

«I Will Eat You and Spit You Out»: A Reading of the ‘Lesbian Machine’ in Dacia Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina*

Abstract

This article analyzes the «lesbian-machine» (Grosz 1995, 184) at work in Dacia Maraini’s novel *Lettere a Marina* (1981) and collection of poems *Mangiarmi pure* (1978). To this purpose, I engage with two conceptions of desire within the western philosophical tradition. Firstly, examining the development of the metaphor of cannibalism or ‘eros fagico’, I argue that Maraini avoids the ontologization of the notion of desire considered as a lack and thus disengages it from its historical association with the denigration of the female other. Secondly, conceiving desire as a force of production, relational and creative, I explore a particular use of metaphors in the novel which leads to bodily transformations or metamorphosis, without, however, reaching the subject’s imperceptibility through progressive identification. The co-presence and re-elaboration of two, apparently incompatible, theories of desire underline female same-sex desire’s potential to be thought and actualized as a lack *and* a production, its tendency to annihilate and being annihilated as well as its creative impulses. As a result, Dacia Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina* and *Mangiarmi pure* complicate and destabilize the fixity of representational categories, expanding discourses on lesbianism and lesbian desire. Indeed, the convolution of negative and positive dilates the domain of desire and multiplies its possibilities, carving out a «narrative space in which women might desire differently» (Ross 2015, 16), beyond the heterosexual norm and in diverse ways, *who* and *how* they please.

Introduction

In her introduction to *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle reveals a pervasive pattern that tends to miss or ignore the lesbian, making her invisible to culture itself. She compares western writing to a «kind of derealization machine: insert the lesbian and watch her disappear» (CASTLE 1993, 6). In a countermovement which aims at bringing the representation of female same-sex desire to the foreground, this article stems from Elizabeth Grosz's concern about «what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in, what kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies, and to what effects?» (GROSZ 1995, 184). Notwithstanding that Dacia Maraini's literary production has been carefully analyzed far and wide, I believe this article may contribute to spelling out (one of the possible) articulation(s) of the lesbian specificity, especially concerning the novel *Lettere a Marina*. Published in 1981, «a watershed year for Italian lesbians in terms of political organization and public visibility» (BALLARO 1996, 178)¹, the novel consists of a series of 78 unsent letters that Bianca writes to Marina, her former lover, once their relationship has come to an end. Even though Bianca starts writing with the intention of interpreting her involvement with Marina, she quickly feels the urge to delve more deeply into her own past. In order to substantiate various observations I put forward concerning the *Lettere*, I will also examine Maraini's collection of poems *Mangiarmi pure* which, published in 1978 (three years before the novel), constituted, I argue, a proving ground for several themes expressed and expanded in the novel.

Tracking the diverse articulations of female same-sex desire I identified in the novel, the article is structured in two main parts, which correspond to two different conceptions of desire within the western tradition. On the one hand, I draw on philosophical theories that conceive desire as a lack, an absence, or a hole, as inherited from Plato, Hegel, and the psychoanalytic tradition. In this regard, I examine what has been defined as «eros fagico» (MARAINI 1979) or anthropophagic erotism, namely a declension of the erotic attraction that entails a push to absorb the others by, figuratively or not, devouring them. On the other hand, I consider a subordinated tradition within the western thought

that can be dated to the works of Spinoza and has been expanded upon by Deleuze and Guattari, and which deems desire as a force of production, creative and relational. Within this framework, I especially address the first-person narrative voice's assembly of metaphors, which eventually leads to metamorphic transformations of the bodies involved. My primary interest here is not to undertake a systematic comparison of these theories or to assess and valorize one approach over another to understanding lesbian desire. Rather, I aim to critically evaluate all the discourses and mechanisms I have identified that enable the «lesbian machine» (GROSZ 1995, 184) within the novel to function the way it does. Moreover, even though the female same-sex desire does not exhaust the representation of desire dynamics in the *Lettere*, which span widely and embrace a nuanced range of possibilities, my analysis delves mainly into this declension of desire, given the preeminent position it occupies in the narrative.²

The Lack of Desire: Cannibalistic Impulses and the Pitfalls of Ontologization
The Ontology of Lack

The first model of desire I examine is based on what Elizabeth Grosz has defined as the «ontology of lack» (GROSZ 1995, 175), which, she argues, has been dominant in western thought since antiquity. In this understanding, desire is conceived as a lack, an absence, or a hole, which seeks fulfilment, and it is characterized as «doomed to consumption, incorporation, dissatisfaction, destruction of the object» (ibid. 179). This tradition commences with Plato, is expanded upon by Hegel, and is expressed most recently in psychoanalysis, with Freud and Lacan. As Grosz has pointed out, this model has traditionally been both sexualized and heterosexualized (ibid. 177-178). The contrast between substance (presence) and lack (absence) has been historically coded in terms of the binary opposition between male and female, becoming especially problematic for feminists. For these reasons, Grosz continues, this tradition must be «thoroughly overhauled if it is to be capable of accommodating women's desires and those [...] that specify and distinguish lesbianism» (ibid. 176). Eventually, despite various explorations aiming at reframing the terms traditionally associated with desire as lack,³ Grosz asserts that we must

abandon this model and, instead, experiment with alternative ways of understanding desire altogether.

