



## Drawing as a Device to Deconstruct Gender Stereotypes: The Case of the Southern Italian Woman

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### Abstract

My project is a combination of artistic and scholarly research about the Southern Italian woman, who are often referred to by the pejorative term *terrona*. By analyzing films that include the *terrona* stereotype, I investigate how she has been represented as aggressive, sexualized, and maternal. Through my drawings, I challenge the *terrona*'s stereotype by recontextualizing the *terrona* image in dialogue with the Italian philosophy of sexual difference and ecofeminism. My drawings reconfigure the *terrona*'s stereotypical feminine traits into an agential, fulfilled woman connected to the Mediterranean environment. In my drawings, I fantasize how the reclaimed relationship to the Mediterranean environment potentially transforms the *terrona* representation from a marginalized woman into an empowered one. In this imaginative arts-based speculative narrative, the stereotypical *terrona*'s aggressiveness becomes a green energy that she uses to produce sustainable agricultural activities. The *terrona*'s sexualized body becomes a power that she holds to feel sensorial pleasure by connecting to her environment. Her stereotypical maternal attitude is transformed into her capability to bring prosperity to the ecosystem where she lives.

**Keywords:** *terrona*, Mediterranean, ecofeminism, sustainability, agriculture, empowerment

### Introduction to the *Terrona* Stereotype

Italian cultural media productions are characterized by a variety of representations where women are portrayed as marginalized subjects. Many of these representations are loved and appreciated in Italy and abroad, such as the movie characters played by the famous actress Sophia Loren.<sup>1</sup> Italian feminism challenges and deconstructs patriarchal narratives about women while also considering and preserving aspects of Italy's cultural heritage (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). In my research, I bring my studio art practice of drawing in conversation with Italian feminist philosophy of sexual difference (Cavarero, 1999) and recent theories related to ecofeminism (Shiva, 2022) to deconstruct the stereotype of the southern Italian woman, the *terrona*. I am a woman born and raised in Rome in a traditional Italian family. I have contradictory feelings about my culture because I am fascinated about some popular patriarchal representations of Italian women while also find them marginalizing and disempowering. These contradictory feelings influenced the content of my research and my artistic practice.

*Terrone* is a pejorative term used by northern Italians to address and describe southern Italians.<sup>2</sup> Yet these words do not capture the specificity of *terrone*, its unique connection to geography—the south of Italy and the Mediterranean Sea. Rooted in the word “terra,” which means ground, *terrone* suggests the action of an uneducated person living in poverty farming the land. The reference to the ground also suggests the color brown and alludes, in a derogatory sense, to the darker skin of those living in southern Italy than lighter skin people from northern Italy. The term “*terrona*,” the female grammatical form of “*terrone*,” refers to the southern Italian woman. In this essay, I discuss how the *terrona* has been represented—even caricatured—in a variety of media

<sup>1</sup> For example, three popular films with actor Sophia Loren are *The Gold of Naples* (De Sica, 1954), *Marriage Italian Style* (De Sica, 1964), and *The Girl with the Pistol* (Monicelli, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> The English language derogatory terms “hick,” “hayseed,” or “redneck” are rough translations.

as impulsive, possessive, buxom, attractive, and maternal. These stereotypes, according to which the *terrona* is uneducated and impulsive, assumes the entire southern Italian population possesses these general characteristics.

The *terrona* stereotype has its origin in 1861, the year when Italy became a unified country (Daniele, 2019). Until 1860, the Italian peninsula was composed of separate state entities. In the north of Italy, there were the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Lombardy-Veneto State, and the two duchies of Parma and Modena. In the center of Italy there were the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Papal State. The South of Italy and Sicily were part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. These disparate state entities differed from each other in terms of history, economy, cultural traditions, and polity where the North was more industrialized and politically organized than the rural South (Daniele, 2019).

In 1861, the southern Italian territories represented by the Kingdom of The Two Sicilies was annexed to the rest of the Italian peninsula and to the Kingdom of Italy. When the King of The Two Sicilies was deposed, part of the southern Italian population did not recognize the authority of the new king of Italy because under his domination, the material conditions of the southern Italian population did not improve. Instead, they experienced impoverishment (Daniele, 2019). The phenomenon of the brigandage is a consequence of the southern Italian population's malcontent. The brigandage was a political movement of resistance as well as a criminal practice performed by bands of evildoers. They infested the countryside and the routes of communication, committing robberies and murders. At the time of Italian unification, the brigandage phenomenon was largely widespread, and because of the social and economic problems that it provoked, it began a type of civil war that for decades involved the southern Italian regions. The brigandage was brutally repressed by the army of the novel kingdom of Italy, and northern Italians perceived the southern Italian regions as populated by violent and retrograde people (Daniele, 2019). This prejudice was supported by the theories proposed by the anthropologists Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and Alfredo Nicèforo (1876-1960) at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Lombroso (2013) and Nicèforo (1898), the Italian peninsula is inhabited by people belonging to two different races where people living in the south are genetically, intellectually, and morally inferior to people living in the north. These

