. 78). Furthermore, the way the project has been designed underlines the importance of a potential place that also favors the oral culture that has become an important feature of the 'electronic media' characterized by Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technology of the Word* (1982) as a 'secondary orality' that resembles more that of ancient Greece than that of post-Gutenberg society. In Lunàdigas, while 'second orality' can refer to the lack of formal register used in the project's blog and in its group discussion clips, I would argue that a second orality can also refer to the way users discuss the content of the project by blog or by email exchange, or simply by talking to friends who don't have access to the Internet for whatever reason.

In the following sections, I will examine how, responding to many Italian childfree women's call to voice their desires, their longings and their needs, Nesler and Piga interactively construct a 'potential space' for childfree women and challenge the dominant representation of womanhood in Italian society. I will first describe the project; I will then explore the multiple meanings implied in the name *Lunàdigas*, and explore how *Lunàdigas* opens up a potential space for childfree Italian women and, finally, how the project represents a situated struggle, that is to say, Italian childfree women's struggle to define themselves and their views not only against male perspectives but also in contrast to 'traditional' mothers' perspectives.

Lunàdigas: The Webdoc Project

In the section called 'progetto', Nesler and Piga center their narrative about their project development around a sudden sense of urgency that has led them to bring this project to fruition: 'L'idea di dedicare questo

nostro lavoro alle donne senza figli è arrivata all'improvviso, proprio come un'urgenza messa via da troppo tempo' (www.lunadigas.com). The two authors commissioned the Italian demographic institute Eurisko to do research about the childfree phenomenon in order to obtain the necessary data and statistics required to shape their project. According to the research, childfree women are concentrated mainly in the northern part of the country (especially the north-west). While we can find childfree women in rural areas, data shows their concentration is slightly higher in urban areas (with over 500,000 inhabitants). The age groups most represented are those between twenty-five and fifty-four. A distinctive characteristic of the group is a medium-high or higher level of education (almost 19% are university graduates, and 37% have a high school diploma; respectively, these statistics for the total population of Italian women are 9% and 27%). Their income is high or medium-high: they are entrepreneurs, executives, or self-employed, but also factory workers (although to a lesser extent). Students, housewives and retired women are under-represented.

Having the commissioned data in mind, Nesler and Piga shaped their webdoc project as a neighborhood of a city with its buildings and traffic noise as the soundtrack. Authors describe the webdoc on the newly renovated webpage as an Italian neighborhood in the fifties: 'Alcuni edifici, una stazione, un caffè, un museo. Il webdoc di Lunàdigas ci accoglie così, in un quartiere ideale degli anni Cinquanta disegnata al tratto' (www.lunadigas.com). There are several buildings and a train station that are clickable icons. There are five clickable buildings. Near the train station, users can find an icon called 'In altre parole.' As for the buildings, three of the icons include materials called 'testimoni'; one includes materials called 'artiste' and, finally, the last building includes materials called 'ragionamenti.' The icon called 'In altre parole' includes four interviews with journalist and expert myths and traditions author, Bruna Dal Lago Veneri, with feminist and author Lidia Menapace, with writer, journalist and psychotherapist Claudio Risè (interviewed by Moidi Paregger), and, finally, a conversation between sociologist Paola Leonardi and feminist Ferdinanda Vigliani that focuses on their experiences and their book, which is a collection of interviews of 'special women' called *Perché non abbiamo avuto figli: Donne 'speciali' si raccontano* (2009). 'In altre parole' also includes a written contribution by Guido Orange that analyzes the phenomenon from an anthropological point of view, the results that came out of the research Nesler and Piga commissioned from the

Italian demographic institute Eurisko, and, finally, a radio interview of the two authors, who talk about the project.

