

## Surviving melancholy and mourning

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# SURVIVING MELANCHOLY AND MOURNING: A QUEER POLITICS OF DAMAGE IN ITALIAN LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF SAME-SEX PARENTING<sup>1</sup>

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## *abstract*

*While family forms are ever more diverse, there are few critical analyses of the ways in which LGBTQ families have been represented in fiction. This article explores recent Italian novels by Cristiana Alicata, Melania Mazzucco and Chiara Francini that depict lesbian and gay parents and their children. In all these novels at least one gay or lesbian parent dies. Drawing on Judith Butler's work on mourning and melancholia, I problematize the persistent spectre of grief and loss attached to gay and lesbian parenting. However, reflections by Heather Love also prompt me to explore what Love calls a "politics of damage", or an attempt to see past the looming threat of inevitable homosexual doom towards the queer, subversive elements of these narratives, which question normative conceptions of the family and open up space to reflect on 'alternative' parental models.*

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## *keywords*

*same-sex parenting, queer politics of damage, Italy*

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**1. Introduction** Cultural representation of sexual minorities in general, and LGBTQ families in particular, can play a crucial role in how these phenomena are understood and the status they have. As scholars such as Stuart Hall have argued, the meaning that we attribute to socio-cultural phenomena is generated at least in part through representation, indicating that cultural texts can play a significant role in shaping cultural discourses on and attitudes towards the world around us (Hall, 1997, p. 5). In a similar vein, Jeffrey Weeks and Judith Butler have suggested that narratives and representation are vital to our sense of self, to our developing identities and our well-being: Butler goes as far as to argue that the liveability of our lives depends in part on cultural representation, and cultural intelligibility more broadly (Weeks, 2003; Butler, 2005, p. 43). It is my contention that cultural texts that represent LGBTQ families have the potential to make important interventions in ongoing socio-cultural and political debates about human rights issues: they may reinforce problematic stereotypes, or disseminate a more progressive message, for example by enhancing empathy in readers, thereby dissipating homophobic hostility (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013). Moreover, research in the UK has shown that LGBT parents may feel unrepresented in mainstream cultural discourse. While they often seek to engage closely with cultural representation to develop their sense of self they frequently feel alienated by what they find (Reed, 2018). Therefore a critical engagement with these texts is a vital step towards improving our understanding of the messages circulating in culture. While there are many sociological studies of the experiences of LGBTQ families, there are few critical analyses of the ways in which they have been represented in fiction. Consequently our understanding of the discourses circulating in culture is radically incomplete. In particular, there is almost no scholarship on the representations of LGBTQ families in cultural texts in languages other than English. With this in mind, this article begins to address the gap in scholarship on the cultural representation of LGBTQ families, and seeks to push discussion beyond the current focus, which is on children's books and English-language novels. Specifically, my discussion centres on Italy—a country that is still today pervaded by the myth of the heteronormative family, despite the fact that family structures have been diversifying for several decades (Saraceno, 2004). I analyse a series of recent Italian novels that depict lesbian and gay male parents and their children, since, in my research on the topic to date, these are the non-heterosexual family forms that occur most frequently in Italian literature.<sup>1</sup>

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1 There are several other Italian cultural texts that discuss queer families: these include Goliarda Sapienza's novel

The significance of these texts is compounded by recent and ongoing heated political and media debates about same-sex parents in Italy, largely motivated by problematic, normative anxieties about the well-being of the children of such couples, as well as by new legislation on civil unions and anxieties about surrogacy. Thus these novels, which emerge from a tense and complex discursive context, can be read as speaking to and about the socio-cultural and political status of gay and lesbian parents, and their children, in Italy.

The novels I discuss are: Cristiana Alicata's *Quattro* (Four, 2006), and *Verrai a trovarmi d'inverno* (You Will Come to See Me in the Winter, 2011); Melania Mazzucco's *Sei come sei* (You Are as You Are, 2013); Chiara Francini's *Non parlare con la bocca piena* (Don't Talk with your Mouth Full, 2017) and *Mia madre non lo deve sapere* (My Mother Mustn't Find Out, 2018).<sup>2</sup> As yet, there are no scholarly studies of these works. I note how in all these novels at least one gay or lesbian parent dies. Drawing on Butler's work on mourning and melancholia, I problematize the persistent spectre of grief and loss attached to gay and lesbian parenting, which seems to close down any more progressive vision of a future in which such family forms might flourish. However, reflections by Heather Love also prompt me to explore what Love calls a 'politics of damage': starting from the premise that "modern homosexual identity is formed out of or in relation to the experience of social damage", she suggests that making this damage visible, and critiquing it, opens up new existential pathways (Love, 2007, p. 29). In relation to these novels, we might understand this politics of damage as an attempt to see past the looming threat of inevitable homosexual doom towards the queer, subversive elements of cultural narratives, which question normative conceptions of the family and open up space to reflect on 'alternative' parental models. I argue that traces of this queerer, more combative perspective can be seen in two of the novels in particular: Mazzucco's *Sei come sei* and Alicata's *Verrai a trovarmi d'inverno*. Moreover, I discuss how, significantly, these narratives give space to the children of lesbian and gay parents, whose voices have been largely missing from cultural and political debates, partly due to their age. As such, these fictions supplement political and broader cultural debates in striking ways.