theories became popular at the time of Italian unification, and they contributed to the creation of the stereotype about the southern Italian person as backward, impulsive, and uneducated (Daniele, 2019). This way of perceiving the south of Italy by the more industrialized and economically developed north of Italy persists nowadays (De Francesco, 2012).

The stereotype of the southern Italian woman—in addition to having southern Italian's general characteristics of being impulsive, backward, and uneducated—also is stereotyped as maternal and sexualized (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). Consequentially, due to the practice of caregiving being a socially expected role of southern Italian women, their work is to manage the domestic space and serve as mothers and wives (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010). Only men have the possibility of governing society and exerting power by investing in economic and political systems. Such socially-inscribed gender roles in southern Italy forces women to function as reproduction vessels with the consequence of encouraging their sexualization according to a heterosexual male perspective. Recent studies show how these ways of understanding the southern Italian woman still relate to most of the southern Italian contemporary society, even among the young and educated population (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010).

Famous 20<sup>th</sup> century movies, such as *The Girl with the Pistol* (Monicelli, 1968) with actor Monica Vitti, *The Gold of Naples* (De Sica, 1954) and *Marriage Italian Style* (De Sica, 1964) with actor Sophia Loren, contributed to create the stereotype of the southern Italian woman, the *terrona*, propelling the *terrona* character into celebrity while also making her charming and lovable. These depictions, thus, serve only to reinforce the idea that the *terrona* is a chaotic person, lacking intellectual and political agency. From this perspective, she is cartoonish and unreal, bereft of the power to affect the world in serious and positive ways. According to these representations, the *terrona* has authority only in the confinement of her domestic space. Her seductive body is a source of pleasure exclusively for the heterosexual male's needs: she is largely subject to the male gaze.<sup>3</sup> She spends all her physical and mental energies to take care of her children,

<sup>3</sup> The term "male gaze" was coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) in her feminist critique of films as catering to viewing desires of heterosexual masculine audiences in portraying women as objects of male desire. Privileging the male gaze is observable in commercials and advertisements where the woman is represented as demure and submissive to serving men's sexual desires.

neglecting her personal ambitions and well-being.

In my drawings, I encourage the viewer to deconstruct the stereotype of *terrona*—to fantasize about a different and imaginative way to signify her. I imagine the *terrona* as embedded and rooted in her territory, where the Mediterranean landscape is the crucial element of my reconfiguration. According to arts-based speculative narratives, the pejorative stereotype of *terrona*'s aggressive and fiery temperament is her reclaimed power to act ecologically—to govern the Mediterranean territory and to cultivate its natural elements. My drawings reveal how the *terrona*'s attractive and provocative body transcends the enjoyment she is supposed to provide to the heterosexual male. This excess folds back into itself, as she feels exceptional sensorial pleasure qua herself—just as she is and for herself alone. She becomes an autonomous agent of self-love that extends to the world around her. Her bond with the richness of the Mediterranean environment activates this ecstasy and *joie de vivre*. In addition, her talents of hospitality, usually kept for her family alone, invest her with the political and social authority to protect and preserve the natural resources of her environment.

### Reclaiming and Reinterpreting *Terrona*

My arts-based investigation involved theoretical reflection and artistic practice. Through drawings, I analyze three mid-20th century films (*The Girl with the Pistol*, *The Gold of Naples*, and *Marriage Italian Style*) depicting the stereotype of the *terrona*. My drawings reclaim and reinterpret the film's *terrona* character. I rework assumptions about femininity in Italian patriarchal culture by considering the relationship between women and their environment. Bringing Adriana Cavarero's (1999) Italian philosophy of sexual difference in conversation with Rosi Braidotti's (2013) feminist materialism, I connect Cavarero's use of imagination to deconstruct gender stereotypes to Braidotti's (2013) understanding of the relationship between a woman's subjectivity and her environment.

In *Nonostante Platone* (i.e., *In Spite of Plato*), Cavarero (1999) discusses fictional women characters penned by famous ancient Greek writers. In her analysis of Homer's and Plato's narrations of Penelope, Demetra, Diotima, and the enslaved Thracian woman, Cavarero (1999) ascribes new meaning to these characters, diverging from that which patriarchal culture has attributed to them.