However, in her *Rethinking Desire: The Ontology Of Lack And The Edible Other*, a slightly more recent contribution, Michelle Mawhinney discerns the very diverse implications of the ontology of lack and the notion of lack itself, and urges not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather than rejecting the conception of desire thought in terms of lack altogether, Mawhinney emphasizes the «contingent nature», the «historical rather than inevitable status» of the association of lack and negativity with the denigration of the other in western philosophy and cultural practice (MAWHINNEY 1998, 148). She contends it was precisely the *ontologization* of lack that led to the general process of 'othering' that, in turn, has *historically* structured desire around a singular signifier, the phallus, and has ultimately generated the binary and heterosexist model of presence and absence. In the following, I examine how Maraini has approached the concept of desire as a lack while avoiding its ontologization, that is, avoiding imposing a teleological closure on the system, for «invoking this final closure and unity is effectively an act of violence, of assimilation, in which difference is *absorbed*, defined only in relation to the singular logic of Spirit» (ibid. 149). As everything is incorporated into this logic, the specific 'otherness' of the other is not recognized — or rather, it is measured as 'other' only in relation to the self.

Food and Sex

In order to clarify the functioning of the concept of desire as a lack and successively disclose its re-elaboration in Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*, I would like to refer to Maggie Kilgour's examination of the relation between inside and outside, which, according to Jacques Derrida, conceptualizes all the antitheses and thus constitutes the foundation of all binary oppositions (DERRIDA 1981, 103). The instance in which this antithesis materializes the most fiercely is that of bodily experience. What is 'inside' one's own body is perceived as a coherent structure that can be defined against what lies 'outside' the self. Furthermore, the inside usually appears as the superior, central and good, while the outside is considered secondary, extraneous and ultimately threatening. However,

albeit its apparent firmness, the binarism could not be more unstable. The body does not constitute an autonomous system, but it is continuously impelled to the act of incorporation, in which an external object is taken inside another, aiming at the preservation of the latter. In this view, the sense of incompleteness and the recognition of the non-autonomy of the body are what trigger incorporation, meaning that the lack is precisely what generates the desire to fulfil. Therefore, the relation between inside and outside comprises «a delicate balance of simultaneous identification and separation» (KILGOUR 1990, 4), insofar as the subject must carefully select what objects are akin to the self and thus proper to incorporation, while the function of incorporation is ambivalent: it depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside, inasmuch its very purpose is to maintain the bodily boundaries, but in the act itself that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it strives to produce (ivi).

Undoubtedly, eating represents the most basic mode of incorporation, in whose economy 'good' is equated with what is edible, and 'bad' with what is poisonous. A less totalizing but still bodily image for incorporation is that of sexual intercourse, during which two bodies become one, although the union is temporary and precarious. In Maraini's *Mangiarmi pure* and *Lettere a Marina*, the domains of food and sexuality are closely intertwined by the means of the metaphor of cannibalism, which makes the sexual or amorous partner, namely the object of desire, edible. In Maraini's collection of poems *Mangiarmi pure*, food is meticulously mentioned, accompanying the first-person narrative voice's dispositions and her encounters with other characters: «il caffelatte» (MARAINI 1978, 4), «pane e salsiccia» (ibid. 4), «un melone» (ibid. 14), «carne al limone» (ibid. 15), «una mozzarella» (ibid. 34), «un biscotto all'anice» (ivi), «un tramezzino sbocconcellato» (ibid. 65), «carciofi fritti» (ibid. 66), «ciliegie» (ibid. 73). The novel *Lettere a Marina* is teeming with references to concrete food as well: what Bianca cooks for lunch or dinner, what she buys at the local market, what she remembers someone prepared during a special occasion many years before or what she used to eat in the company of Marina or others.⁴ Besides, the reader is continuously informed on Bianca's physical condition with regard to food: whether she is hungry or satisfied, whether she actually

wants to eat or forces herself to do so for she is feeling weak, or if she skips a meal altogether. The semantics pertinent to the realm of food is extended to that of sexuality through the use of verbs such as 'mangiare', 'divorare', 'ingoiare', 'succhiare' and 'ingurgitare' that relinquish the food as their proper object and substitute it with the 'prey' of amorous or sexual desire. Bianca recalls the first meeting with Marina quite literally in these terms: «Tu stavi zitta. Mi guatavi. È la parola giusta mi puntavi gli occhi addosso come per capire se ero commestibile» (MARAINI 1981, 30).

*Non mi dire che le donne sono buone*⁵

Nonetheless, sexual intercourse does not permit complete incorporation of the object of desire for its temporal, thus flawed, nature. The dissatisfaction which sprung from this setback may lead to an intensification of the desire up to where it mutates into aggression (KILGOUR 1990, 8). At an extreme level of intensity, the erotic and the aggressive sides of incorporation cannot be differentiated, making it ambitious to distinguish the moment in which «the desire for consummation turns into the desire for consumption» (ivi). Aggressivity and the violence of which women are capable of are recurring themes in Maraini's production, and the works under consideration are no exception. In *Mangiarmi pure*, women are defined as «feroci» (MARAINI 1978, 43) and women's body is depicted as «fatto di sangue di impulsi di ira» (ibid. 22). Hence, the first-person narrative voice demands to abandon the commonplace according to which women «sono naturalmente buone e candide e affiatate» (ibid. 43), irreconcilable with destructive inclinations.⁶ Although less explicitly, the question of women's violence is further elaborated in *Lettere a Marina*, affecting closely Bianca and Marina's relationship. By association of thoughts, Bianca juxtaposes the «ombre inquietanti» (MARAINI 1981, 30) she starts registering in Marina's behavior to ferocious eels, which can bite and possess «una bocca grande e robusta piena di denti» (ivi). From the first letters, Bianca recalls the violence within Marina's eyes: «una volontà delicata e ritrosa allegrissima di possesso» (ibid. 11). More plainly, Bianca affirms she fears Marina's violence she has many times experienced, for instance when Marina shoved her because she had had a conversation with an attractive woman;

