

## **Mobilizing around motherhood: successes and challenges for women protesting toxic waste in Campania, Italy**

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*This paper examines the relationship between neoliberal governance of waste and women's environmental activism in the Italian region of Campania, which has been suffering from several decades of illegal dumping. By analyzing narratives of the waste struggles taking place in the region as they appeared in three large Italian newspapers, I discuss how environmental degradation in Southern Italy's peripheries is creating new spaces for women's participation and oppression. . While receiving only limited coverage in mainstream newspapers, women's anti-waste groups in Campania have organized extensively around seemingly conservative notions of motherhood. This strategic use of traditional gender identities is central to women's efforts opposing top-down, mainstream narratives of Campania's waste crisis as a local problem resulting from citizens' lack of environmental consciousness. The analysis reveals ways in which women suffer from and resist to male-dominated, neoliberal politics reconfiguring Campania's territory for the purpose of international waste disposal.*

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, problems of waste accumulation and groundwater contamination in Southern Italy have been a recurring concern for local citizens and governments. Dramatic images of toxic waste burning next to agricultural fields and of uncollected trash covering Naples and Caserta's landmark neighborhoods have made the headlines of national newspapers regularly and occasionally appeared in international media as well (Corona and Fortini, 2012). Although the most spectacular media depictions of Campania's waste problems appeared only after 2005, its history of waste has been controversial since at least the 1980s, when criminal organizations began to use local landfills and impromptu dumpsites to dispose of industrial waste coming from Northern Italy and Germany (D'Alisa, 2010).

Concurrently to criminal investigations, a series of law enforcement, journalist and academic efforts have also called the attention to the responsibilities of state and economic actors in generating the crisis (Andretta, 2009; D'Alisa et al., 2010; Graziani, 2013). These efforts include inspections of landfills in Mount Vesuvius National Park (Gravetti, 2010) and investigations of the faulty tenders surrounding the incinerator in the town of Acerra (D'Alisa et al., 2010). In October 2013, a bi-partisan government commission studying illegal dumping<sup>2</sup> released a series of previously secret court documents containing explicit references to illegal waste traffics through Campania, highlighting how the latter enjoyed the implicit or explicit consent of industrial and state actors (Graziani, 2013).

The emergence of such a widespread, human-made environmental disaster is revealing of widespread inequalities within and among countries of the Global North (Wallerstein, 2004). In

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<sup>2</sup> Commissione Bicamerale d'Inchiesta sul Ciclo dei Rifiuti

terms of waste politics, such inequality comprises institutional and economic forces shaping a particular region to dispose of toxic waste coming from neighboring and distant places. This paper examines women's mobilization against such oppressive forces at the level of rural townships dealing first hand with illegal dumping. By doing so, it seeks to address how neoliberal governance of waste in Campania resulted in new spaces for women's participation to civil society and at the same time new instances of gendered oppression. For this purpose, I discuss how women's movements resorted to traditional notions of gender roles to organize anti-waste campaigns and to delegitimize mainstream narratives of the crisis portraying grassroots' efforts as rowdy manifestation of NIMBY syndromes (Corona and Fortini, 2012). .

Empirically, this paper illustrates the efforts and narratives of two groups of women, Postcards Mothers and Volcano Mothers, which played a prominent role in grassroots mobilization against toxic waste. Both groups have incorporated patriarchal notions of motherhood as an inherently emotional existential condition to mobilize against a male-dominated neoliberal state they accuse of jeopardizing their territory. Discussing the strategies activists used and setbacks they risked can clarify how neoliberal governance of waste in Italy and in the EU is generating new instances of empowerment and exclusion for women (Carlassare, 1994; Alvarez, 2002; Gille, 2009).

This research combines theories of neoliberal governance (Brenner, 1999; Sassen, 2003) with studies of environmental justice addressing the race, class and gender inequalities linked to unequal exposure to environmental hazards (Ernst, 1994; Schultz, 2003; Gutbertlet, 2012). This intersection situates Campania's waste crisis as the product of global forces exacerbating social inequalities along the intersecting lines of gender, class, ethnicity and nationality. I further rely on the work of subaltern studies (Spivak's, 1990), eco-feminists (Carlassare, 1994 and 2000;

Gaard, 2011) and feminist political ecologists (Rocheleau et al., 1996) to discuss the seemingly traditional understandings of motherhood underlying women's mobilizations.