Cavarero's feminist reinterpretations play with language to create counter-narratives about *terrona* women and their society.

Cavarero's reconfiguration of Penelope is one of these creative experiments that inspired my project about reconfiguring the stereotype of the *terrona*. In the *Odyssey*, Homer narrates how Penelope, Ulysses' wife, waits for her husband to return from his long journey. Penelope does not expect to see Ulysses again. She cries about Ulysses' absence for days and nights in her room with her handmaids, who are helping her to weave the shroud for Laertes, Ulysses' father. In book XI of the *Odyssey*, Ulysses's mother, Anticlea, who resides in the underworld, in speaking with her son, reassures Ulysses that Penelope is waiting for him and reports that she spends her nights suffering and crying (1990). Penelope as a symbol of the loyal wife. Cavarero (1999) points out, by analyzing Penelope's behavior with more attention, other characteristics emerge (1999). Penelope does not chase away the suitors from her house, and she leaves them at the mercy of her indecision. In the meantime, the suitors consume Ulysses' goods, and they spend their time eating and drinking. Cavarero (1999) proposes that Penelope's behavior is motivated by her desire to maintain herself in a space of ambiguity to preserve her freedom. Penelope does not want to marry one of the suitors, but she also does not want Ulysses to return to Ithaca. Ulysses' absence offers to her the possibility of living in a condition of freedom. According to Cavarero's (1999) revisionist narrative, Penelope is neither a loyal wife nor a manipulator seducer. Rather, she resides outside these two stereotypes of women. Inspired by Cavarero, I sought to reconfigure the stereotypical image of the southern Italian woman.

Continental philosopher and feminist theoretician, Rosi Braidotti (2013) addresses how matter and thought do not belong to two different realms. Rather, according to Braidotti (2013), thinking and matter, as well as culture and nature, are the expression of the same, single, vital force that manifests itself in a way that does not follow a dialectical structure. Braidotti (2013) addresses the human being as a located subject, always speaking from a certain place and time, and coming from a specific material condition in opposition to the universal, immaterial *man* addressed by philosophy based in patriarchal traditions. According to Braidotti, the woman subject is an embodied subject, rooted in a specific land and in the

materiality of her environment. That land is not something external to her mind and to her thoughts; rather, it is what constitutes her culture, traditions, values, and beliefs. Grounded in Braidotti's (2013) theory of the woman subject relationality to the materiality of her environment, I deconstruct the stereotypical image of the southern Italian woman by reflecting on how her desires and practices are connected to how she exists within her environment, and, at the same time, how her environment determines the openness of her actions.

I link Cavarero's (1999) and Braidotti's (2013) theories to Vandana Shiva's (2022) reflections about the connection between White patriarchal colonialist domination over land, agriculture, women, and people of color. Shiva (2022) addresses how intensive agriculture as industrial farming damages natural resources and provokes hunger and pollution. According to Shiva (2022), by recognizing the environment's agency and creativity, it is possible to find alternative ways of relating to existence that promote social justice and gender equality.

#### **Arts-based Methodology, Analysis, and Counter-narratives of the *Terrona***

In my black and white line drawings, I represent women as aggressive, vigorous, and active. My drawings minimize body details to emphasize gestures, actions, and expressions. Through my drawings, I envision *terrora* counter-narratives to relate with her territory, her body, and to her society. My drawings are intended to inspire visual pleasure and identification in the feminist spectator and not in the patriarchal viewer. My process involved placing familiar patriarchal representations of southern Italian women next to images addressing objects and situations that are not associated with sexualized representations of her body. By observing these juxtapositions and making these deliberate choices, I modify the characteristics usually attributed to the *terrora* by envisioning scenarios associated with the Mediterranean and its materiality that are capable of promoting the *terrora*'s agency and pleasure.

In my work, I use a handmade, rough, fast, and irregular drawing technique where the interaction between the materiality of the ink and the paper's texture produces imperfections and irregularities that confer movement and spontaneity to the images. As a result, the material characteristics of the ink and the

paper become an essential part of my drawings. In my images there is a connection between the materiality of medium and the materiality of the elements represented in my images such as the *terrora*'s body and to the Mediterranean environment. My lines emphasize the *terrora*'s gesture, poses, and facial expressions and they address the narratives performed by my characters, which are inspired by the movies that I investigate to analyze the *terrora*'s stereotype.