during sexual intercourse: «Mi tiri via i vestiti ti impossessi di me con una violenza da mozzare il fiato» (ibid. 14); or when Marina destroyed the portrait Fiammetta made of Bianca: «Me l'hai buttato nell'ingresso e te ne sei andata senza una parola. Mi volevi ferita cancellata. Era un gesto arcaico feroce. [...] Il tuo era un gesto di morte» (ibid. 77-78). On few occasions, the desire to incorporate the other is envisaged to stretch to such an extent that the metaphor of amorous cannibalism disappears altogether, leaving behind only its polarized inclination to annihilate and thus possess the other permanently, as Bianca specifies: «L'amore troppo furioso può trasformarsi in un languido desiderio di assassinio» (ibid. 130). This tendency is exemplified both in the poems: «tu avresti voluto strozzarmi / per possedermi meglio» (MARAINI 1978, 77); and in the novel.

Quante volte hai tentato di uccidermi con gli aghi col coltello con il cucchiaino con un chiodo. Mi avresti straziata lo so e poi lasciata dissanguare carezzandomi le tempie mentre la mia vita scorreva via sulla tua gonna sulle tue scarpe. [...] Mi avresti composta e sepolta dentro uno dei vasi del tuo terrazzo accanto al basilico alla genziana al pisello selvatico alla begonia alla violacciocca (Maraini 1981, 172).

Longing Communion, Dreading Regression

If, on the one pole of the spectrum, the desire to annihilate the other emerges, on the other, the pleasure of subtraction or dissolution within someone else can be identified. Occasionally, the latter materializes in the novel as a counterforce to the other's desire to incorporate, in an almost spiteful display: «Il piacere della sottrazione quando sono con te ecco conosco questo piacere: la gioia di scartare mutilare per lasciarti a mani vuote» (MARAINI 1981, 46). More often, however, the incorporation is carried out in the interest of the part that is incorporated, a desire to fill the lack of the other that, in return, would fill one's own. However, this does not come without latent anxiety. On the one hand, a desire for the most intimate possible identification with the other, which expands up to include the idea of the return to «a communion with an original source and a primal identification» (KILGOUR 1990, 12). On the other, the same idea is «demonized as regression through the loss of human and individual identity» (ivi).

Bianca reveals this double-faced feeling while recalling her childhood and adolescence. As a child, she used to confuse the boundaries of her body with those of the world: «Mi credevo un cane una dalia o una lucertola» (MARAINI 1981, 119), experiencing it as a joyful adventure while, at the same time, remembering her vulnerability and fear. Moreover, writing about the years spent in a Catholic boarding school⁷, she recalls the bizarre attachment she had to a statue of the Virgin Mary, which, for her, coincided to «la grandezza stessa del cosmo» (ibid. 105). Her love (ivi) for the statue coincided with a moment of «dissoluzione interna» (ivi), when Bianca was aiming at disappearance, annulment and, ultimately, not being: «Andavo da lei per consolarmi come si va alla notte per farsi inghiottire annullare. [...] Io mi toglievo i bocconi dalle labbra per portarli a lei. Volevo nutrirla per placarla saziarla perché non mi divorasse pur desiderando profondamente essere divorata da lei» (ibid. 106). Conversely, the anxiety caused by the same desire of dissolution is exemplified by a recurrent dream in which the loss of documents, and thus symbolically of personal identity, is compared to bodily mutilation and impairment: «Improvvisamente mi accorgevo che qualcuno mi aveva rubato la borsa. Ero terrorizzata. [...] perdevo il passaporto o la patente e mi disperavo come se mi fossi rotta una gamba» (ibid. 118).

We Are Different, We Are the Same

Once sexuality is introduced in the equation, the simultaneous presence of the desire for communion and the fear of regression is complicated by Bianca's perception of Marina, and especially Marina's body, as expression, at the same time, of difference and sameness. Marina is different from Bianca because of her physical appearance, her attitude towards her own body and her personality.⁸ Difference is seen as a reason for attraction,⁹ but the possibility to actually love what is different is questioned: «Ci rincorriamo perché diverse e vogliamo anche il nostro uguale. Anzi vogliamo soprattutto il nostro uguale [...] che non riusciamo a incontrare in noi assieme per la prima iniziale diversità che credo permettimi affascinari entrambi» (MARAINI 1981, 86). However, Marina is also the same for the very fact that she possesses a woman's body, and thus it does not come unexpectedly that Marina's genitals reveal to be the site of

greatest ambiguity for Bianca. On the one hand, the perpetuation of the sexual act reveals the desire for incorporation and, thus, communion. On the other, Bianca's fear, which arises only and every time she comes face to face to Marina's sex, becomes an obsessive motif in the text (ibid. 32-34, 47, 133). As a result, Bianca's attitude towards her lover's body is very much ambivalent: «Il tuo corpo che mi attira e mi respinge mi seduce e mi annoia e a volte ho desiderato carezzare fino a sciogliermi di delizia a volte ho desiderato fare a pezzi» (ibid. 117). Eventually, Bianca affirms that she feels destined to choose men «per una tendenza malefica colpevole all'abbraccio con l'altro da sé il diverso» (ibid. 115). However, Bianca's declaration does not imply that Marina's ambivalence is pacified. Conversely, the ambiguity remains,¹⁰ as does Bianca and Marina's desire for each other.