Before turning to the novels, I offer a brief overview of recent scholarship on LGBTQ families and of the socio-political and legal context for same-sex families in Italy.

Many sociological studies have evaluated LGBTQ families in the UK, US and some European countries, largely with a focus on same-sex, monogamous, and now married, or legally partnered parents.<sup>3</sup> Such studies have allayed problematic homophobic concerns that the children of same-sex parents will identify as gay, and confirmed that they may actually be more open-minded than their peers with heterosexual parents (Schumm, 2016, p. 673). Some scholars have suggested that it is no longer helpful to ask whether LGBTQ families are 'different', but rather to think about how, why and to what effect heteronormative society constructs non-normative families as 'different' (Berkowitz, 2009).

In a related vein, work on queer kinship has explored how the normative family form has been

## 2. Between Queer Parenting and Homonormativity: The Kids are Alright, but What About the Parents?

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*L'arte della gioia* (The Art of Joy, 1998), in which the bisexual protagonist Modesta creates a vibrant and transgressive family of choice; Egon Botteggi's autobiographical theatrical monologue *Mi chiamo Egon* [My name is Egon], which narrativizes his journey as a transman and parent; Ferzàn Ozpetek's film *Le fate ignoranti* (His Secret Life, 2001), in which a widowed heterosexual woman encounters her late husband's queer family of choice. While these all merit critical attention, they are all quite distinct. I have selected novels that share a focus on the challenges facing same-sex parents in a heteronormative society, and the ways in which their children may respond.

2 All translations are mine.

3 Schumm, 2016 provides a detailed review of sociological studies that have explored the past few decades. See also, for example, Biblarz and Stacey, 2019, Park, 2013.

challenged by those who seek alternative models for intimate relationships, ‘families of choice’ (Weston, 1991), and who reclaim “the right to define significant relationships and decide who matters and counts as family”, and “the right [of an individual] to create family forms that fit her or his needs to realize the human potential for love in non oppressive relationships” (Goss, 1997, p. 19). A crucial question that has emerged in recent years is the degree to which these new family forms are creatively subversive, as Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan have suggested (2001), or whether they are problematically assimilationist and homonormative. That is, do gay and lesbian couples espouse “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions [such as marriage], but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179)?

More recently, drawing on the work of Susan Fraiman, Maggie Nelson has critiqued the tendency to create an opposition between some obliquely evoked form of queer political ‘authenticity’ and domestic assimilationism: “the tired binary that places femininity, reproduction, and normativity on the one side, and queer resistance on the other” (2016, pp. 75).<sup>4</sup> Can parenthood be queer, she asks? Or, can we queer parenthood? While critically appraising discourses on LGBTQ families, it seems important to hold in our minds the possibility for same-sex parenthood to retain a subversive edge, even if elements of the relationships depicted may appear (homo)normative. As Nelson argues, it is impossible for anyone to be just one thing over the course of their life, whether normative or queer. These concerns inform my analysis.

Research on LGBTQ parents in the Humanities lags far behind the Social Sciences.<sup>5</sup> There are some analyses of children’s books in English that depict same-sex parents (DePalma, 2016, Lester, 2014), and a few articles and chapters on certain cultural contexts (e.g. Rye, 2010 explores contemporary literary depictions of lesbian mothers in France). These offer useful critical analyses of how same-sex parents are depicted in individual texts or contexts and serve as a starting point for further debate since a pattern emerges of a concern with how ‘normal’ or ‘progressively different’ these parents may be. For example, Epstein (2012) asks why there are so few BTQ characters in children’s picture books and young adult fiction, and critiques the lack of diversity and widespread use of stereotypes; Rye argues that in recent French texts (novels and memoirs), lesbian mothers are portrayed and self-portray as oscillating between ‘normalcy’ and offering a ‘different’, progressive model of parenting. However there is no clear picture of the dominant representational forms associated with LGBTQ parents within specific national/linguistic contexts; neither have any substantial comparative studies been published that engage critically with differences and similarities between contexts, or with the transnational aspects of cultural representations of LGBTQ parents. This article supplements

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4 Here, Nelson is engaging indirectly with Lee Edelman’s critique of the normative drive towards “reproductive futurism” and his discussion of a queer antisocial stance as an alternative (Edelman 2004). While Edelman’s intervention is an important contribution to debate, it has attracted criticism for its insistence on the binary (reproduction/queerness) that Nelson highlights. Similarly, Michael Snediker has noted that “there are ways of resisting a pernicious logic of ‘reproductive futurism’ besides embodying the death drive” (2006, p. 14).

5 Critical discussions of LGBTQ families that appear in fiction include a handful of studies of children’s books in English that feature gay and lesbian parents, such as DePalma, 2016, Lester, 2014, Epstein, 2012, Sunderland and McGlashan, 2012. Some recent articles which explore the Italian context discuss both Italian-authored books for children and translations of English-language picture books about gay and lesbian parents (Forni, 2018). A recent themed issue of the journal *Ácoma* (Bavaro and Iuliano eds, 2019) explores representations of LGBTQ families in cultural texts more broadly (including novels and TV series), with a focus on English-language texts. Gill Rye has begun to explore the representation of lesbian motherhood in French literature (2009), but there are very few critical analyses of LGBTQ families in literature written in languages other than English.

Rye's work and seeks to shed light on underexplored literary texts that tackle this politically and ethically complex issue.