The skyscraper on the webdoc, which includes a group of materials called 'testimoni'—the first of three sections dedicated to 'testimoni'—provides users with a collection of interviews of five women: Alessandra Bonacci, writer Melissa Panarello, Nela Matas, teacher Nives Simonetti, and feminist and journalist Lea Melandri. The section also includes an interview with Michael Scott Hughes, who, being homosexual with no desire to have children whatsoever, describes his own childfree experience from this particular point of view. A Le Corbusier-style building includes the second collection of 'testimoni' with six interviews: these interviews include women such as Carla Slanzi, Cinzia Mocci, the astrophysicist Margherita Hack, and a conversation between the two feminists and philosophers Nora Racugno and Annarita Oppo, who talk about their free choice of non-mothering; additional interviews deal with involuntary childlessness (Cinzia Mocci) and mothering as a 'natural' aspect of womanhood (Ilaria Bernabè, Valentina Prisco, and Eleonora Prisco discuss the issue in light of their study in the field of obstetrics). The third collection of 'testimoni' comprises five interviews of childfree women, including Seventies' doctor and social activist Afra Carubelli, Francesca Carta, Kathia Deidda Mocci, Laura Grasso, and psychologist Elba Teresa De Vita. An interview with Enrico Gioffrè, who also explains why he has never been interested in becoming a father, is also part of this section.

The section called 'Artiste' includes seven interviews with childfree female artists: theatre actress/director and singer Gisella Vacca, multidisciplinary artist based out of Florence, Letizia Renzini, sculptress Monica Lugas, actress Veronica Pivetti, and, finally, writer and journalist Valeria Viganò. On the other hand, while musician and singer Rossella Faa explains that she could not have children and that she feels like a mother when she creates her songs, actress Monica Trettel, who is a mother, chooses to talk about a German Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who was a doctor, writer, composer, philosopher, polymath and Christian mystic. Hildegard is also considered to be the founder of scientific natural history in Germany.

Lastly, the section called 'ragionamenti' includes three conversations among women. The first conversation is divided in two parts. The first part is called 'Cena delle donne al Melograno, Firenze'; the second part is called 'Cena delle donne al Melograno, Firenze. Rami secchi? Aqrah?'

The second conversation within a group of female friends is called 'Le amiche di Monica.' The last conversation called 'Verona Rugby Ragazze' is a conversation within a group of female rugby players from Verona.

In January 2016, the section called 'Monologhi Impossibili' was moved out of the webdoc and thus is now part of the main page of the project itself. Nine imagined monologues of famous women from the past are part of 'Monologhi Impossibili.' A monologue of the personification of the Capitoline She-Wolf is also part of this group. While the popular fashion doll Barbie, the world-famous designer Coco Chanel, the poet and short stories writer Dorothy Parker, the heroine of France Jeanne D'Arc, and, finally, the Marxist theorist, philosopher and revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg, talk about their lives and their deliberate choice of not having children, the noblewoman Adelasia di Torres, the sculptress Camille Claudel and the artist Dora Maar talk about their frustrated feelings about being mothers. While describing the encounter with Romolo and Remo, the Capitoline She-Wolf defines herself as a 'surrogate mother.'

LUNÀDIGAS: NAMING THE PRIVATE

Being childfree women themselves, Nesler and Piga seek to invert the taboo of not having children into a choice and to publicize and name the private. Thus the 'public' becomes personal, and the 'private' becomes public. While underlining that both she and Nesler have been looking into the private, Marilisa Piga also brings up that they looked at the topic according to their belief, grounded in the seventies, that the private is the political:

> Intanto mi pare che noi abbiamo un po' lasciato da parte tutto quell'aspetto che
>
> riguarda il sociale, abbiamo davvero guardato molto al privato, forse perché, anche per
>
> ragioni di età, veniamo da quegli anni in cui si diceva che il privato è il politico, quindi
>
> questo ci è sembrato anche un modo per affrontare l'argomento. (Marra 2015, p. 192)

Naming undoubtedly has power and significance in this context. The equivalent of the word 'childfree' does not exist in the Italian language. Being accompanied by prepositions or negations, other possible options such as 'senza figli' or 'non mamme' undermine the meaning of a condition that implies a sense of a deliberate choice. On the other hand, while an English term such as 'childless', which defines the state of not giving birth to children only in terms of an absence of motherhood, has not been extensively used in Italy, the other English term 'childfree' is becoming increasingly popular. By defining themselves 'childfree' in forums, Facebook groups, and blogs, many Italian women are starting to name themselves and putting emphasis on their individual choices, values and intentions, thus reaffirming their agency 'through the suffix "-free" rather than "-less"' (Bartlett 1994, p. 163).