Keep It Open

According to Hegel, reality is fundamentally relational and mediated, and depends on the notion of lack: it is a dynamic process, rather than substance, motivated by the recognition that its finite elements are not complete in themselves (HEGEL 1991, 84-88). In the philosopher's understanding of subjectivity, desire is precisely what constitutes the 'I', or self-consciousness itself, and is thus what motivates social and historical developments (HEGEL 1967, 225). In fact, as an absence or emptiness, desire «disquiets and unsettles the subject, requiring it to *act*» (KOJEVE 1969, 3): the subject «receives real positive content only through the destruction, assimilation, or transformation of the object» (MAWHINNEY 1998, 149). Furthermore, in the philosopher's view, the desire of another self-consciousness, «the struggle for *recognition*» (ivi), is the only appropriate object of one's own desire, for it both satisfies desire and perpetuates it: the desire for recognition is not a present 'thing' that can be obtained once and for all. The dialectical process is thus potentially infinite and open-ended (HEGEL 1967, 228-267). However, Hegel does theorize that there will be an end to this process, an ultimate reconciliation or synthesis of self and other, subject and object, when the Absolute Spirit is realized in the world (ibid. 138). Assuredly, this reconciliation or synthesis can be understood as an ontologization, an assigning of 'being' or 'presence' to the interconnected

concepts of subjectivity and desire (MAWHINNEY 1998, 149), causing the crystallization of their inherent fluidity and volatility and their containment according to some pre-given system, purpose or end. By preserving the ambivalence and ambiguity, Maraini avoids putting a closure to the dialectical process generated by desire, thus avoiding its ontologization.

«*Va bene, mangiami pure*»

The refusal of the ontologization destabilizes and disengages several problematic conceptions associated to the notion of desire as a lack. Firstly, the notion of authentic and proper selfhood is questioned. This has been historically expressed in binary terms of presence and absence: «the paradigmatic subject of Western modernity is the self which needs to be self-identical» (MAWHINNEY 1998, 147) in order to protect its own subjective 'truth'. To effectively do so, the subject must posit and maintain an antagonistic other, namely everything which cannot be reduced to its own logic. Conversely, in *Lettere a Marina*, Bianca expresses many times her discomfort with the imposition of having to be self-identical: «Chissà perché in certi momenti mi prende una voglia così furibonda di non essere io. [...] Tutto fuorché quella persona così nota a me stessa e così prevedibile che mi porto appresso da troppi anni» (MARAINI 1981, 45).¹¹ Consequently, Bianca tends to blur the borders of her body, of her self, for instance by sliding, uninvited, into someone else's body (ibid. 41-42).

Secondly, by refusing the ontologized schemes of thought, namely the sexualization and heterosexualization historically associated with the notion of desire as lack, Maraini carves out a narrative space for representing active¹² female same-sex desire, which does not remain in fantasy but finds its actualizations. Besides, even though Marina could be seen as occupying a rather dominant position in the relationship, the inconsistencies implied in this assumption can be easily traced. Both Bianca and Marina are, in fact, active subjects in their relationship, inasmuch as they both actively engage in the attempt to seduce the other (ibid. 6, 12, 13, 31-32, 135) as well as behave violently, in thoughts or acts, towards the other,¹³ in order to build «una tensione violenta di torture e di delizie» (ibid. 173). Furthermore, the

incorporated part exercises her agency insofar as it *gives consent* to the other's desire to eat: «va bene, mangiami pure», «va bene strappami pure le viscere» (MARAINI 1978, 3). Occasionally, the act of incorporation is explicitly reciprocal: «forse ci mangeremo a vicenda» (ibid. 39), «e se smettessimo di mangiarci la lingua, / di farci i nodi alle viscere?» (ibid. 49). As a result, it becomes impossible to distinguish who is active and who is passive, who eats and who is eaten, or at least to determine whose body is the one engendered by the process of incorporation. This, I argue, is the ultimate assertion of a desire that rejects the process of othering, avoiding the definitive establishment of power and value hierarchies. Desire remains volatile and thus mutable in its expressions and modes, and it assumes different connotations especially from the moment in which Bianca runs away and starts writing letters to Marina.

The Metamorphosis Which Desire Undergoes and Provokes: Bodies Assembled, Bodies Expanded

An Unprivileged History

The mechanisms of desire examined up to this point are associated with events that occurred in the past. When Bianca retreats from Rome to the Southern seaside town of T. (MARAINI 1981, 100), desire, and especially Bianca's desire for Marina, undergoes a progressive transformation in its dynamics. In order to comprehend its unfolding and effects, it is more fruitful, I suggest, to modify the philosophical framework I have been employing so far, and to substitute it with a secondary, less privileged history of the conception of desire and of corporeality that begins with Spinoza, and is further developed by Nietzsche, Foucault, and especially Deleuze and Guattari. According to this conception, desire is to be interpreted as a productive phenomenon of bodily surfaces, «the action that creates things, makes alliances, and forges interactions» (GROSZ 1995, 179), not just «feeling or affect» but also «doing and making» (ibid. 180). It is conceived as an «actualization», whose aim is not an object but only «its own self-expansion» (GROSZ 1994, 164). Being desire «nomadic, unpredictable, and creative» (MAWHINNEY 1998, 152), it does not aspire to unity and oneness, but provides «provisional linkages between “elements, fragments, flows”» (ibid. 153). As a consequence, «[p]resence and absence are thus replaced with

a notion of “pure” and open-ended “becoming”» (ivi). As Grosz argues, this fundamentally non-hierarchical approach avoids the problems of sexual polarization and the posing of the woman as the ‘other’ of the dichotomy since it rejects «a single explanatory logic or exemplary paradigm» (MAWHINNEY 1998, 153) and no particular difference can be assigned the status of the denigrated other.