This paper speaks to various concerns. First, feminist activists' and journalists denouncing governing bodies, mainstream media and police forces for ignoring, silencing and physically repressing women's experiences with waste in Campania (Rifiuti e Uomini che Rifiutano le Responsabilità, 2008; Zagaria, 2011). Second, by analyzing empowering and oppressive narratives of women's activism, this paper discusses the role of gender in present-day civil society: particularly in terms of women's efforts, discursive (Carlassare, 1994) to politicize the private domain (Bru-Bistuer, 1998; Armiero, 2008). Finally, by situating the empirical case study in the context of neoliberal governance, this research links women's narratives of oppression and resistance to global forces and local circumstances.

### **Waste in Campania**

Accumulation of toxic waste in Campania began in the 1980s, when criminal organizations operating in the area began to offer convenient waste disposal services to industries located in Northern Italy, but also in France and in Germany (Armiero, 2014). These waste traffic routes employed lawful landfills designed for regional urban waste, as well as a series of impromptu unregistered dumpsites to dispose of industrial waste (D'Alisa et al, 2010; Legambiente, 2013). Such practices compromised trash collection services in residential areas and contaminated soils and groundwater in the region's agricultural peripheries, where the majority of authorized and unauthorized landfills are located (Armiero, 2008). Government interventions however focused primarily on solving issues of trash collection in upper-class urban neighborhoods, leaving the predominantly working-class citizens of small peripheral towns to bear the sanitary and

economic burdens of toxic waste contamination. Most of these interventions responded to the national rather than the regional government's concerns, as Campania's waste crisis led the Prime Minister to appoint a special commissioner to manage all waste-related matters in the area. This form of centrally appointed waste administration lasted between 1992 and 2008 (Armiero and D'Alisa, 2010).

The environmental hazards of the waste crisis reflect and aggravate a series of social hierarchies in the region. First, a notorious socio-economic divide between northern southern regions, by which the latter became more easily or readily exploitable for environmental risks; within Campania, there are also regional inequalities between urban and rural areas (D'Alisa et al, 2010; Armiero, 2014). Government plans to enhance the number of landfills and incinerators in Campania's peripheries for the benefit of distant industries and local cities further aggravated such divides (D'Alisa et al., 2010). Such measures in fact rely on narratives of Campania's waste issues blaming local citizens' poor recycling practices as the main cause for a crisis that criminal organizations aggravated (Corona and Fortini, 2012). This autocratic discourse served the important purpose of co-opting Italian public opinion and Campania's urban middle classes' to support government interventions to build new incinerating plants and landfills as the only way to restore trash collection (hence traffic and tourism) in the cities (Pasotti, 2009). From this perspective, protests in the region's peripheries were merely episodes of NIMBY syndrome turning urban middle classes into the victims of allegedly rowdy and self-centered rural communities (Corona and Fortini, 2012).

Grassroots movements in the peripheries of Campania, particularly in the northeast province of Caserta and in the area surrounding Mount Vesuvius, have been advocating for an alternative narrative of the crisis. These alternative narratives depict Campania's waste crisis as a

decades-long process featuring a coalition of criminal, state and economic actors allowing toxic waste to accumulate in their territories, regardless of the negative outcomes that this could have on local communities' health and on the quality of life in their municipalities (Armiero, 2008). Although activist groups had been mobilizing since at least 2006, it was not until the fall of 2013 that their claims became somewhat acknowledged on the part of political discourse and urban civil societies in Italy. This shift resulted from a series of events, including group of mothers' pleas to the president of the republic (Terra dei Fuochi, Patricello e le Mamme da Napolitano, 2014) and a series of demonstrations in downtown Naples and other localities (De Rosa, 2013). Finally, the disclosure of Schiavone's confessions, which had remained under state secrecy since 1997, testified the Italian government's awareness of toxic waste traffics in Campania as early as the mid-1990s (Graziani, 2013). These events fostered public awareness of a different set of concerns associated with illegal dumping, particularly the possibility of increased cancer mortality in the contaminated areas. By advocating for the end of dumping and purification of Campania's peripheries, grassroots' movements demand the right to live in a safe environment, claiming Campania's territory for agriculture and tourism in opposition to government and business schemes (Terra dei Fuochi, la Strage dei Bambini, 2013).