In my work, I have a contradictory relationship with the image of the *terrora*. While I want to change the *terrora* by giving her more autonomy and power; simultaneously, I also am seduced by her sensuality, her protective and maternal femininity, her aggressive behavior, and her fun and outspoken attitude. This is the reason why, in my drawings, I modify the *terrora*'s stereotype while still maintaining characteristics of sensuality, maternal care, agency, and fearlessness in speaking truth to power.

#### **Aggressive-*terrora* Becomes *Agro-terrora***

To discuss the *terrora*'s stereotype as aggressive, violent, and impulsive I analyzed the movie *The Girl with the Pistol*, a comedy directed by Mario Monicelli (1968). In this movie, Monicelli denounces the traditional Sicilian social morés that in the 1960s was still based on the concepts of family honor and a woman's purity. He does it by addressing the traditional Sicilian practice of the honor killing. In the movie, Assunta Patanè, performed by Monica Vitti, is a young Sicilian woman who was mistakenly kidnapped by accomplices of the character Vincenzo Maccaluso, played by Carlo Giuffré. Vincenzo organizes the kidnapping of Assunta's cousin, Carmela, to force her family to consent to their wedding. However, Vincenzo's collaborators confuse Carmela with Assunta, whom they wrongly bring to Vincenzo. Even if Vincenzo does not want to have sex with Assunta, people living in Assunta's town witness her kidnapping and because of this, Assunta expects Vincenzo to marry her because of her compromised honor. Assunta feels the moral obligation of appearing upset about the idea of having sex with Vincenzo, although she is attracted to him. Assunta's behavior provokes Vincenzo's irritation because, according to the Sicilian gendered social norms of the 1960s, an honest woman was supposed to disdain the sexual advances of a man. She was not supposed to have sexual drives or to feel sexual pleasure. Because Assunta experiences physical pleasure during her sexual intercourse

with Vincenzo, he decides not to marry her, and he escapes to the United Kingdom, where he finds a job as a waiter. As a result of this, the only way for Assunta and her family to save their honor is to kill Vincenzo. Sicilian post-war society, at times, included honor killing as a form of accepted retribution. Honor killing was usually performed by the father or the brothers of the dishonored woman. However, in *Girl with a Pistol*, Assunta's father is dead, and her family is composed only of women. Assunta must, therefore, journey to the UK to kill Vincenzo herself. In the movie, Assunta is stereotyped as an impulsive and violent. She is ready to shoot Vincenzo to preserve her honor and the reputation of her family.

Kidnapping and raping a woman to force her to marry him was a common accepted practice in southern Italy before 1981. According to Article 544 of the Italian Penal Code, a man who raped a woman could avoid going to jail by marrying her (Sarogni, 2018). This practice was called *matrimonio riparatore* (wedding of repair), and it was largely practiced in the south of Italy, where social norms of honor and reputation encouraged the victims of rape and their families to consent to the wedding of repair. According to the legal and social practices of much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in southern Italy, a devirginized woman was unsuitable for another man to marry; she was condemned to be rejected by her society unless she consented to marry her rapist.

By referring to the character of Assunta in my drawing *Assunta* (Figure 1), the *terrona* is represented in a moment of rage, as she furiously threatens an invisible enemy with her gaze. Her mouth is open in the action of speaking, while her body is in motion, her disheveled hair covers one of her eyes. By placing *Assunta* next to other drawings, representing Mediterranean animals and plants, such as *Rosemary* (Figure 2), *Boar* (Figure 3), *Tomatoes* (Figure 4), and *Pheasant* (Figure 5), I connect the *terrona's* violent and impulsive personality to the Mediterranean landscape and to the management of its resources. In my grouping of drawings (Figures 1 to 5), the *terrona's* energetic personality represents a fundamental skill to practice a sustainable way to cultivate vegetables and to breed animals. I imagine the *terrona's* volcanic temperament as being a renewable energetic source that she uses to create ecological food production and agrarian methods that presuppose a constant exchange of energies, information,

and sustenance between the person and her landscape. From this perspective, the *terrona*, by possessing an exceptional vitality and mental strength, represents the best candidate to administer the resources of her land and to be in holistic dialogue with the Mediterranean environment.



Figure 1. *Assunta*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021), revisions the *terrona* in the film, *The Girl with the Pistol* (Monicelli, 1968), who takes revenge against the man who raped her.



Figure 2. *Rosemary*, a plant native to the Mediterranean region and the title of Francesca Brunetti's (2021) 8"x11" ink drawing, is juxtaposed with *Assunta*, to signal her resiliency.



Figure 3. In the 8”x11” ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021), titled *Boar*, she revises the *terrona* as intelligent, self-aware, creative, and empathetic, characteristics attributed to the wild boar, an animal that has inhabited the deciduous forests of Mediterranean for centuries (Hamlett, 2021).