In opposition to the current trend, Nesler and Piga have decided to choose a term that was unknown to the majority of Italian speakers. The two authors have learned about the term *lunàdiga* from the female Sardinian artist Monica Lugas, who had already used this name for some of her sculptures: white ceramic nipples locked in rabbit cages. They decided to adopt the pluralized version of the word *lunàdiga,* which is a word from the Sardinian dialect used to indicate a sheep without offspring. Interestingly enough, the term—which would be the equivalent of the word 'lunatica' in Italian—underlines a sense of sterility for sheep, due to their bad mood (*luna storta* in Italian). While overtly implying that moodiness and mental instability are 'natural' attributes of female reproductive subjects in the animal world, the reference to the latter also parallels the image of the 'insane woman' as part of the Western cultural framework in which the ideas of both femininity and insanity—that have been a powerful definition for 'deviant' female behaviors—have been constructed. Furthermore, the term *Lunàdiga* retains—according to Nesler and Piga—a sense of beauty, musicality and uniqueness that is suitable to indicate childfree women:

> La scelta di questo termine è dovuta intanto al suono che questa parola ha, che è bello, morbido, e alla sua unicità. Noi l'abbiamo trasposta sulle donne che hanno scelto di non avere figli. In italiano non c'è un'unica parola senza una negazione davanti: senza figli, non madri, e tutto il campionario che sappiamo. Essendo così unica, sembrava un bel modo, sintetico e nuovo di definire le donne che compiono questa scelta. (Marra 2015, p. 191)

The choice of a name such as *Lunàdigas* becomes not only a powerful tool for women in naming themselves and their own experiences, but also provides a name for that 'potential' virtual 'space' where they can gather together and as a marginalized group are able to 'struggle to name their own experiences for themselves in order to claim the subjectivity, the possibility of historical agency' (Harding 2008, p. 186). According to Nesler and Piga, the new word has provided childfree women with the opportunity to position themselves in a shared communal identity: 'La cosa bella che è successa è che [la parola] è stata adottata da tutte le donne che hanno conosciuto e conoscono e si avvicinano a questo nostro progetto e che ne fanno parte, che tra loro si definiscono *lunàdigas* al plurale e *lunàdiga* al singolare' (Marra 2015, p. 191).

Ann McClintock suggests: 'As Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* says: "Names Matter." Names reflect the obscure relations of power between self and society, and women's names mirror the degree to which our status in society is relational, mediated by our social relation to men' (1995, p. 269). Although—as already mentioned—the name *Lunàdiga* itself reflects the power relations between feminine identity and society, Nesler and Piga seek to invest it with new meaning by breaking the obscure relations of power between childfree women and society. The self-naming process raises issues of gender identity, social subordination, and intellectual independence, involving self-awareness and self-evaluation, and women's empowerment in Italian society.

A 'Potential' Space/Place

Ireland claims the importance of the redefinition of the missing maternal part—the absence—as 'a potential space' for women. I would argue that with data and statistics as a foundation, through their webdoc, Nicoletta Nesler and Marilisa Piga seek to finally open up a 'potential space' on the Internet that gives a voice to 'non-maternal identities' as 'equivalent alternatives to, and not substitutions for, maternal identities' (Ireland 1993, p. 127). In an interview with Emilia Marra, Nesler underlines that the public admittance of childfree or childless women to not having children creates an awkward atmosphere. At the same time, this circumstance confines women into a space of pity due to the gaze of those—men and women with children—who rely on the assumption of maternity as the default option for every woman: 'Quando una donna in pubblico dice io i figli non li ho, cade immediatamente un'atmosfera