### **Re-territorializing Campania**

Political discourse, and to an extent scholars discussing waste in Campania approached the issue as a national or local problem resulting from an environmentally-unfriendly culture, criminal organizations or bad governance (Corona, 2009; Pasotti, 2009; Corona and Fortini, 2012); only a few Italian historians refer to it from a global perspective (Armiero, 2014; Petrillo, 2009). This section expands on the latter scholarship by introducing a transnational studies framework situating Campania's recent history of waste in relation to global trends and local particularities.

These theories understand neoliberal capitalism as a set of forces reconfiguring places and spatial relationships (Brenner, 1999; Sassen, 2000) through present-day forms of accumulation by dispossession (Ernst, 1994). I intersect this broad framework with empirically grounded, gendered perspectives on environmental justice (Carlassare, 1994; Rocheleau et al, 1996; Davies, 2008) to reflect on the effects of such reconfiguring forces on gender relationships at the local level.

A substantive portion of globalization scholarship describes the current era as one of hypermobility, where commodities, money, people and ideas are constantly flowing from one place to another at an unprecedented speed: such movements are possible because of technological innovations as well as market deregulations (Appadurai, 1999; Giddens, 2002; Harvey, 2007). A number of supranational actors, national governments and scholars are somewhat optimistic towards such processes, expecting that the reduction of state apparatuses would promote development and equality worldwide. Their optimism however has encountered several critiques: in particular, authors such as Sassen (2000), Brenner (1998) and more recently Margaret Somers (Block and Somers, 2014), have criticized global market deregulation starting from global flows' need for physical, institutional and ideological infrastructure makes them interdependent with nation-state regulations. By linking the flow of commodities, labor and money to physical places, such theorists investigate how neoliberal market forces operate, in opposition or in agreement with state and local forces, to reconfigure such localities (Sassen, 2003). Some of these spatial fixities include industries and transportation hubs, but also waste treatment facilities. In the European Union, governments and industries must dispose of waste close to production sites, encouraging governments to install the necessary infrastructure within its boundaries and sovereignty (Davies, 2008). According to Sassen (2000), the need for



infrastructure requires at least some degree of corroboration between state actors and market forces; this relationship is often unbalanced as productive economic actors can threaten to relocate (Brenner, 1999).

A central feature of neoliberal governance is nation-states' efforts to foster and retain capital flows within their boundaries: this implies strategizing to make national territories attractive to private and foreign investments while at the same time diversifying the economic capacities of its regions to reduce internal competition (Brenner, 1999). States can thus offer tax breaks to industries and corporations, at the expenses of labor protection laws and of environmental regulations (Doherty et al., 2000; Harvey, 2007). As these measures create vulnerable labor forces and readily available, inexpensive lands, they reconfigure different territories according to the needs and trends of market forces (Brenner, 1999; Sassen, 2000 and 2003).

Campania's history of waste and environmental degradation resonates well with theories of neoliberal de-territorialization. Scholars such as D'Alisa et al (2010) and Armiero (2008) have denounced how governing bodies' priorities in the tenders for the additional incinerators and landfills were low costs and timing, at the expenses of environmental and health safety norms (D'Alisa et al., 2010). Financial concerns and industries' interests were thus more relevant than the threats that malfunctioning facilities could pose to surrounding communities.

### **Women and environmental struggles**

Grounded experiences of environment-related reterritorializations are a concern for various scholarships addressing the social relationships surrounding and resulting from waste related concerns, struggles and human-made disaster (Gille, 2009). While the gendered nature of

such experiences has been on the research agenda of environmental justice since at least the 1970s, eco-feminists and feminist political ecologists have reflected specifically on gender roles and women's concrete experiences of such problematic. Reflecting on Campania's waste crisis through this broad lens can help situate women's grassroots efforts in relation to gender relationships but also class disparities in various contexts, including governance, civil societies and local communities (Alvarez, 2002; Mies, 2007). The over-accumulation of toxic waste in Campania is consistent with a global trend of over-exposing poor communities and ethnic minorities to environmental hazards such as industries, landfills and chemical plants (Ernst, 1994; Beck, 2002, Armiero, 2008). This practice reflects a capitalist logic of accumulation by dispossession, but also an assumption that certain marginalized groups are less capable of mobilizing and resisting (Gould, 1998; Mohai, Pellow and Roberts, 2009). For this reason, these efforts rely heavily on governing bodies and economic actors' ability to coopt expert knowledge, thus presenting environmental concerns as technical, rather than political, matters (Mukerji, 2010), a logic that oftentimes undermining grassroots' attempts to refute such claims (Salleh, 2003).