Figure 4. Francesca Brunetti (2021), 8”x11” ink drawing, *Tomatoes*, a vegetable intricately linked to Italian cuisine, has a political history with bias against the tomatoes as poisonous because it belongs to the nightshade family of vegetables and because it is cultivated close to the dirt. The drawing evokes roots, histories, and misperceptions of the *terrona*.



Figure 5. In Francesca Brunetti (2021), 8”x11” ink drawing, *Pheasant*, she shows the stride of pride exhibited by a bird that is difficult to trap given its characteristics of excellent sight, hearing, and the ability to run fast, swim, and fly.

#### Sexy *Terrona* Revisioned as Happy *Terrona*

In my drawings, I also consider the *terrona*'s attractive and provocative temperament that, in Italian dominant patriarchal culture, is intended to provide enjoyment for heterosexual males. In my artistic work, this enjoyment is transformed into a superpower possessed by the *terrona* offering her the capacity to experience exceptional sensorial pleasure by connecting with the resources of her environment. To explore how the *terrona* has been represented as sexualized and objectified, I analyzed the movie *The Gold of Naples*, directed by Vittorio De Sica (1954). The movie was a big success, and it cashed a sum that nowadays approximately corresponds to 19 million euros. The popularity of this movie consecrated Sophia Loren as an important actor (Enrico Magrelli, 2019). *The Gold of Naples* is divided into six episodes, and it is based on the novel *L'Oro di Napoli* by Giuseppe Marotta (1947). One of the movie's episodes is *Pizze a credito* (pizzas on credit) where Loren plays the main character, Sofia. The movie is set in Naples during the 1950s in the Materdei neighborhood. Sofia and her husband, Rosario, run a little pizza kiosk consisting of a table on the street at the entrance of their house where they knead and fry pizzas. Sofia's and Rosario's house is comprised of a room, visible from the street, which functions as a bedroom to sleep at night and as laboratory where to make pizzas during the day. The episode

is entirely played in Neapolitan dialect, and it has a low-class urban setting.

In the first scene Sofia is with her lover Alfredo. They are in a shoe storage, which is probably the warehouse of Alberto's shoe shop. In the scene, Alfredo is without his shirt and is wearing a tank top. While Sofia is hastily combing her hair and getting dressed, Alberto kisses and embraces her while begging her to not go away. Sofia smiles and playfully breaks free from Alfredo's hugs. In the second scene Sofia exits the shoe storage and walks on the street in the direction of her pizza kiosk. This scene offers to the viewer the opportunity of appreciating Sofia's provocative body. She wiggles with fast and firm steps wearing a tight black skirt and a very low-cut white blouse, which emphasizes her voluptuous breasts. After she arrives at the pizza kiosk where her husband is waiting for her, Sofia starts to knead and fry pizzas. While doing this, she invites people walking on the street to come to buy her pizza by addressing them with a loud and shrill voice.

The kiosk's table where Sofia prepares her pizzas is placed between the street and the entrance of her house. Sofia's position at the threshold between the private and public space, her house and the street, is consistent to how Sofia is presented in the movie as a married woman who nevertheless encourages other men to conquest her. This dynamic is represented in the scene where Sofia's and Rosario's clients arrive at the kiosk. Several of them after buying their pizza instead of leaving stay in front of the kiosk looking at Sofia. They observe her while she kneads the dough, and they enjoy how this action provokes Sofia's breasts to lean forward revealing the absence of a bra. The movements of Sofia's arms cause the sleeves of her very low-cut top to move and uncover her shoulders. The clients wait until Sofia's husband is out of earshot to make explicit lewd comments related to her body and her breasts. Sofia reacts to these comments by laughing and joking even if some of these men are old, toothless, and unattractive. One of these clients is a young, good-looking man that after buying his pizza consumes it while staring at Sofia. The scene suggests a parallel between the pleasure that the young man is feeling by eating food and his desire to possess and enjoy Sofia's body. He desires to consume Sophia's body in the same way as he is consuming his pizza. Sofia responds to this action by smiling and laughing suggesting a mixture of flattery and temptation.