Bodies into Pieces

It has been said that Maraini writes against «the representation of women as monstrous site of mutilation, powerless in the world, ‘chopped to pieces,’ and severed from language and its institutions» (DIACONESCU-BLUMENFELD 2000, 13). In this second section, I would like to use precisely this image of fragmentation, of being ‘into pieces’, but turning it upside down in the attempt to disengage it from grotesque and devalorizing connotations. According to this second conceptualization of desire, entities and bodies are no longer seen as unified or unifiable organisms, centered either physiologically or psychologically; they are, rather, elements or fragments of «a series of desiring machines» (GROSZ 1994, 168-169). The body must be imagined as a corporation of its members, composed of elements, parts, organs, bits of bodies. Furthermore, it is the coming together of two surfaces that produces «a tracing that imbues eros or libido to both of them» (GROSZ 1995, 182). For this reason, there is not «a predesignated erotogenic zone, a site always ready and able to function as erotic» (ivi), but, instead, all surfaces may function as erotic.

At this point, the two modes of desire may seem in opposition to each other or even mutually exclusive, and they certainly are to some extent. Nonetheless, they occasionally just as certainly move on common ground. Firstly, the cannibalistic imagery associated to the conception of desire as a lack contributes to the breakdown of the subject into assimilable, ‘edible’ parts, and operates a blurring of bodily borders, which, I argue, is functional for the development of the second mode of desire. And secondly, they are exposed to a similar danger. As underlined, the conception of desire as a lack implies an anxiety for regression, dissolution and loss of personal identity. Similarly, Grosz notes that Deleuze and Guattari have been criticized by feminists for

appropriating feminist theory and politics while neutralizing women's sexual specificity (GROSZ 1994, 161-164). More in general, the Deleuzian desiring subject is able to establish connections with countless other subjects and objects, in a communal flow. However, the movement of desire through an increasing fragmentation may lead to imperceptibility and thus to complete dissolution, resulting in a monolithic final destination in which «all things are dissolved, and hence reduced to sameness» (MAWHINNEY 1998, 154). In addition, Mawhinney warns that, due to the complete elision of negativity and lack of this model of desire, an equally totalizing view or ontological closure may be imposed (MAWHINNEY 1998, 152).

In the following, I intend to explain how Maraini approaches this second model of desire, while avoiding the complete dissolution of the subject as its backlash. In *Lettere a Marina*, Bianca considers and relates to Marina's body as if it was composed of different pieces or parts: «ho scoperto il tuo corpo pezzetto per pezzetto con la gioia del sacrilegio» (MARAINI 1981, 32), «[her body is] di sotto terreno massiccio di sopra leggero fragile» (ibid. 116). As Morelli rightly notes, *Lettere a Marina* displays a strong interconnection between sexuality and textuality precisely through Marina's body, which is «a constitutive element of the text» (MORELLI 2015, 106).¹⁴ By the means of writing, Bianca breaks down and reassembles Marina's body, playfully combining its elements with 'external' ones taken from the animal,¹⁵ vegetable and inanimate realms, in a sensual exploration of the most diverse combinations. This effect is achieved by the use of metaphorical language.

Attempting Combinations: Metaphors and Metamorphoses

Many critics have underlined the subversive potential of the metaphor, defined as «a trespassing across boundary lines» (PARKER 1983, 44) or «a means [...] that subverts normal definitions of identity» (KILGOUR 1990, 14). In most cases, it entails an estrangement of the familiar, in which «a word is transferred from its original meaning and made identical to something alien to itself» (ibid. 12). In the 1950s, drawing on Ivon Richards's studies, Max Black elaborates what he called the interaction theory,¹⁶ unfolding the metaphor's ability to create new concepts or new perspectives on pre-existing concepts through the application

of models extraneous to them. According to Richards, «when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction» (RICHARDS 1936, 93). More specifically, Black indicates that speaking of metaphor means referring to a sentence or another expression in which some words are used metaphorically (focus), while the remainder is used non-metaphorically (frame) (BLACK 1954, 276). Focus and frame interact with each other, eventually producing an extension of meaning. Furthermore, according to Black, interaction-metaphors (BLACK 1954, 293) do not merely formulate already existing (and hidden) similarities, rather they *create* them (BLACK 1954, 285). The result is not a description of reality by allusions or substitutions, but rather the production of original cognitive material, new aspects of reality.