strana, un po' fatta di silenzi, forse più espliciti anche di certe parole, fatta di sguardi quasi di commiserazione (poveretta, non ha potuto…)' (2015, pp. 192–193). Women with children may play an important role in this case, as sometimes the female gaze defines a space of unspoken 'violence.' While talking about her decision to not have children, Giovanna Morena highlights in the webdoc that what struck her was the 'ferocious' gaze of women with children: 'Lo sguardo più feroce è delle donne. Non ho trovato uomini così feroci come le donne' (www.lunadigas.com). While bringing judgment into sharp relief, *Lunàdigas* not only subverts that space of commiseration into which childfree or childless women are confined by others' gazes, but also reverts the multiple situations in which childfree women have felt obliged to provide an answer, a public response to justify their choice. In her interview with Nesler and Piga, Emilia Marra pinpoints another possible definition of this 'potential space' as a space that is a missing metaphorical space in Italian contemporary society, as well as an unthought space in Italian women's reflections, where the childfree choice needs to be conceptualized as a viable option: 'Possiamo dire che attraverso l'identificazione di un termine, un'operazione semantica quindi, e attraverso la volontà di mettere in gioco la propria esperienza personale avete ritagliato uno spazio che era rimasto impensato nella riflessione sull'essere donna?' (Marra 2015, p. 192). Nesler not only agrees with this perspective but also reinforces this idea by underlining that a great number of women write emails saying: 'Finally we are talking about it': 'Sembrerebbe di sì, non perché lo pensiamo noi, ma perché rispondiamo a mail che ci arrivano attraverso il sito e il webdoc, e sono veramente tante le donne che dicono 'finalmente ne parliamo,' quindi direi che la risposta è la loro' (Marra 2015, p. 192).

Nicholas Burbules defines the web as a rhetorical 'place' rather than a 'space', as a place is 'a socially or subjectively meaningful space' (2006, p. 78). In his formulation, this rhetorical place has 'navigational and semantic elements' such as an 'objective, locational dimension: people can look for a place, find it, move within it' and also a 'semantic dimension: it means something important to a person or group of people, and this latter dimension may or may not be communicable to others' (2006, p. 78). According to Burbules, 'calling the Web a rhetorical *place* suggests […] that it is where users come to find and make meanings, individually and collectively' (2006, p. 78) (emphasis in the original). Drawing from Burbules' definition of the web as a rhetorical place, I would argue that by becoming a virtual space that encompasses the

collection of many different stories and narratives, told mainly by women with the great desire of sharing their own experiences, the project also becomes a rhetorical place, as users know where they are (either if they came across it or they looked for it) and they know what it means to be there. Thus the web project becomes *their* space—their own place.

In order to create such a potential place, not only the name—as seen before—but also the content and the structure of the project respond to the need of broadening definitions and web surfing experiences. As far as the structure is concerned, the authors define the navigation as a multi-sensory experience: 'Avventura ipermediale e *multisensoriale* che associa elementi audio, video e testuali in un'architettura flessibile e in continua evoluzione' (www.lunadigas.com, emphasis in the original). Far from proposing a linear narrative where the destination of the story is pre-determined, the webdoc project—which is a work in progress—through the integration of a combination of multimedia assets, provides users with the experience of moving through the document via clusters of information, and interacting with them according to their curiosity. Not only the blog, but also the way the project has been designed, aim at building a place that encourages the interaction of ideas and opinions as well as the expression of women's innermost thoughts and feelings. In the interview with Emilia Marra, Marilisa Piga underlines the importance of a virtuous circle that—starting from public speaking—has encouraged a greater awareness in those women who took part in the project, which in turn has led them to talk more about their situations: 'Per molte è stata la prima vera occasione per pensare i perché di questa scelta, e piano piano si è creato un bel circolo virtuoso: il racconto pubblico permette una maggiore consapevolezza, che porta a sua volta a raccontare di più l'essere-lunàdiga' (Marra 2015, p. 192). While dealing with 'electronic media', Walter Ong affirms that 'secondary orality' represents one of the main features of the 'electronic media', as it resembles more that of ancient Greece than that of post-Gutenberg society. Indeed, the way the project has been designed underlines the importance of a potential place that also favors oral culture. While monologues and some interviews use a formal register blog, many interviews and the section called 'ragiona-menti'—where groups of people discuss their own choices—resemble everyday speech. I would argue that the project also favors a 'secondary orality', as *Lunàdigas* allows for the stories not only to be watched and watched again, read and read again but also to be told and told again. While many users watch or read (another feature of the project) the

interviews, they will probably talk about them with close friends to share their feelings and their thoughts.

As far as the content is concerned, while attempting to take into account as many arguments as possible for being childfree women, *Lunàdigas* also includes not only childfree women's interviews but also imagined monologues of well-known women from the past, interviews of childless women and also of some mothers and of men as well. While the main concern is about childfree women, the project also shows that it is fundamental to expand categories and perhaps to think and develop ideas that go beyond the conventional approaches. *Lunàdigas*, in fact, does not present itself as a childfree women's niche but rather as a potential place that seeks to go beyond strict definitions, as well as to break down the rigid dichotomy between categories, such as mothering and non-mothering.