Italy offers a compelling case study in relation to the representation of same-sex parents. It has long had a reputation for being 'backward' in terms of LGBTQ rights. For example, there is inadequate anti-discrimination legislation that actually sanctions discrimination against people on the grounds of sexual orientation in certain professions like the armed forces;<sup>6</sup> legislation on sex reassignment (Law 164/1982) needs urgent improvement, since, it is too rigid and prescriptive and assumes that all trans people follow the same trajectory; moreover, access to medical treatment is uneven in different regions (Maffioletti, 2020). Civil partnerships for same-sex couples were finally introduced in 2016 (Law 76/2016), however, due to the restrictive Law 40 (2004), same-sex couples cannot access reproductive technologies such as IVF, or adopt. Indeed, there is no provision in the civil partnership legislation for legal recognition of non-biological, or social parents: this clause was removed from the draft law after heated debate, leaving thousands of families in legal limbo. Those parents who can afford to do so have applied for adoption, and so far around 20 cases have been heard in court.<sup>7</sup> In the majority of cases, the judge has ruled to recognize the non-biological parent, however this has not always been the case. Recent governments have been clear in their hostility to LGBTQ individuals and communities: on taking up his new role as Minister for Families and Disabilities (which he held from June 2018-July 2019) Lorenzo Fontana declared that same-sex families do not exist (De Luca, 2018). Simone Pillon, a Lega Senator, continues to campaign to revoke civil partnerships and against LGBT rights in general, to the extent that he has been accused of and condemned for defamation towards an Arcigay activist group (Santoro, 2019). In addition, recent years have witnessed many well-attended, widely reported demonstrations and rallies all over Italy organized by the Catholic, anti-gender movement, which opposes the recognition of rights for LGBTQ people, particularly same-sex couples and parents, and trans people (Lavizzari and Prearo, 2018). Yet, since April 2018, several mayors have decided to defy the government and have amended the birth certificates of many children to include the non-biological parent as co-parent, thus giving same-sex parents equal legal status and circumventing the need to go to court (Ricca, 2018). Unsurprisingly, there has been significant media coverage of these issues in the past few years, with three main discursive trends emerging:

1. strong defences of gay and lesbian parents by the national association Famiglie Arcobaleno (Rainbow Families, founded 2005), a minority of centre left politicians (particularly Monica Cirinnà who led the civil unions bill) and some key media personalities (such as Luciana Litizzetto);
2. homophobic and essentialist statements that seek to defend the apparently besieged 'natural' heterosexual family and attack same-sex families, coming from the Church, many leading politicians, and 'anti-gender' campaign groups (*La Repubblica*, 2018);
3. some feminists and lesbians who disagree with the practice of surrogacy, which is currently illegal in Italy, and have made public statements specifically against gay men who decide to have a child with the help of a surrogate (Ross, 2020).

### 3. Rainbow Families in Italy: A Precarious Existence

<sup>6</sup> In Italy, while article 3 of the constitution seems to assert equality for all citizens, it has not historically been implemented in this way. The first law to mention sexual orientation, Legislative Decree 216/2003, regarding equality in the workplace, actually specifies that people can be discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality in certain professions, such as the armed forces (article 3). See also Ross, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Research project in progress, 'Doing Rights: Innovative Tools for Professionals Working with LGBT Families' ([www.doingrights.eu](http://www.doingrights.eu)), led by Federica de Cordova, Giulia Selmi, Chiara Sità, Cristina Lonardi, University of Verona.

I offer this sketch of some of the tensions and discourses circulating in Italy to show that there is plenty of hostility, but there is also reason to be hopeful: thanks to decades of activism, as well as to vociferous opposition, same-sex parenting is more talked-about and publicly visible than ever before. Same-sex parenting has some strong supporters, and as yet there are no concrete plans to revoke any legislation relating to civil unions;<sup>8</sup> however, there is still uncertainty about the legal status of some parents, which is stressful and difficult for those families.<sup>9</sup> With this context in mind, I turn now to my selected literary texts.

#### 4. Happy Endings vs Mobilizing Shame and Melancholy

In Italy, as elsewhere, LGBTQ-identified individuals have historically been under-represented, or associated with pathological defects and afflictions (Beccalossi, 2012; Ross, 2015). Even in recent years, representation has not seemed to be able to shake off the shackles of past discourses. Indeed, what has struck me in my research on this topic so far is that there are some unsettling resonances between Italian literary representations of lesbian and gay parents, and some of the more offensive political statements that have been circulating recently, including the idea that same-sex families simply do not exist, as Fontana argued. Strikingly, the novels that I analyse not only draw attention to problems such as the lack of legal protection for same-sex families, but also heap on what I would argue are disproportionate amounts of personal tragedy. To varying degrees, these novels are what Heather Love (2007) would call ‘backward’: focussed on the past, on shame, on closeted identities, on the impossibility and potential damage of same-sex parenting, and even of same sex relationships in some cases. In these novels, same-sex parents are also inextricably linked to death, loss, and the disintegration of the family: same-sex parents exist, but only briefly, before they are narratively erased. The first part of my analysis therefore explores the persistence of the historically-entrenched, problematic trope of queerness as a harbinger of doom and death in relation to same-sex parenting. The recurring narrative drive to kill off queer characters, perhaps to restore heteronormativity, or to underline how queerness leads inevitably to tragedy, or just through authorial lack of imagination and desire for sensational drama, is such a widespread phenomenon that it is known informally as the habit of ‘burying your gays’ (Hulan, 2017). I am interested in the degree to which these texts move beyond a problematic association of same-sex parenting with damage, coupled with a desire to ‘bury’ the offending parents, towards a queer critique of homophobic discourse.