We can analyze this scene through the lens of the concept of "male gaze" that Mulvey (1975) explains in her landmark film theory essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey (1975) addresses how the gender inequality that characterizes society is reflected in Hollywood movies in terms of their narrations, cinematographic techniques, and fruition. According to Mulvey (1975), in these movies women are observed as a sexualized objects by both the movie's male characters and the movie's male viewers. *The Gold of Naples* is such an example of the "male gaze" theory in practice. During the scene representing Sofia's clients looking at her and appreciating her body Sophia's behavior suggests that in the same way as she cheated on her husband at the beginning of the movie, she is willing to do it again with some of her clients. In observing this scene, the movie's male spectator feels part of this group of suitors peeking at Sofia's neckline and desiring to possess her body. *The Gold of Naples* promotes sexist views about the relationships between men and women, where the men harassing Sofia are not represented as annoying and inappropriate; rather, they are shown to be innocently paying homage to the beauty of a young woman. Under De Sica's direction, Loren performs the character of Sofia as naturally inclined to satisfy men's voyeurism. Consequentially, the male spectator, by feeling a part of the group that compose Sofia's clients feels free to objectify Sofia without questioning his behavior.

In my drawings I transform the objectified Sophia into a woman experiencing pleasure and satisfaction. I do this by showing the *terrona* while she is eating and smelling delicious food, watching the sea, swimming in the ocean, and touching her body. These activities are represented in the drawings *Strangozzi* (Figure 6), *Dive* (Figure 7) and *T-Spot* (Figure 8). In the *Gold of Naples*, Sofia's body is presented as a public sexualized object that everybody can openly observe and appreciate. In my redesigned *terrona* I subvert this sexist dynamic where the *terrona* is not the one that provides pleasure to others, rather, she is the one that feels pleasure by connecting to the elements that compose her surrounding environment.



Figure 6. Francesca Brunetti's (2021) 8"x11" ink drawing titled, *Strangozzi*, references the Italian wheat pasta produced, particularly, in the Umbria region in central Italy.



Figure 7. *Dive*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021) shows the bold agency of a woman diving into pleasure, being immersed in the soothing and healing waters of the Mediterranean Sea.



Figure 8. In *G-Spot*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021) suggests women finding their sexual pleasure by locating their own erotic zones.

To visually convey my redesigned *terrona*'s ability to feel sensorial pleasure in the drawings *Strangozzi*, *Dive*, and *T-Spot*, I consider how the *terrona* has been addressed by the contemporary Neapolitan novelist Elena Ferrante (2011) in *My Brilliant Friend*. The way Ferrante describes Lenù, the novel's main character, offers a point of reference to deconstruct the traditional image of the *terrona* represented in *The Gold of Naples* by Sofia.

*My Brilliant Friend* narrates the story of two baby-girls, Lenù and Lila, in a neighborhood in the outskirts of Naples right after the Second World War. Lenù and Lila are bright and smart, and during their elementary school years, they become best friends. They are both from the same low-socio economic background. Their destinies change when after the end of elementary school, Lenù has the opportunity to continue her education by going to middle school where instead Lila has to go to work with her father and her brother in the family's shoe shop. As the result of this division, Lila will spend her life in the Neapolitan neighborhood where she was born while Lenù will be able to travel, study, and discover the world outside of Naples.

One of these discoveries is represented by Lenù's first encounter with the Mediterranean Sea during the summer vacation of her first year of high



school. Lenù has the chance to spend her holidays in Ischia, an island in front of Naples. Ferrante describes the beach of Ischia thusly: “The beach was endless and deserted, with a granular sand that rustled at every step. The sea gave off an intense odor and a sharp, monotonous sound” (Ferrante, 2011, pp. 201-202). At the beach in Ischia, Lenù for the first time experiences the sensorial pleasure of swimming in the sea and she becomes aware of the well-being that the contact with the Mediterranean Sea could bring to her body.

The first encounter with the Mediterranean Sea represents for Lenù the beginning of a mental and physical change. She realizes her passion for travelling and the need to explore the world outside the restricted borders of the neighborhood where she was born. She gets tan, and the acne inflammation on her face heals. By spending her days swimming and taking in the sun, she develops a great appetite that she satisfies by enjoying the delicious local food: “In other words, the last ten days of July gave me a sense of well-being that I had never known before. I felt a sensation that later in my life was often repeated: the joy of the new” (Ferrante, 2011, p. 202). By connecting with the Mediterranean environment, Lenù realizes aspects of herself that she was previously not aware. She comprehends her desire of enjoying life and claiming an existence made of happiness and satisfaction.

Lenù’s mental change can be interpreted as a consequence of a physical event where the materiality of the Mediterranean environment produces a cultural metamorphosis which meets Lenù’s physical desires. These corporeal aspirations are conveyed in my drawings *Strangozzi*, *Dive*, and *T-Spot* where the *terrona* is represented in the action of plunging herself into the water, feeling gustatorial pleasure, and experiencing autoeroticism. By presenting these three drawings as a vertical triptych I intend to suggest the opportunities that the connection with the Mediterranean environment can bring to the *terrona*’s existence. I do this by considering how the Mediterranean represents the space into which the *terrona* negotiates the possibility of researching for herself new meanings and significations which are divergent from society’s expected roles of the *terrona*.