Although it has the merit of being among the first projects to address this important topic in Italy from multiple perspectives, it seems that *Lunàdigas* portrays the situation from a white-woman-centered perspective. It can be argued, in fact, that while relying on data by Eurisko, the project does not take into account the diversity of the female population (i.e., women born in Italy to foreign parents or born abroad and naturalized) that constitutes contemporary Italian society. It seems that those allowed to speak are white 'Italian' women, with a few exceptions; oftentimes they are well-known women: 'donne speciali,' as part of the title of the book by sociologist Paola Leonardi and feminist thinker Ferdinanda Vigliani, also interviewed in *Lunàdigas*; oftentimes they are from Sardinia. Regarding media participation, media theorist Jean Burgess argues: 'The question that we must ask about "democratic" media participation can no longer be limited to "who gets to speak?" We must also ask "who is heard, and to what end?"' (2006, p. 203). Extending the definition further to a 'democratic' medium such as a webdoc, I would argue that the question that we must ask still needs to be: 'Who gets to speak?' While under-represented childfree white Italian women, gays and lesbians, childfree men, and Sardinian women 'get to speak,' other Italians of foreign descent are perhaps still waiting to 'get to speak.' Nonetheless, the webdoc is a work in progress that shows the great potential of becoming more and more inclusive.

Lunàdigas is undoubtedly a rhetorical place that calls for users' participation. First, through a blog, the project further develops the building of a sense of community (without the physical community) where

'members believe themselves to be part of a large, caring, and like-minded community whose members they scarcely know' in person (Gergen 1991, p. 215). Although the blog does not have many comments yet, Nesler and Piga are also looking not only for feedback but, more importantly, for users to have an opportunity to share their experiences on a variety of subjects related to mothering and non-mothering. One user, Lara, through her comment, highlights not only that this blog project is about sharing and discussing information, but that *Lunàdigas* represents a rhetorical opportunity to speak her own mind without censorship: 'Mi chiamo Lara e sento il bisogno di scrivervi per dirvi GRAZIE. Conoscendovi ho sentito la necessità di parlarvi di me, scusate se sarò prolissa, parlo poco ma quando scrivo non riesco a smettere' (www.lunadigas.com, capital letters in the original).

The webdoc project is a powerful potential space and place that both literally and figuratively seeks to carve out a space to think about feminine identities unshackled from reproduction, thus also showing, on a variety of different levels, that the so-called maternal instinct has been discursively constructed throughout the centuries. As a woman at Cena delle donne al Melograno in the webdoc affirms: 'Non mi è mai passato per l'anticamera del cervello o dell'utero di voler un figlio nella mia vita. Questo a dimostrazione del fatto che l'istinto materno non esiste' (www.lunadigas.com). While it can be argued that this is not true for every woman, this statement and the project itself clearly speak for those women whose choice of no reproduction has been often questioned and labeled as 'unnatural.'

Transforming the Italian Context

As already mentioned, Mardy Ireland in *Reconceiving Women* (1993) outlines three types of women who are not mothers: the 'traditional woman: childless,' the 'transitional woman: childfree and childless,' and the 'transformational woman: childfree.' I would argue that in this project most of the women are 'transformative,' as they all have in common a resistance to pronatalist cultural discourses, a resistance that implies the potential of 'transforming' the idea of femininity in Italian society. Most of the 'traditional women' in the project have come to terms with the idea of not being mothers, and most 'transitional women' have shifted their identification away from the maternal or have adjusted their maternal identification by restructuring their social roles and redirecting their