The earliest novel is Alicata’s *Quattro*, which tells the story of Andrea and Chiara, the teenage children of Martina and Francesca, who have just been killed in a car crash. It is the early 2000s, so Andrea and Chiara must have been born in the 1990s. We hear about their childhood, and discover that each woman gave birth to one child, apparently thanks to donor insemination although no specific details are provided about that process.<sup>10</sup> We learn from the narrator, Andrea, that the children call their birth mother ‘Mamma’, but the other mother by her first name. This leads to a startling conversation in which a 7 year-old Andrea asks Francesca, who is not his birth mother, “Ma tu...chi sei?” [But...who are you?] (Alicata, 2006, p. 29). Andrea tells us that Francesca and Martina sought to hide the fact that they were same-sex parents by avoiding coming out and orchestrating select socialising, in a bid to protect their children. We discover that Francesca found it very hard to accept her sexuality, partly as a result of her homophobic parents; and we follow a family crisis as the mothers proclaim they

<sup>8</sup> Law 76/2016 is recognized by the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights so it would be difficult to revoke it.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the Court of Appeal recently ruled against recognizing the non-biological parent of a child born abroad with the help of a surrogate (ruling no. 12193, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Andrea is Martina’s son, Chiara is Francesca’s daughter.



are relieved that the children are ‘normal’ (i.e. heterosexual). They were terrified that they would confirm heteronormative society’s worst suspicions and produce queer children—as if this were a serious problem. Chiara is rather horrified at her parents’ normativity and at their belief that they can and should control their children’s sexuality. However all of this is overshadowed by the deaths of Francesca and Martina. Afterwards the ‘normal’ children go on to find partners, and create heterosexual families. Andrea tells the story out of a conviction that his children need to know about their grandmothers, who otherwise would be buried and forgotten.

In Alicata’s second novel, *Verrai a trovarmi d’inverno*, Elena is a closeted medical student struggling to come to terms with her lesbianism. She lives with her father, Aldo, and adopted brother Mattia. Aldo, and Mattia’s father Giovanni, now dead, were best friends in the 60s, and were the ones left to look after the children when Elena’s mother died and Mattia’s mother abandoned them. Elena is deeply depressed because of her manipulative lover Viola, and attempts a sort of bungled suicide by driving her scooter into a wall. While she recovers, she discovers that Giovanni and Aldo were lovers, making the family not just non-normative—two single fathers with children living as a blended family—but more explicitly queer. However, this is only discovered when Elena’s internalized homophobia has almost cost her her life, and when the relationship is no more because of Giovanni’s death.

In Mazzucco’s *Sei come sei*, Eva is the 11-year-old daughter of Giosè and Christian, who has died in a motorcycle accident. Conceived thanks to the help of a surrogate in Armenia, Eva lived happily with her fathers, until she was separated from Giosè because he was not the biological parent, and therefore had no legal relationship with her after Christian’s death. Her uncle and aunt, whom she hates, become her guardians, and she loses touch with Giosè. The novel opens with Eva pushing a classmate under a train because he was bullying her. She then runs away to find Giosè. He is compelled to bring her back to her guardians but it seems like they have begun to rebuild their relationship.

Chiara Francini’s *Non parlare con la bocca piena* and *Mia madre non lo deve sapere*, depict the adventures of Chiara, the protagonist, a young woman whose birth mother decided she was not cut out for parenthood and so entrusted her child to two friends: a gay male couple. Chiara is trying to make her heterosexual relationship work, but ends up moving back to her family home. During this time, one of her fathers, Giancarlo, dies: His last words are about love:

dobbiamo amare, amare, come regine’ [...] Giancarlo se n’era andato per un infarto. Quel cuore gonfio e stanco Chiara se l’era immaginato talmente pieno di valzer, vita, zucchero e ideali che a un certo punto doveva aver deciso di mettersi a dormire. Giustamente (Francini, 2017, p. 51).

[We have to love, love like queens. [...] Giancarlo left us because of a heart attack. That tired, swollen heart that Chiara imagined as being so full of waltzes, life, sugar and ideals that at a certain point it had decided to lay down to sleep. And rightly so.]

Here we have a clichéd view that gay men are so caught up in a stereotype of hyperbolic, affected camp that they wear themselves out with it and die.

The status of the authors, and how and where the texts have been received are important details to add here. Alicata is an ‘out’ lesbian, a mechanical engineer who now works in the food industry and also writes novels. *Quattro* is published by a small lesbian feminist press, and the afterword cites letters to Alicata by the lesbian activist Daniela Bellisario, and *Verrai a trovarmi d’inverno* includes a glossary of LGBTQ terminology at the back, framing the text as a progressive contribution to LGBTQ representation. Mazzucco is a much more successful author, published by the major press Mondadori. She has won numerous prestigious prizes,



including the Premio Strega (2003), for the novel *Vita* and the Premio Viareggio-Tobino (2011), recognizing her successful career. While she is not closely aligned with LGBTQ activism, she has previously written about the queer Swiss journalist and photographer Annemarie Schwarzenbach in *Lei così amata* (2012). Francini is an actor who has appeared in many films and TV series. These are her only novels. All novels have been well-received by the cultural press, with differing visibility: Mazzucco's has received more attention in established literary publications like *L'Indice dei libri del mese*, Alicata's novels have been discussed in relation to LGBTQ activism and on an individual reader's blog, and Francini has had enthusiastic write-ups in the *Huffington Post*.<sup>11</sup>