In *Lettere a Marina*, Bianca employs several metaphors and 'tries out' different pieces in combination with Marina's body: at times, these attempts do not fully convince her and therefore they can be found in the text only on few occasions: «drago furibondo» (MARAINI 1981, 19), «braccia che si fanno serpenti» (ibid. 13), «saggio barbagianni» (ibid. 14). However, other attempts of combination do fit particularly well in Bianca's mind, resulting in their iteration across the letters. For instance, the first thing Bianca notices about Marina is her fleshy toes: «Portavi i sandali avevi le dita dei piedi abbronzate. Che dita grassocce da bambina tozze e larghe come le foglie gonfie e spinose di un cactus ho pensato» (ibid. 12). This passage shows how the association 'piede-cactus' is born, initially configured as a similitude, which constitutes the previous and logically necessary step to produce the metaphor which elides the 'like'. According to Bianca, her unusual mental association may have been prompted by Marina's showing off her feet, offering them to the sight: «Strano che con te ho guardato prima i piedi che le mani. Forse perché quei tuoi piedi cactus li tenevi bene in vista sul tavolino» (ibid. 20). Proceeding in writing the letters, Bianca employs this metaphor repeatedly (ibid. 72, 114, 147, 154). Furthermore, it finds validation through successive discoveries (e.g. Marina's possession of «piante carnivore spinose» (ibid. 114)) and, more importantly, dreams: «stanotte ho sognato di toccarti un piede e di essermi punta. Proprio

come un cactus avevi delle spine così sottili e chiare da essere invisibili. Ma sulla pelle delle dita davano più dolore di un ago» (ibid. 118). The thorns are invisible but cause physical pain, even though only in dream. Eventually, Bianca's question «[s]ei spinosa tu?» (ivi), which follows the dream, produces, I argue, a sort of metamorphosis, in which the foot as cactus achieves visual and ontological stability, prompted by the blurring of borders between the real and the oneiric. The metamorphosis not only retrospectively modifies the writer's perception of Marina's body, but it also broadens Bianca's comprehension of Marina's personality as well as their relationship. Marina's «piedi cactus ben piantati per terra» (ibid. 114) are the expression of her firm and confident personality, of her self-love and her 'earthly' attachment to life and its pleasures.¹⁷ Besides, their relationship, defined as «spinoso amore» (ibid. 6), acquires a specificity or singularity which could only and uniquely stem from the encounter between Marina ('s body) and Bianca ('s mind). Simultaneously, it points to the difficulties the relationship had generated.¹⁸

Even though several instances of metamorphosis in the text could be mentioned, the one I examined more in depth is paradigmatic because it is not based on an anxiety of annulment,¹⁹ nor it allows any of the two elements to overcome the other. As an instance of the latter, Bianca recalls that when she was a child she used to confuse 'gelato' and 'ramarro': «Per me [...] erano la stessa cosa due stranezze verdi sguscianti e gelate» (ibid. 154). This would happen to the extent that she would say just 'ramarro' to refer to the ice-cream, erasing the latter through the former. Conversely, the foot and the cactus are always mentioned together: their images overlap while maintaining their respective wholeness.

Finally, *Lettere a Marina* displays desire and the desiring subjects as transforming and transformable entities. One thing transmutes into another, undergoes metamorphoses, becomes something else through its connections with something or someone outside. Characters, bodies and objects enter «into an arrangement, an assemblage of other fragments, other things, becoming bound up in some other production, forming part of a machine, [...] component[s] in a series of flows and breaks, of varying speeds and intensities» (GROSZ 1995, 184). In addition, Bianca's desire for Marina holds productive

outcomes. Firstly, Bianca's very act of writing constitutes a generative thrust, and the letters are thus the material product of the creation enabled by desire. And secondly, through recursive metaphorical interventions which eventually lead to metamorphic transformations, Bianca expands and thus enriches Marina's body. However, although Marina's body is thought in relational terms and undergoes transformations, it does not combine with *everything at disposal*. Only those metaphorical associations that Bianca deems to best match her former lover eventually stabilize. In this manner, Maraini eschews the threat this second model of desire entails, namely the complete reduction of differences into sameness through an increasing (metaphorical) move of identification. Ultimately, women's bodies and women's sexual specificity is preserved by the means of an explicit language which gracefully and plainly recounts the two women's experience, with no euphemisms, uneasiness, or omissions.

Conclusion Without Concluding

Published in 1978, *Mangiarsi pure* is concerned with several themes that are taken up and expanded in the novel — among which heterosexual and homosexual desire, as well as their intertwining. More significantly, similar patterns concerning the «circuits of exchange in which desire functions» (GROSZ 1995, 178) can be identified in the two works. One of those involves two women who find out they are not the only lover of the same man, who, in addition, is married. As a result of the revelation, the first-person narrative voice insists on meeting with the other woman and ends up being sexually attracted to her, declaring, in *Mangiarsi pure*, her frustration for the very presence of the man in the equation: «Ora ci siamo date la mano / è quello che voglio, donna con donna / senza quel corpo di maschio da cui io esco e tu entri» (MARAINI 1978, 17). In the novel, Bianca, Bruna and Marco (and Miriam, the wife) recreate this structure, while Bianca explicitly admits that she has always been attracted to the lovers of her lovers (MARAINI 1981, 154).²⁰ However, this desire, albeit active, remains in fantasy and unfulfilled: neither the first-person narrative voice commits herself to an amorous or sexual relationship with the «donna bruna» of the poem (MARAINI 1978, 13-20), nor Bianca gets to meet

with Bruna more than a couple of times. Just as the 'extra element,' the man, is removed from the premises, desire can find its actualization. It is no accident, I believe, that Marina resembles both Bruna and the «donna bruna» of the poem²¹, granting another chance of fulfilment to a desire that could not find enough satisfaction just from daring speaking its name. Desire, thus, transgresses the borders of one work, not being exhausted in the poems, and expands to produce the novel, generating continuity between the two.²²

This is just another indication, among those I have underlined in this article, of the transformative nature of desire, with its unpredictable, often ambivalent movements, its capacity to be thought and realized as a lack *and* a production, its tendency to annihilate and being annihilated as well as its creative impulses. As Maraini suggests, desire absorbs and releases, it eats and spits out enriching the inside and the outside: «è possibile ingoiare la terra / e poi sputarla come una seta viva?» (MARAINI 1978, 39). *Lettere a Marina* is precisely a reflection on the latter verses, and the answer I believe can be found in its very last pages, when, eventually, Bianca implicitly expresses her gratitude to Marina.²³ Therefore, I argue, the co-presence and re-elaboration of two, apparently incompatible, theories of desire in Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* complicate and destabilize the fixity of representational categories, expanding discourses on lesbianism and lesbian desire.