### **Mamma-terrona Reclaimed as Eco-terrona**

Another stereotype that I consider in my drawings is that of the *terrona*

as maternal and caring. The movie *Marriage Italian Style*,<sup>4</sup> directed by Vittorio De Sica (1964), for example, narrates the story of a *terrona*, who places her children at the center of her existence and considers every other aspect of her life as insignificant and meaningless. The protagonist of the movie is Filumena (Sophia Loren), a prostitute who is in a relationship with Domenico Soriano (Marcello Mastroianni), the rich owner of a pastry shop. Filumena falls in love with Domenico, and she stays in a relationship with him for more than 20 years. Domenico, even after many years of sentimental involvement with Filumena, always sees her as an ex-prostitute, a woman unsuitable for a serious commitment. When Domenico turns 50, he decides to marry the young cashier of his pastry shop and to sell his business in order to have the money and the freedom to travel the world with his new young wife. Filumena reacts by devising a plan to prevent the marriage between Domenico and the cashier. She fakes a mortal sickness, and, on her deathbed, she expresses the desire to become Domenico’s wife. Domenico consents because he thinks that, within a few hours, after Filumena’s death, he will be single again. However, as soon as they get married, she reveals her trick, and she reproaches him for the years of mortification and humiliation that she has endured. In addition, Filumena reveals the principal reason she wants to be Domenico’s wife. She has three teenage sons from when she was still a prostitute, and she wants her children to have Domenico’s last name. By doing this, her sons can avoid being marked by Italian law as illegitimate children, in keeping with Italian culture in the 1950s (Sarogni, 2018). However, Domenico does not accept the situation, and he obtains an annulment of the marriage. Domenico’s behavior changes when Filumena reveals to him that one of her three children is Domenico’s son. At the end of the movie, Domenico realizes how much he cares about Filumena, and he marries her, living together with her and with her three sons as a family. In the last scene of the movie, Filumena’s cries of joy suggests she has finally accomplished the goal of her life, which was to give to their children a respectable last name: Soriano.

For 20 years, Domenico treated Filumena as a concubine and cheated on

<sup>4</sup> *Marriage Italian Style* was nominated for two Academy Awards. In 1965, Sophia Loren was nominated for Best Actress in a Leading Role and in 1966, the movie was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film. The movie is an adaptation of the play *Filumena Marturano*, written by Eduardo De Filippo (1946).

her through his love affairs with other women. Filumena tolerated this humiliation because she was driven only by the desire of maintaining her children and providing them the material support that they needed. Filumena is represented as having no friends, as constantly working, and as spending all her energy in taking care of her family. Filumena succeeds in providing her children with economic and material support. However, she accomplishes this task by sacrificing her own happiness and well-being.

In my drawings, I represent the positive aspects of Filumena's personality, such as those of being protective and caring for her children; at the same time, I present the *terrona* as a fulfilled and satisfied woman. In this way, I reconfigure the powerless *terrona* by giving her an influential role in her society, which she attains because of her ecological skills. By doing this, I intend to weave a visual thread between the care that the *terrona* feels for her children and the one that she feels for her environment. This connection is visually conveyed by placing the drawing *Kiss* (Figure 9), where the *terrona* is hugging and kissing her daughter, next to other drawings representing Mediterranean animals and plants, such as *Caper Flower* (Figure 10), *Hens* (Figure 11), *Octopus* (Figure 12) and *Chives* (Figure 13).



Figure 9. In *Kiss*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021), maternal love is recognized as a valuable practice of care.



Figure 10. *Caper Flower*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021) presents a sweetly fragrance flower, which is an ancient perennial native to the Mediterranean, as a metaphor for women opening up to their own sexual pleasure.

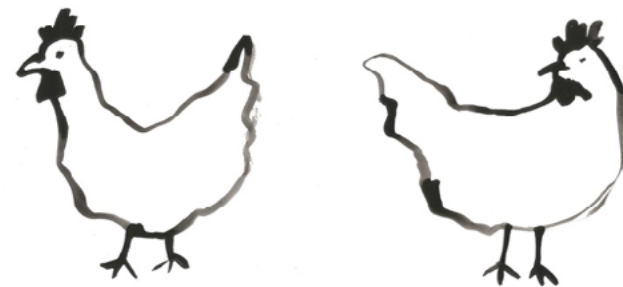


Figure 11. *Hens*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021) references the commonality of everyday life in rural Italy in which chickens are part of the community and roam freely.