In these novels, we see same-sex couples choosing to have or raise children, and to defy heteronormativity and Italian laws regarding reproductive technologies, but there is a great deal of shame, hiding and a pervasive, stubborn sense of impossibility. We see the linguistic erasure of the non-biological mother in *Quattro* as the children don't refer to their non-biological parent as 'mamma', and don't even seem to know what relationship they have with them; in *Mi verrai a trovare d'inverno*, Giovanni and Aldo hide their relationship for decades and are unable to live it freely. There is almost an inescapability about the deaths that interrupt these brave new family configurations that, it is implied, are just too risky. The protagonist of Francini's novels is a slight exception since she has made it through to adulthood with both parents, but the death of her father Giancarlo is also presented as inevitable, while her birth mother then comes back into the picture as an enduring presence, symbolically ghosting out the gay male parent.

I argue that these novels are imbued with queer melancholia. In her discussion and reworking of Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler develops a useful perspective on this issue. Simply put, in Freud's view, mourning involves a feeling of loss that is openly acknowledged, and then the subject moves on with their life; melancholia, on the other hand, is produced by a denial or deferral of loss, and an introjection or incorporation of the loss itself into the ego, so that the subject's own identity is thereafter intrinsically bound up with loss. Butler considers this phenomenon in relation to homosexual identity, commenting that the normative prohibition on homosexuality that structures dominant social relations results in widespread melancholia as queer subjects experience their desire through loss. She calls this:

a preemptive loss, a mourning for unlived possibilities. If this love is from the start out of the question, then it cannot happen, and if it does, it certainly did not. If it does, it happens only under the official sign of its prohibition and disavowal (Butler, 1997, p. 139).

She goes on: 'homosexuality is not abolished but preserved, though preserved precisely in the prohibition on homosexuality' (Butler, 1997, p. 142).

If we apply this view to the narratives of same-sex parenting, we see that the novels are infused with a profound sense of queer melancholy. While we are presented with various examples of same-sex parents, they are all disavowed, narratively sidelined, but preserved as loss. In *Quattro*, Andrea wants to preserve the memory of his child's grandmothers, as though they were a rare example of a historical phenomenon that will never be seen again. They are written into the text, but as a foreclosed impossibility that remains socially and politically prohibited. Giovanni, Christian, Martina, Francesca and Giancarlo are derealized or ghosted, to use Terry Castle's expression: they are evoked only to disappear (Castle 1993, pp. 2-6).

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Manetti, 2014; Gilioli, 2011; Massari, 2018.

Of course, some of the novels also contain a good deal of nuanced, subversive narrative and characterization, which complicates this reading. Francini's novels are really a series of vignettes, of mini chapters of a couple of pages that recount anecdotes. However they do sketch out, albeit in a rather stereotypical way, scenes of happy, 'queer' family life, as we learn about the eccentric decor in their family home and see lively dinners with a crowd of gay 'uncles' round the table providing witty observations. In my view, *Quattro* is the most problematic text, since the mothers, Martina and Francesca, seem to have approached parenting with the desire to conceal their relationship from their children, and to have taken active steps to 'heterosexualize' their children. While they are portrayed sympathetically, they are complicit with heteronormative society and have jointly sought to obfuscate their relationship to their own children, which is extremely confusing and potentially quite damaging: this is a far cry from what a queer politics of damage might look like.

*Mi verrai a trovare d'inverno* is a more progressive novel. While Elena is recuperating from her accident on the island of Pantelleria, she meets a pre-op male to female transsexual called Liz, who berates her for her internalized homophobia, and encourages her to accept her lesbianism, and to live it more openly. Conversations between Liz and Elena show the difficulties that individuals may experience in a hostile context, and the power of queer solidarity to overcome this. Later in the novel we see that homophobia is not necessarily the instinctive response when learning about a relative's homosexuality. When Mattia, Elena's step-brother, learns that Giovanni and Aldo, his fathers, were lovers, he doesn't flinch, maintaining that it changes nothing about his sense of who he is:

Elena: "Non ti sconvolge che..."

"...che stessero insieme?" m'interuppe Mattia riferendosi al babbo e a Giovanni.

"Sì".

"Dimmi cosa cambierebbe della mia vita. Prova a dirmelo" (Alicata, 2011, p. 258).

[Elena; Doesn't it shock you that...]

"...that they were together? Mattia interrupted me, referring to Dad and Giovanni.

"Yes."

"Tell me what it changes about my life. Just try".]

In this novel, the queer parenting has already happened, silently, and is only really recognized as such after the fact. We see how affective bonds are strong enough to weather the potential shock of an unexpected revelation about a parent's sexuality, and how a parent's sexuality does not necessarily impact on their ability to bring up a child. Moreover, we do see some signs of a more progressive future, as Elena begins to come to terms with her own sexuality through learning about her father's personal life. Her own fears about her sexuality and of rejection by her family are proved to be unfounded and the narrative supports openness about identity.