De-politicizing environmental matters discredits the experiences, knowledge and concerns that grassroots actors may have. Eco-feminist and political ecologists argue that the marginalization of non-expert knowledge silences the daily experiences that communities at large, but particularly women have of and pollutants, thus allowing environmental degradation to exacerbate gender inequalities (Leach, 2007; Alaimo, 2008; Shiva, 2009). This happens through some pollutants and hazards that damage women's health more than men's (Schultz et al., 2003), but also in terms of resource management and of additional burdens on domestic labor and women's work (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Salleh, 2003). A diverse body of empirical scholarship

denounced several circumstances in which environmental sustainability becomes part of women's unpaid labor, as volunteers or as homemakers (Schultz, 1993; Miraftab, 2004; Gutbertlet, 2012).

Concerns for the well-being of their families and communities recur as main reasons for women's decision to become involved with environmentalist efforts and struggles occurring in the private sphere and in the context of social movements. Empirically grounded studies in both eco-feminism (Carlassare, 2000) and feminist political ecology (Gaard, 2011) indicate that health related concerns are often central to women's groups organizing around environmental concerns. It rather common for such groups connect their efforts to the work of social reproduction, for example ensuring a clean and sanitary environment for their families or volunteering to improve living conditions in their neighborhoods (Bellows, 1996; Miraftab, 2004). The underlying association of traditional gender norms with environmental preservation, at the material and theoretical level, is controversial. Various feminist political ecologists and eco-feminists have highlighted how such ideology creates yet constrains women's engagement with the public sphere (Bellows et al., 1996) and risks reinforcing essentialist notions of womanhood (Gaard, 2011). However, feminist scholars engaging with subaltern studies have counter-argued that deploying a seemingly traditionalist discourse on gender roles can be strategic to both mobilizing (Spivak, 1990) and to dismantle patriarchal narratives (Carlassare, 1994; Gaard, 2011).

Many women mobilizing against toxic waste, landfills and incinerators in Campania have done so in response to the threats these pose to their families, to pregnant women and to their communities. By doing so, they are de facto linking the sphere of private life to the one of national politics (Miler et al., 1996; Armiero, 2014). Women's groups have successfully turned their everyday experiences of a polluted environment into claims for just governance, through

their traditional roles of caregivers for sickly children and family members. Specific claims, for sanitation and alternative waste management strategies, deconstruct not only capitalistic accumulation by dispossession but also male dominance over their territories.

### **Narratives of Campania's waste crisis**

In the following section I will be analyzing narratives of Campania's waste crisis appearing in three large newspapers publishing locally and nationally: these are La Repubblica, Il Corriere della Sera (including the Southern Italian affiliate Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno) and Il Mattino. To focus on issues of waste in Campania in the specific period 2008-2013, I performed an advanced search on the online archive of these headlines crossing year of publication, location of the reports, and keywords such as "Trash emergency", "Waste Crisis" and "Waste Protests". At the end of this initial research, I could identify the key actors according to newspapers targeting predominantly urban middle classes. As these articles rarely mentioned women, I searched the database again, with gender-specific keywords such as "women" and in a second time "mothers": This search directed me to two women's groups, Postcards Mothers and Volcano Mothers, whose narratives represent the empirical core of this paper.

Until September 2013, the main themes that the media discussed with regards to Campania's waste crisis are government spending, inefficiency or corruption of state bureaucracy, and infrastructure; throughout this period, flash news denouncing accumulation of urban waste in the street also abound. Government spending concerns include the cost of establishing new infrastructure (Sannino, 2008; Russo, 2013), but also of waste shipments towards other regions or nations (Demarco, 2013). Issues of toxic contaminating lands and groundwater appear in 2013 in a conjuncture of events including the publication of a health

report attributing the growth in mortality rate observed in the area to lifestyle choices rather than exposure to toxic waste as well as the aforementioned confessions of former mob leader Carmine Schiavone (Sannino, 2013).