lives (Ireland 1993, p. 40). Many 'transformative women,' 'by developing alternative forms of creative work as the main focus of their lives … are giving birth to additional forms for female identity' (Ireland 1993, p. 93). This project undoubtedly represents a situated struggle, that is to say, Italian childfree women's struggle to define themselves and their views not only against male perspectives but also in contrast to 'traditional' mothers' perspectives. If Cavarero argues that maternal power consists not only in the power to give birth, but also in the power to withhold it, to refuse to generate, most of the women in *Lunàdigas* reinforce their maternal power by either describing the reasons for their choices or by deconstructing and struggling against many discourses about childfree women. I will analyze only some aspects of this power: in particular, how some women in the project are concerned with defying the stereotypes that surround childfree and also childless women leading to labels such as 'rami secchi'; how others tell how they have expressed maternal feelings in different circumstances such as working on pieces of art, or singing and playing an instrument; and how still others concentrate on the charge of selfishness and irresponsibility. Women in the project feel empowered to speak against the stereotypes associated with childfree women and try to move to more nuanced and reflective representations. Many women in the project talk about their experience of disapproval or being stigmatized for their decision by a society that believes that they are not 'real mothers' unless they have given birth. Women without children have often been referred to with labels such as 'mula,' 'segnata da Dio,' or 'ramo secco.' While the word 'mula' links directly to the animal world, as mules are infertile, the phrase 'segnata da Dio' points to a possible feeling of guilt in that it suggests the divine sphere does not allow certain women to have children. On the other hand, the term 'rami secchi' clearly refers to a condition that compares the situation of not being reproductive not only to the dimension of infertility but also to that of death. A 'ramo secco' is, in fact, a dead branch. Feminist Lea Melandri underlines how this is a misogynist definition that diminishes the role of women in society as they are exclusively linked to the idea of reproduction. In addition, this definition situates women in a superimposing biological determinism. The Italian feminist states:

> Non mi piace perché la trovo di una profonda misoginia. Profonda perché fa riferimento alla fertilità, la donna vista essenzialmente come colei che produce figli, genera figli, quindi collegata con la natura, alla terra, quindi

alla fecondità, alla fertilità. Quindi è un'immagine, come dire, che fissa la vita delle donne in una sorta di determinismo biologico. Quindi direi che è proprio l'espressione peggiore. (www.lunadigas.com)[4]

Another way to uncover stereotypes is when some women refer to a negative relationship with their own mothers as a justification for not becoming mothers themselves. In this way, they simultaneously uncover the stereotypes of the quintessentially happy mother who finds fulfillment in her children and suggest that, if a woman chooses to have children, she must enjoy motherhood. Giovanna Morena affirms that she decided not to have children when she was only nine years old because her mother suffered from recurrent episodes of major depression, and she did not want her child to feel what she felt during her mother's depression episodes: 'Decisi di non fare figli a nove anni perché mia madre era molto malata e molto depressa. Quando avevo nove anni ebbe una crisi molto grossa e decisi di non volere figli e neppure correre il rischio di far soffrire un figlio come stavo soffrendo io.' Although accused of being children-haters, women in the project show that there are other ways to 'mother' than biological mothering, in which they can express and experience nurturing. Journalist and philosopher Ida Dominijanni affirms: 'Abbiamo fatto bene a non fare figli, perché abbiamo messo al mondo dell'altro.' While underlining that women should have children only if they really want to be mothers, astrophysicist Margherita Hack—who died in June 2013—expressed her own experience of mothering as a professor in the form of scientific training and professional guidance of her own students: 'La mia eredità? L'ho lasciata agli allievi, ne ho avuti tanti. Una persona dovrebbe mettere al mondo una creatura solo se sente veramente questo desiderio.' Musician and singer Rossella Faa explains that she could not have children and that she feels like a mother when she creates her songs: 'Ho ritrovato il mio senso materno in altre cose. Mi dà il senso di creazione, di figliolanza, generare dei brani di musica. Mi appaga molto. Questo potrebbe essere il mio piccolo dono al mondo come lo è mettere al mondo un figlio.' On the contrary, journalist and writer Valeria Viganò, while comparing creativity to motherhood, does not believe that a book can be compared to a son or a daughter. What happens for released books is opposite to the sorrowful process, at least for Italian mothers, of grown-up children who leave the house: 'Pur non avendo figli ho cercato di creare attraverso la letteratura, attraverso i miei libri…. Non credo che si possa definire un

libro come un figlio. La creazione artistica non è una perdita quando va agli altri.' Since they regarded motherhood as a significant responsibility that negated their freedom of lifestyle and compromised their independence, some of the women in the project share that they decided to dedicate their lives to achieving their own professional goals. In a dialogue between philosopher Nora Racugno and her partner Annarita Oppo, Racugno affirms that she decided that she wanted to devote her time to herself, to her studies, to her job and eventually to her political commitments, while trying to give birth to herself:

> Ho deciso che la mia più grande aspirazione era costruirmi una libertà nell'ambito della quale io potessi prima di tutto rendere conto soltanto a me stessa, intanto dedicare il mio tempo allo studio, alla professione, e poi è diventato anche un impegno politico… Prima di mettere al mondo per esempio un figlio, io ho pensato che dovessi mettere al mondo me, e quest'impegno mi ha catturato talmente tanto che sono ancora qui che ci provo.

Nora Racugno also describes her partner's motherhood as a sacrifice that implies the necessity of selflessness to a certain degree: 'Ecco quello che io lamento delle donne che hanno avuto figli,' contends Racugno, 'quantomeno della maggior parte e tra queste ci sei tu purtroppo, è che il figlio comunque ha sempre la priorità su ogni altra cosa, anche sulle cose che si afferma siano essenziali per la propria esistenza.' If childfree women face stigma for choosing not to have or to rear children for so-called selfish reasons, Racugno highlights her awareness of the implications of motherhood while showing that her alleged selfishness derives from a precise choice. On the other hand, while accused of being selfish, women in the project also underline that one is not automatically a good mother just because one has children. The reality is, underlines actor Veronica Pivetti, that there are many bad mothers around: 'È un lusso fare un figlio. Prova ne sono le orrende madri che ci sono in giro che creano complessi e difficoltà ai figli.' While blaming bad mothers, however, Pivetti shows that it is extremely difficult to deconstruct the Western Italian cultural framework in which bad mothers and childfree women are assigned qualities that describe them as women that do not fit the expected social norms.

Nesler and Piga seek to show that multiple ways of 'giving rise to new femininity discourses, distinct from motherhood' (Gillespie 2000,

p. 224) are possible in Italian society. The advancement that this project supports is not merely individual but mainly collective. While deconstructing powerful stereotypes and showing a nuanced representation of Italian childfree women, the project also seeks to go beyond culturally constructed categories such as mothers and non-mothers, by instead using categories such as mothers, childless women, and also gay men and lesbian women with no desire of having children, in the hopes of expanding our own notion of the issue that is investigated at different levels. Although the blog and the project are powerful tools of reflection and expression for those women who find their own place in *Lunàdigas*, it is worth remembering that blogging and having the opportunity to surf the web and explore the project still remains an activity that is available to those who are on the empowered side of the digital divide. Nevertheless, *Lunàdigas* constitutes a powerful tool for voicing the almost unspeakable decision or desire to not be mothers of those Italian women whose discourses are marked as separate from the mainstream and are in some way excluded. The result is to carve out a space for a definition of feminine identity that is unshackled from reproduction. Furthermore, the project also carves out a space that becomes *their* place, where not only Nesler and Piga but also all the other women who participate in the project, whether as interviewees or users, are trying to rewrite the rules on femininity and reproduction and also the rules on how to represent women in Italy today.

NOTES

1. See Eurostat data at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/database.
2. The first quantitative and qualitative study in Italy about voluntary childlessness carried out in five provincial capitals (Padua, Udine, Florence, Pesaro, and Messina) (Tanturri and Mencarini 2004 and 2008) reveals that a third of the women without children interviewed (aged 40–44 years) live with a partner and are voluntarily childless. They have greater gender equity within marriages; they are inclined to be less traditional, non-religious, employed in a professional occupation, and to have experienced marital disruption. These women find sources of fulfillment other than motherhood, and in some cases consider a child to be an obstacle to their achievements.
3. On familism and women in Italy, see Ruspini 2015, pp. 64–76.
4. From now on, unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from the interviews on lunadigas.com.

Works Cited

Bartlett, J. (1994). *Will you be mother? Women who choose to say no.* London: Virago Press.

Benedetti, L. (2007). *The tigress in the snow: Motherhood and literature in twentieth-century Italy.* Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press.

Bloom, D., & Pebley, A. P. (1982). Voluntary childlessness: A review of the evidence and implications. *Population Research and Policy Review, 1*(3), 203–224.

Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture & the body.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bruno, A., dir. (2015). *Stato Interessante.* B7B film. Rai 3 TV channel. September 17.

Burbules, N. (2006). The web as a rhetorical space. In I. Snyder (Ed.), *Silicon Literacies: communication, innovation and education in the electronic age* (pp. 75–84). New York, London: Routledge.

Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing ordinary voices: Cultural studies, vernacular creativity and digital storytelling. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, 20*(2), 201–214.

Butler, J. (2008). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Cavarero, A. (1995). *In spite of plato: A feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy.* New York: Routledge.

Chodorow, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cirant, E. (2012). *Una su cinque non lo fa: Maternità e altre scelte.* Milano: Franco Angeli.

Eurostat. (2015). http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/database. Web. Accessed August 3, 2016.

Firestone, S. (1970). *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution.* New York: Morrow.

Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Gergen, K. J. (1991). *The saturated self: Dilemma of identities in contemporary life.* New York: Basic Books.

Gillespie, R. (2000). When no means no: Disbelief, disregard and deviance as discourses of voluntary childlessness. *Women's Studies International Forum, 23*(2), 223–234.

Harding, S. (2008). Subjectivity, experience and knowledge: An epistemology from/for rainbow coalition politics. *Development and Change, 23*(3), 175–193.

Ireland, M. S. (1993). *Reconceiving women: Separating motherhood from female identity.* New York: Guilford Press.

Leonardi, P., & Vigliani, F. (2009). *Perchè non abbiamo avuto figli: Donne 'speciali' si raccontano*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Letherby, Gayle, & Williams, C. (1999). Non-motherhood: Ambivalent autobiographies. *Feminist Studies, 25*(3), 719–729.

Marra, E. (2015). Progetto Lunàdigas. Intervista a Marilisa Piga e Nicoletta Nesler. *La deleuziana—rivista online di filosofia—crisi delle biopolitiche europee*, 1, pp. 190–193.

McClintock, Anne. (1995). *Imperial leather: Race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge.

Moore, J. (2014). Reconsidering childfreedom: A feminist exploration of discursive identity construction. *Women's Studies in Communication, 37*(2), 159–180.

Ong, Walter J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London and New York: Methuen.

Peterson, H., & Engwall, K. (2013). Silent bodies: Childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 20*(4), 376–389.

Rich, S., et al. (2001). "Unnatural", "Unwomanly", "Uncreditable" and "Undervalued:" The significance of being a childless woman in Australian society. *Gender Issues, 28*(4), 226–247.

Ruspini, E. (2015). Role and perceptions of women in contemporary Italy. In A. Mammone, E. G. Parini and G. A. Veltri (eds.) *The Routledge handbook of contemporary Italy: History, politics, society* (pp. 64–76). London, New York.

Tanturri, M. L., & Mencarini, L. (2004). Time use, family role-set and childbearing among Italian working women. *Genus, 60*(1), 111–137.

Tanturri, M. L., & Mencarini, L. (2008). Childless or childfree? Paths to voluntary childlessness in Italy. *Population and Development Review, 34*(1), 51–77.

Tanturri, M. L., & Mencarini, L., et al. (2015). State-of-the-art report: Childlessness in Europe, *Tech*. Rep. 32, Families and societies working paper series.

Author Biography

Giusy Di Filippo is a lecturer at the University of New Hampshire. She holds a Ph.D. in Italian from the University of Wisconsin Madison, with a dissertation on women's writing in the Italian Literature of Migration. Giusy Di Filippo has written articles on Joseph Conrad, Carlo Goldoni, on motherhood and murder. Her article 'Musica e migrazione: ritmi e significati contemporanei' has been published in January 2017 in the volume *La Memoria Delle Canzoni. Popular Music e Identità Italiana*, edited by Alessandro Carrera and published by Puntoacapo. Her article '"Straniero A Chi?" Canzoni e Seconde Generazioni Nell'Italia Contemporanea' has been published in January 2017 in the volume *Attraversamenti: Cultura italiana nel terzo millennio*, edited by Fulvo Orsitto and Simona Wright and published by Cesati Editore. She is the co-author of a textbook on Italian migration literature for advanced students of Italian, published in 2017 by Edizioni Farinelli.