*Sei come sei* merits more attention, since it is a complex novel that is also more self-aware of the topics it is dealing with. Mazzucco constructs a narrative that aligns itself alternately with different characters, remaining in the third person but offering insights into their personal experiences. The narrative subtly evokes and dissolves prejudices about how other people live, by juxtaposing different views. For example, Eva's classmate Loris feels sorry for her, not having a mother. He has a strong bond with his own mother, and a rather icy relationship with his father, and therefore imagines family life with two fathers as a tense, cold and stressful situation. In contrast, the novel shows Eva's home life as infused with affection and fun, and makes it abundantly clear that she idolizes her fathers. This challenge to Loris' prejudiced view narrativizes and invalidates the common practice of making assumptions about how non-normative family models might work, based on a heteronormative view. Eva's fathers are

entirely different from Loris' stern, patriarchal parent but he has no cultural models to go on aside from the homophobic clichés that the children use to bully Eva. In this novel we also see subversive narratives of fatherhood: Christian and Giosè's desire to have a child together is linked, quite unexpectedly, to Catholic iconography as Giosè's desire to become a father is catalysed by a painting from 1645 by Francisco de Herrera the Elder (Fig. 1). It shows *St Joseph with Jesus*: a non-biological father whose tenderness towards the infant transfixes Giosè and moves him to tears (Mazzucco, 2013, p. 121-23). This unusual depiction of the Holy family, which puts at the centre a figure who is often eclipsed, and whose role is passed over in silence, reminds us of the queer elements in even those families that are presented as the most normative.



Fig. 1. *St Joseph with Jesus*, Francisco de Herrera the Elder (1645)<sup>12</sup>

Mazzucco's narrative also engages with ongoing debates about frustrations with the recurring trope of queer pathologization. She injects a very self-conscious moment in which Christian is reflecting on literary representation of gay lives:

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<sup>12</sup> This image is available via Wikimedia Commons in the public domain using the Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0. This work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or fewer. See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco\\_de\\_Herrera\\_the\\_Elder\\_St\\_Joseph\\_And\\_The\\_Child.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco_de_Herrera_the_Elder_St_Joseph_And_The_Child.jpg)

Christian aveva iniziato a dire che lo avevano stufato i libri che proponevano una visione maledetta dell'omosessualità, i cui protagonisti erano sempre senza scampo, condannati all'infelicità, alla punizione e perfino alla morte. Comunicavano un'idea ormai datata, rancida, esaurita, anche artisticamente. Voleva l'happy end. Voleva una commedia, qualcosa che rispecchiasse la condizione contemporanea dell'omosessualità liberata e vissuta senza sensi di colpa (Mazzucco, 2013, p. 172).

[Christian had started to say that he was fed up of books that offered a negative view of homosexuality, whose protagonists could never be saved, they were condemned to unhappiness, punishment and even death. They conveyed a dated message that was rotten, worn out, even from an artistic perspective. He wanted the happy ending. He wanted a comedy, something that reflected contemporary liberated homosexuality, that was lived without a sense of guilt.]

Despite this, Mazzucco then obviously decides not to provide the longed for happy ending, perhaps because this would be unrealistic, or would seem simplistic and hackneyed after this reflection. While Christian rightly critiques the inevitability of queer tragedy in many texts, it would be equally problematic and unrealistic to insist on a guaranteed 'happy' outcome. Here, Mazzucco's text resonates with Sara Ahmed's discussion of happiness and unhappiness, in which she argues that we need to retain an open sense of possibility about these different states, rather than seeking a received idea of 'happiness' to be sought at all costs, thereby trapping ourselves in normative logics (Ahmed, 2010, p. 219). Unhappiness can be productive, she observes (Ahmed, 2010, p. 217). Instead of a clichéd 'happy' narrative, Mazzucco shows how unexpected tragedy can hit any family, and how families who are not properly protected by law are so much more vulnerable. Giosè, for example, has to endure the humiliation of being interrogated by a police officer about his relationship with Eva, since they don't have the same surname, and he is then called a 'friend of the family' by Eva's uncle, her legal guardian (Mazzucco, 2013, p. 137). Thus Mazzucco uses her novel politically to critique the Italian socio-cultural and legal context, not just to describe personal loss. Yet this is not a novel that can be easily classified as 'pro' gay fatherhood, since it also depicts the ethically-challenging practice of surrogacy in a rather uncomfortable way. Christian even suggests that surrogacy can be seen as reducing women's bodies to reproductive vessels that can be rented out. Christian and Giosè differ in their views: Christian is more aware of how physically hard and invasive it must be for the surrogate, while Giosè is rather idealistically convinced that it is an undertaking that requires a special vocation. We later see the surrogate herself, a poor widow from a family of shepherds in Armenia—as the novel explains, surrogacy costs much less there than in the US. She is pale and exhausted in the hospital after giving birth, silently weeping and grieving for her husband, who died several years previously, whose absence she is feeling keenly. When asked to pose for a photograph with the two new fathers, she refuses, saying that she is not sure that she wants to remember this moment, or this experience (Mazzucco, 2013, p. 216). The juxtaposition of the different perspectives of Giosè, Christian and the surrogate complicate this story, as ethical dilemmas are raised but no specific side is taken. The novel is clearly anti-homophobic, but more ambiguous on the ethics of how gay men might become parents. Here it takes a more nuanced view of surrogacy than recent debates in the Italian media and some activist communities (Ross, 2020). While sexual difference feminists have been vocal in their condemnation of surrogacy as an inevitably exploitative, commodifying practice Mazzucco presents us with a narrative that sheds fascinating but partial light on why each character makes particular choices, or how free those choices might be. The novel's ultimate concern is not to decry surrogacy as universally unacceptable, but to follow Eva and Giosè, as they navigate uncharted territory in hostile waters.