Figure 12. *Octopus*, an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021), is a native of the Mediterranean Sea and is an important fishery resource and valuable to ecosystem of the sea. It is patient yet strong, sustenance yet flexibly responsive to environmental conditions, displaying creativity and intelligence.



Figure 13. *Chives* is an 8"x11" ink drawing by Francesca Brunetti (2021), and a plant commonly added to hummus, a Mediterranean diet staple known for promoting good health.

In *Marriage Italian Style*, Filumena sacrifices her happiness to provide sustain and happiness to her children. She is represented as an intelligent woman that manages to run Domenico's pastries shops while he travels the world and spends money. Filumena works hard to make sure that Domenico's businesses produce good incomes so she can use them to support her children. In doing this, her organization and managerial skills are not recognized and appreciated by Domenico and the society where Filumena lives. In my drawings, I present a counter-narrative to communicate that the *terrona's* resourcefulness of providing for her children and skills in organizing the resources of her environment result from her practice of care. I transform through my drawings the Italian conventional way of understanding care as a practice that is performed by women to support their family in the confinement of their domestic space to the *terrona's* skill to nurture the entire ecosystem where she lives. In reclaiming care as valuable and respectable acts, the *terrona* in my drawings merge her enjoyment as a mother with her economic independence and social recognition.

### Conclusion: Feminist Counter-narratives as Arts-based Visual Culture Research

My imaginative experiment about the *terrona's* reconfiguration has the potential of providing new avenues for women to explore alternative ways to live their lives. In my work, I decided to focus on a specific territory and on its material and cultural aspects to fantasize about possible strategies for southern Italian women to achieve empowerment and satisfaction. My investigation about the *terrona's* culture and material world do not apply to other geographical and cultural realities. Because of this, the revision of pejorative stereotypes that I propose to the *terrona's* oppression do not have the pretense of being general and universal. However, my work proposes arts-based research methodologies that can be used as a point of reference to realize artistic feminist projects of counter-narratives to hegemonic cultural narratives. As Braidotti (2013) maintains, the challenges that characterize our contemporary reality encourage academia "to undertake a leap forward into the complexities and paradoxes of our times. To meet this task, new conceptual creativity is needed" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 54). Implications for further study may include analyzing a certain geographic area to examine the cultural and artistic artifacts that contribute to creating and reinforcing the patriarchal

stereotypes about women distinctive of that society.

In my case, I analyzed movies to discuss the stereotype of the *terrona* as aggressive, sexualized, and maternal. I used irony and imagination to turn these patriarchal women's representations into positive characteristics that women can use to improve their material and social condition. To do this, I re-envisioned the *terrona* by considering the creative strategy used by Cavarero (1999) in her philosophy of the sexual difference and the relationship between ecology and feminism discussed by Braidotti (2013) and Shiva (2022). In my project I transformed the *terrona's* impulsive and choleric personality into renewable ecological energy, which she adopts to practice sustainable agronomic activities. Her buxom and provocative body is transformed into an organism that has the superpower of feeling exceptional sensorial pleasure. According to the Italian dominant way of thinking about the *terrona*, the heterosexual man is the one that consumes and objectifies the *terrona's* body; by doing this, he feels sexual pleasure. In my reconfiguration, however, it is the *terrona* that feels pleasure by connecting her body with the resources of her environment. The *terrona's* maternal attitude, and her capability of taking care of and nurturing her children, are turned into the *terrona's* capability of taking care of and creating prosperity in the entire ecosystem where she lives. In my work, I use drawing to visually represent the *terrona* in a way that is different than how patriarchal culture has represented her in films and other media. This way of conducting academic research provides historical and environmental information about specific cultures and geographic areas while at the same time offering the freedom of creatively playing with this information to make artistic projects to fantasize about alternative ways to explore women's material, political, and cultural existences.

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### About the Author

**Francesca Brunetti** is a Teaching Fellow at the Institute of Creativity and Innovation at Xiamen University in China. She is an artist and a scholar interested in the intersection between drawing, gender studies, and ecology. She pursued an interdisciplinary and international education in Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She earned her BA and MA in Philosophy from La Sapienza University of Rome. She also has a MA in Communication Design from the Glasgow School of Art. On moving to the US, she obtained a PhD in Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Dallas. She has been included in several group and solo shows in the US, Europe, and Japan; held teaching appointments at U.S., European and Asian universities; presented her artistic projects at international academic conferences; and published articles about her work in peer-reviewed journals. She can be reached at [francescabrunetti@hotmail.it](mailto:francescabrunetti@hotmail.it).