### *Women at the protests*

The problem of toxic waste contamination in Campania's peripheries became part of mainstream discourse in 2013, when Health Minister Balduzzi and a team of medical experts organized a press conference in the town of Aversa. The purpose of the event was presenting the findings of a government-funded study showing no correlation between the high cancer mortality rates in Campania and toxic waste contamination (Esposito, 2013). The study further argued that cancer mortality in contaminated areas are more likely the outcome of culturally-driven, irresponsible lifestyles and of hepatitis C in the population (Sardo, 2013): unsurprisingly, such declarations sounded offensive, patronizing and unacceptable to various activists and communities (Esposito, 2013; Sardo, 2013). Various articles covering the press conference discuss the protests and unrest accompanying the event in very critical or even mocking terms. The center-leftist newspaper *La Repubblica* for example presented a sensational depiction of an angry mob where a group called *Volcano Mothers* were waiting for the minister and of subsequent attacks on the cars where Balduzzi and his team travelled (Sardo, 2013). The article however makes no further mention of *Volcano Mothers* or any other organizations participating in the protest: rather, it focuses on a specific man yelling insults at the minister, sensationalizing someone who may have been a fringe actor in a protest, at the expenses of more organized groups (Bail, 2012).

Ethnographies of Campania's waste crisis (Armiero 2008 and 2011), alternative newspapers (Puglia, 2013; Brancaccio, 2013) and even the images accompanying major

newspaper articles (Rifiuti, Molotov lungo la strada per Terzigno, 2010) show women's groups as central and well-organized actors in Campania's waste protests whose acts of civil disobedience are not necessarily violent (Armiero, 2008).

Mainstream newspapers' focus on the efforts of austere and authoritarian male politicians engaging with the minute technicalities of government spending and waste infrastructures presents a highly gendered narrative that intersects with other disparities, particularly in socio-economic status. Besides the grassroots nature of the waste protests, which featured predominantly middle or working class actors, the non-elected nature of some of the offices in question, as well as politician's lack of personal ties with the territory further accrued the distance between political and activist efforts.

Apart from the already mentioned group Volcano Mothers, which gets no more than a few passing acknowledgements in mainstream newspapers, the one group of women who made local headlines quite often and managed to gain a certain support among ruling elites is known as Postcards' Mothers, in spite of their gender-neutral denomination as Everyone's Parents' Association. Such group is the only example of a group where women from working-class rural areas managed to receive a positive portrayal in mainstream media and at least the formal support of political authorities. A closer analysis at both group's discourse and its portrayals in national newspapers can illustrate the gendered nature of their strategies and its returns.

### *Postcards for better governance*

The group that commonly identifies as "The Mothers of the Postcards" became somewhat prominent in the media early in 2013. This group is made of mothers of cancer-ill or late children who in August 2013 begun working on a series of postcards showing images and stories of late

and sick children in the media (Marconi, 2013). Postcards included children's pictures, photos of their rooms and small messages telling something about their kids- their favorite school subjects, their personality traits, their age when they passed away and the hope that these kids could have represented for their communities and the whole of Italy, "had they been allowed to (live)" (Associazione Genitori di Tutti, 2013). These postcards appeared in all of the largest national newspapers, were displayed during several demonstrations and eventually reached the hands of the President of the Republic, whom the group had repeatedly appealed to in the name of his Neapolitan origins, and to the Pope. Although the president eventually agreed to meet with a delegation and promised his support, the publication of Schiavone's testimony only a few weeks after the meeting reminded public opinion that Napolitano had been Minister of Interior Affairs when such depositions were placed under state secrecy; according to someone, this questioned Napolitano's integrity (Graziani, 2013).

Among the various grassroots groups protesting illegal dumping in Campania, Postcards' Mothers seems to be the most successful in terms of obtaining mainstream media's and politicians' attentions. Part of their efforts and engagement with ruling bodies enjoys the active support of Caivano's local parish, with rector Patricello maintaining the group in touch with President Napolitano and other political figures (Demarco, 2014).