In these novels, queer traces remain after death, heteronormativity is not fully restored, and the narratives of family life are deeply invested with all the powerful emotions that bind together any family or kinship group. Yet death is all around, and a sense of queer melancholy and damage pervades the narratives, from the characters to the plots. Indeed, I am struck overall by how these novels resonate with an image that has been discussed in relation to melancholy, political activism and queerness: Paul Klee's 1920 painting *Angelus Novus* (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 2. Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920)<sup>14</sup>

This image has been interpreted, most influentially by Walter Benjamin, as symbolizing impotence in the face of the growing pile of wreckage that is history. Benjamin sees the angel as paralysed before the ever increasing disaster, unable to turn its back on the past and look to the future, but propelled backwards towards this future by a gathering storm (Benjamin, 2003, p. 392).

It might be argued that rather than bold figures forging non-normative families of the future, the novels analysed here show us cowed individuals, like the Angel, who are fearful, looking

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<sup>13</sup> Love discusses the painting (2007, p. 152), and references Wendy Brown's analysis of the angel in relation to politics and history (2001, pp. 138-72).

<sup>14</sup> This image is available via Wikimedia Commons. The author died in 1940, so this work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 75 years or fewer. See [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Klee,\\_Angelus\\_novus.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Klee,_Angelus_novus.png)



backwards, and sometimes in thrall to homonormativity; that is, they seek to prove that they can be as normative or more normative than any other family, instead of redefining in challenging and exciting ways what a family might look like. This is particularly the case in *Quattro*. There is a political significance to narrating that the children of same-sex parents actually do very well, as countless scientific studies have now argued (Schumm, 2016, p. 662). However, in this novel, the children's stability seems to be achieved through a deeply normative, assimilationist agenda: what Shelley Park has called the concealment of queerness in the drive to be accepted (2013, pp. 8-9). This drive for concealment is exemplified in Francini's novels too, since the protagonist develops a lifelong addiction to sweets because her fathers got into the habit of popping sweets into her mouth constantly while they were out in public, so that she wouldn't be heard calling them both 'Papà', drawing attention to their difference. These apparently 'light' and 'amusing' anecdotes testify to a literal, damaging silencing of queerness. Moreover, returning to the narrative trope of burying your gay parents, there seems to be some inescapable destiny that truncates the lives of queer parents in dramatic and tragic ways; the narratives literalize and externalize the introjected loss of the melancholic subject. At least one parent is already dead at the start of *Quattro*, *Verrai a trovarmi d'inverno* and *Sei come Sei*. They are always already doomed.

It is also worth noting that none of these novels engage in any significant way with the broader LGBTQ movement in Italy. There are a couple of brief mentions of activism, but none of the characters belong to groups or associations, or seek support from them. While obviously not all people who identify as LGBTQ are also activists in the same way, the collective impression from these novels is that gay men and lesbians who want to become parents in Italy are isolated and lack support networks, which is not necessarily the case: the Famiglie Arcobaleno network has been very active over the past 15 years, and its Presidents have often been interviewed on TV, or in newspapers.<sup>15</sup> While not every LGBTQ+ parent would want to join the association, it is striking that these novelists have chosen to ghost out not only same-sex parents but also this quite successful activist community. However, I want to try to look beyond these narrative stumbling blocks and reflect more broadly on what we look for, and hope to find, in literature that engages directly with politically and ethically charged issues like same-sex parenting. My view is that, especially in contexts like Italy where historically queer representation has been either lacking or largely pathologizing, and where the contemporary situation remains hostile, authors who choose to represent these stories need to be aware of the potential political resonances of their narratives.<sup>16</sup>

In making sense of the significance of these novels, I turn again to Love's focus on queer backwardness: she argues for the importance of acknowledging the shame, secrecy and failure historically associated with queerness, the constant costs or social damage of being queer. Love advocates preserving our connection to these emotions and experiences as we move towards the future, rather than attempting to focus instead on queer pleasures, as scholars such as Elizabeth Freeman have suggested (Love, 2007, pp. 160-162). Love seeks to trace a queer politics of damage, and discusses a series of individuals and literary characters whose loneliness, melancholy and reticence make them unlikely queer political figureheads. Yet she argues that they are nevertheless valuable figureheads. Love cites Michael Snediker, who has asked whether it is possible to "mobilize shame, shattering or melancholy as interesting, as

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<sup>15</sup> [www.famigliearcobaleno.org](http://www.famigliearcobaleno.org). In particular, the former President Marilena Grassadonia has a very strong media presence.

<sup>16</sup> Here I am inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who stated in a 2018 talk at the British Library, while accepting the PEN Pinter Prize, that in her opinion, while they are not required to offer political views, writers have a social duty that goes along with their platform, to call out lies and problems (Flood, 2018).

opposed to merely seeming instances of fear and trembling”.<sup>17</sup> One way of reading the novels I consider here is by seeking out and valorizing this politics of damage, of shattered lives, and the ways in which melancholia colours the texts. What can we learn from it? Can queer melancholy be mobilized?