As Marilyn Farwell defines it, a «lesbian text» or «lesbian narrative» does not necessarily imply a story by lesbians about lesbians but rather identify «a plot that affirms a place for lesbian subjectivity, that narrative space where both lesbian characters, and other female characters, can be active, desiring agents» (FARWELL 1995, 157). The lesbian subject must be «written against narrative conventions» and can be seen to «invade» or «reorder crucial narrative elements» (FARWELL 1996, 15). Bianca and Marina gracefully invade the narrative space and remold its features according to their dispositions and needs. They reject prefabricated formulas for experiencing sexuality, love, and especially desire. By embracing the lack of desire without ontologizing it as well as employing the productive thrust of desire without being induced to the complete fragmentation of the subject, Maraini experiments with diverse modes of desire, preserving the tension between them. Cannibal impulses are

as necessary as they are inextricable from Bianca and Marina's relationship. Progressively, Bianca learns to mitigate those inclinations without, however, discrediting them. On the contrary, it is precisely thanks to those impulses that her desire acquires creative and productive components. This convolution of negative and positive dilates the domain of desire and multiplies its possibilities, creating a «narrative space in which women might desire differently» (Ross 2015, 16), that is, beyond the heterosexual norm and in diverse ways, *who* and *how* they please.

Notes

¹ The period 1980-81 witnessed the rise of lesbianism within the Italian culture as a visible phenomenon separate from its gay male counterpart, the emergence of national conferences on the lesbian issue as well as the birth of the CLI (*Collegamento Lesbiche Italiane*), first national Italian lesbian organization. See Paola BONO and Sandra KEMP, eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1991, pp. 165-166.

² In other words, I am not making any essentialist claim concerning Bianca and Marina's sexual orientation and identity. By reasons of space and interest, I narrowed my study to the diverse articulations and nuances that female same-sex desire assumes in the works under consideration, focusing on its processes and practices rather than on the classifications it may generate. For detailed studies on Bianca's (sexual) identity, see Beverly BALLARO, *Making the Lesbian Body: Writing and Desire in Dacia Maraini's Lettere a Marina*, in *Gendered Contexts: New Perspectives in Italian Cultural Studies*, eds. Laura Benedetti, Julia L. Hairston and Silvia M. Ross, New York, Peter Lang, 1996, pp. 177-87; Maria MORELLI, "Senza cacciarsi dentro un destino da etichetta": *The Body of Politics of Dacia Maraini*, in *Gendering Commitment: Re-Thinking Social and Ethical Engagement in Modern Italian Culture*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 93-111; and Gabriele TOMMASINA, *From Prostitution to Transsexuality: Gender Identity and Subversive Sexuality in Dacia Maraini*, «MLN», January 2002, pp. 241-56.

³ See Luce IRIGARAY, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Ithaca and New York, Cornell University Press, 1985; Luce IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Ithaca and New York, Cornell University Press, 1985; Judith BUTLER, *The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary*, in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 57-91; and Teresa DE LAURETIS, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.

⁴ «La crema di ricotta al sugo di pomodoro la pizza con le acciughe le uova sode per la torta il tritato di prezzemolo e basilico le mandorle tostate il frutto di melanzane sedani» (MARAINI 1981, 74); «capretto a scottadito patate e rosmarino vino rosso spumeggiante coniglio alla cacciatore dolce di ricotta e grano caffè e liquore» (ibid. 76).

⁵ The title of a poem included in the collection (MARAINI 1979, 43-44), which explicitly rejects the stereotypical association of women with kindness and generosity.

⁶ «ma siamo così feroci / nel morderci l'un l'altra il collo / mi succhi gli occhi come uova / mi frughi nel ventre con la mano ad artiglio / mi torci la lingua / mi bruci le punte delle dita con l'accendino / [...] strappi un pezzo di pane coi denti / non mi dire più che la violenza non ci appartiene» (MARAINI 1978, 43-44).

⁷ Referring to the same period, Bianca mentions that «[o]gni contatto orale era considerato pericoloso» (MARAINI 1981, 62) and thus forbidden, implicitly pointing to the mouth as the primary physical as well as symbolical means of incorporation.

⁸ Marina's skin and hair are dark, and the adjective 'bruno' is used to refer to many parts of her body which, in addition, is robust and strong. She is «capricciosamente innamorata di [sé]»

(MARAINI 1981, 20), extrovert and impulsive. Conversely, Bianca is pale, she used to have freckles (ibid. 184), her hair is blond, and she depicts herself as a child as «stralunata magra e impaurita» (ibid. 186).

⁹ «Il guaio è che Giorgia e io ci assomigliamo troppo per essere attratte l'una dall'altra. Non c'è curiosità nella nostra amicizia. Tu invece hai il potere di sorprendermi ogni momento. Non finirò mai di conoscerti e questo mi rende curiosa. Ho voglia di frugare dentro di te con occhi sottomarini» (MARAINI 1981, 108).