Butler’s suggestion for how this might be achieved is complex. Following Freud, she notes that actually, the distinction between mourning and melancholia is ambiguous at best: even when the subject acknowledges the loss, grieves and ‘moves on’, some loss is introjected and marks the ego (Butler, 1997, p. 193). In other words, melancholy is a permanent and inescapable existential state. However she does make two suggestions: “Survival [...] requires [...] raging against the dead in order not to join them” (Butler, 1997, p. 193); “Survival is a matter of avowing the trace of loss that inaugurates one’s own emergence” (Butler, 1997, p. 195). We cannot and should not try to forget or minimize queer damage and loss, but Butler also advocates some anger, some action, some self-reflexivity and a will to move forward with loss rather than being paralyzed by it. Similarly, Ahmed reflects that “bad feelings” are not simply something we should try to forget, but might be considered as “creative responses to histories that are unfinished” (2010, p. 217). Rather than try to overcome such feelings, they need to be experienced and explored.

Returning to the texts, what forms of mobilization can we see? Martina and Francesca in *Quattro* seem to be in thrall to internalized homophobia and cleave to normativity in the hope of being accepted or not being discovered, hoping for what Jasbir Puar has called a temporary “measure of benevolence” meted out to assimilationist gays and lesbians through forms of liberal tolerance (Puar, 2007, p. xx).<sup>18</sup> Their children who survive them certainly move forward, but traces of queer parenthood are consigned to the past without having been fully or critically explored.

*Mi verrai a trovare d’inverno* offers a more combative picture, as we discover a letter that Giovanni wrote to Elena’s father Aldo, before his death: he alludes to the ‘thing’ that happened between them, which took place while they were caught up in leftwing radical politics of the early 1970s. This was not a particularly gay-friendly context or period, which explains the secrecy and oblique language. Despite this, Giovanni then declares his love for Aldo, and states that what he wants most of all is for them to form a family, and to bring up their children together, which then does happen despite his death. Here Giovanni acknowledges the challenges of a gay male relationship, but refuses to give up the man he desires because of socio-cultural taboos. However, stigma and shame demand a closeted, secretive life, veiling any kind of public queer presence. To use Butler’s terminology, the queerness of Giovanni and Aldo’s parenting and relationships, as well as Aldo and Elena’s queer desires and identities, can only emerge when it becomes clear how much of their own family history has been lost and hidden in unspoken secrecy, and how foolish and existentially damaging it would be to continue to conceal these crucial aspects of their lives and selves.

In *Sei come sei*, we see active determination to become gay parents, as Christian and Giosè sell family property to pay for the services of the surrogate, they travel many times to Armenia and put their relationship to the test, but after Christian’s death, when Eva is assigned to her guardians, Giosè becomes deeply passive and seems incapable of assuming political agency. He withdraws from Eva as a result of the pressures of normative society, which has a negative impact on both of them. He insists on the importance of waiting until he is granted the legal

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<sup>17</sup> Snediker (2006, p. 19) cited in Love (2007, p. 188).

<sup>18</sup> A similar argument is made by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*, as she discusses how the nostalgia for a perceived sense of security can lead to an unthinking “reproduction of normativity” (2011, p. 291).



right to be recognized as her father, rather than thinking creatively of ways in which he can assert his role, and be the father that she obviously needs, immediately. It is only in the last few pages that he finally articulates to himself the urgency of finding a way to be near Eva, and the novel concludes in a vaguely hopeful key.

Returning to Klee's and Benjamin's angel, we might describe these novels as narrating the moment in which paralysis before the wreckage of history begins to cede, giving way to new and uncertain movement. *Mi verrai a trovare d'inverno* and *Sei come sei* are narratives that are just able to turn their heads far enough to see and acknowledge that there is a future. The voices of Eva and Elena emerge from the chaos of loss and pain with a renewed drive to demand what they want and to act, rather than continuing as they had previously, passively accepting emotional abuse (Elena by her former lover Viola) or accepting a forced estrangement from her one remaining parent (Eva and Giosè). Eva, Giosè, Elena, Aldo, and Mattia are damaged by grief, but also by the culture of silence provoked by queer shame, and the lack of legal rights. The specific evocation of a known historical context from a queer perspective (1970s left-wing activism in *Verrai a trovarmi d'inverno*), or of the contemporary legal situation as regards non-biological gay parents (*Sei come sei*), lends the narratives a special connection with 'real' life that lingers beyond the fictional worlds of the novels and demands a critical engagement with the *reasons* for the melancholy and unhappiness. While Alicata's *Quattro* and the novels by Francini show us same-sex parenting as a phenomenon destined to burn itself out and be evoked only through a fond but toothless nostalgia, *Sei come sei* and *Verrai a trovarmi d'inverno* arguably mobilize a politics of damage that, as Snediker hoped, moves beyond "fear and trembling", towards a more assertive, combative stance. Indeed, in different ways, both novels critique and challenge the silencing and invisibilizing of queer parenting as it impacts on parents and children. Moreover, they are narratives that suggest that same-sex parenting is much more than a simple craving for normativity, since each family engages actively in its own complex rewriting of the norms. Looking forward, we might take these novels as a sign that while queer melancholy will always be with us, critical engagement with loss and tragedy can enable the construction of a future that includes the possibility of something like happiness.

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