¹⁰ This is accentuated by the fact that the male and the female bodies are described in almost identical terms: «[The male body] [e]ra l'altro da me il diverso e conteneva tutto il mistero dell'universo» (MARAINI 1981, 134); «Il tuo corpo [Marina's] chiuso dentro la vestaglia marocchina era un mistero che dovevo assolutamente scoprire» (ibid. 32); «Piano piano divaricavi le gambe e io potevo dovevo guardare dentro di te [...] entrare a *curiosare*» (ibid. 135, my italics).

¹¹ See also: «È troppo profondo l'orrore che mi ha preso quando — sei anni forse — ho leccato la mia immagine nello specchio e mi sono vista a un pelo da me così disponibile vera e mutilata odiosa nella mia definita finitezza senza misteri guerre scoperte che mi sono ritratta sconvolta» (MARAINI 1981, 133).

¹² Referring back to psychoanalytical models, the most notable being Freud's, we see that desire has been considered «inherently masculine» (GROSZ 1995, 176), being conceived as an activity, and activity being correlated exclusively with the masculine. The so-called normal response on the part of the woman is to give up «the (masculine, phallic, anacitic) desire to love» (ibid. 178) and to substitute it with «the passive aim of being loved and desired» (ivi). As a result, in this system, the notion of female desire is self-contradictory. Thus, Maraini's subversive representation of *active* lesbian desire is crucial in opposing these kinds of conceptions.

¹³ For instances in which Bianca confesses her violent impulses towards Marina see MARAINI 1981, pp. 10, 22, 173.

¹⁴ This interconnection between body and text is identifiable in the manipulated syntax as well. Being the character of Marina often associated with marine images (MARAINI 1981, 29-30, 31, 40), she acquires the quality of fluidity, which is paralleled in the fluidity of the narrative rhythm, achieved through a breaking of conventional syntax (MORELLI 2015, 106).

¹⁵ «Il tuo corpo mezzo gabbiano e mezzo cinghiale mezzo farfalla e mezzo topo» (MARAINI 1981, 116).

¹⁶ Max Black's interactive theory represents the very moment of the modern transformation of the concept of metaphor, outlining the evolution from theories defined as substitutive or comparative to new cognitive conceptions.

¹⁷ Bianca talks about Marina in these terms: «Quel tuo modo ellittico smodato di stare al mondo quel tuo continuo sotterrarti con le tue mani per poi risorgere più viva e splendente. Una stella mattutina come la si guarda con occhi gonfi prima di stracciare un'altra giornata di beghe» (MARAINI 1981, 71).

¹⁸ Another metamorphosis that acquires stability across the letters is Marina's «capelli coperta» (MARAINI 1981, 114, 147), expanded up to include several entities «capelli coperta tenda casco paravento saracinesca tappeto» (ibid. 114) but which, however, has fewer interesting developments. It can also be mentioned Marina's stubbornness, which is often compared to that of a mule (ibid. 72).

¹⁹ See, as an example, Bianca's anxiety of mutating in microscopic entities: «Tu non sei una persona dice la voce tremenda che si tramanda di madre in figlia tu sei una mollichella di pane sei un filo d'erba sei una cannuccia succhiata sei una formica sbattuta dal vento sei un guscio di noce sei una formica che risale faticosamente i fianchi di quello che tu credi un monte ed è solo una pietruzza sei un seme di melone sei un uccellino caduto dal nido» (MARAINI 1981, 118-119).

²⁰ «Le mani di Marco su quelle ginocchia. E io ci avrei appoggiato le mie sopra. Avevo una voglia spasmodica di aprirle a forza quelle ginocchia ed entrarle dentro con la testa cacciarmi nel suo ventre facendomi cullare dal buio» (MARAINI 1981, 67).

²¹ In the poem, as in the novel, there is a contrast between the 'darkness' of the lover and the 'whiteness' of the protagonist: «alta bruna», «la pelle scura e gli occhi arditi», «la sua testa nera di pantera», «le ginocchia scure e ruvide», «le tue gambe scure», «ginocchia ombrose», «capelli neri»; «la mia faccia bianca»; «io con le mie ginocchia bionde e bianche»; «ma ora siamo qui (una bianca e una nera)» (MARAINI 1979, 13-20).

²² In order to further underline the continuity between the two works, consider also the final poems *ho parlato col mio amore* (MARAINI 1979, 74-75) and *di una lettera* (ibid. 77-79). The

former uses adjectives associated to the marine world to refer to the (male) lover as well as the expression 'il mio amore', the nickname Marina uses for Bianca. Second to last poem of the collection, *di una lettera*, referring again to a male lover, mentions «[...] una lettera che non ti ho / mai scritto [...]», recalling the epistolary structure of the novel *Lettere a Marina*.

²³ «Mi piacerebbe parlarti. Vorrei sentire la tua voce. Ma il telefono resta lì a portata di mano inerte e muto. Mi piacerebbe di più vederti. Ma senza fare lo sforzo di cercarti. Chiudo gli occhi e penso di sentirti arrivare. Apri la porta entri. Porti una delle tue camicie da Pulcinella larga scivolosa una gonna di seta blu e i sandali francescani. I capelli neri a coperta ti arrivano fino alla vita. Vieni vicina al letto. Mi guardi beffarda. Ti chini. Mi sfiori le labbra. E io apro gli occhi. E la casa d'incanto riprende a funzionare a vivere e io ho di nuovo voglia di giocare» (MARAINI 1981, 194-195).

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