Some of the key elements to their successes' include feelings of sympathy for their losses and/or struggles as caregivers of cancer patients, but also their seemingly apolitical discourse. Media portrayals of these mothers place them in private places, such as their living rooms or their late children's bedrooms. Descriptions of their struggles are laden with feelings of anguish and despair, with headlines such as "The mothers cry in pain, don't abandon us Mr. President" (Terra dei Fuochi, Patricello e le Mamme da Napolitano, 2013) and "You knew everything Mr.

President, and did not do a thing about it” (Lettera Aperta al Presidente della Repubblica, 2013).

Other articles describe mothers’ “Silent protests, with everyone holding on to an image of somebody they lost to cancer” and the tragedies of how they unconsciously poisoned their bodies and the ones of their children, just by breathing and preparing food (...). About the lack of a causal link between cancer mortality and toxic waste, what sense does it make to bring up “incorrect life styles for children?”(Marconi, 2013).

The association’s official website, Genitori di Tutti (Everyone’s Parents) presents a slightly different image of the Postcards’ Mothers. First, although the gender-neutral Everyone’s Parents’ appears as official denomination, activists are aware that the greater public knows them as “Postcards’ Mothers”: indeed, all of the activists figuring in the website are women. Second, although testimonials of their late children are the most notorious of their initiatives, it is not the only one. Through their website, the group collects a series of resources including videos, songs and fliers to educate the public about Campania’s toxic waste contamination as well as civic and environmental values. Comparing mainstream media coverage of Postcards’ Mothers’ activism with the group’s own statements shows that while the group does not actively portray itself as one of helpless victims, they nonetheless advocate for better governance or change from within existing institutions. This is particularly evident in an open letter to President Napolitano and to the Pope:

“We are the mothers of the postcards, the mothers of the “fighting angels<sup>3</sup>” We live in a region that has been used as a dumpsite for half of Europe on the part of criminals and business men, who have de facto declared our death sentences (...). We posed in such postcards seeking

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<sup>3</sup>“Fighting Angels” refers to prematurely departed children and/or loved ones



help and the truth, and to alert of an increase in neoplastic diagnoses in our communities. We demand to know: where you aware of all of this, Mr President? (...) We still have hope and want to believe in the state” (Lettera Aperta al Presidente della Repubblica, 2013).

The Postcards Mothers’ activism blends in traditional gender roles with Catholicism; working together with the local parish, they engage in dialogue with high-ranking politicians, but refuse any political affiliation. The seemingly a-political character of their mobilization may reflect the unpopularity and low credibility that governing bodies enjoy in Southern Italy (Corona and Fortini, 2012). Articulating their claims for social justice through the languages of motherhood, loss and religiosity might thus establish the group’s credibility within the community more effectively than through political affiliations (Alvarez, 2002)

This strategy’s success appeared very clearly in an article published on the alternative newsletter Parallelo41 praising “The Postcards’ Mothers in the Lands of the Fires are much more credible than politicians, labor unions and their politics” (Puglia, 2014)

### *Volcano-like motherhood*

The newspapers discussed in this paper provide a much more extensive coverage to the group Postcards Mothers than to the more militant Volcano Mothers. The latter appears in five articles describing such activists as (occasionally rowdy) protesters. For example, La Repubblica’s coverage of Balduzzi’s trip to Campania describes how “the minister was greeted by a group of ‘volcanic moms’ (quotation marks in the article) and an angry mob” (Sardo, 2013). Volcano Mothers’ efforts however received ample coverage in alternative media such as Parallelo 41 and Napoli Today as well as social media. Activists and sympathetic journalists publish declarations that are generally incriminating or confrontational towards authorities that they identify as male:

“We are mothers who scream their pain and demonstrate their anger from the bottom of the ‘mountain’, while being subject to the indifference of men” (Brancaccio, 2013 a). In spite of such inclinations or undertones, the group explicitly defines itself as a-political and diverse, made of a heterogeneous group of women (Puglia, 2013). The personal histories and biographies of group members in fact show a very diverse group in terms of age and work status, with professional categories including schoolteachers, lawyers and homemakers. A closer look at this group’s discourse can clarify further gender dynamics in Southern Italian politics.

The concerns underlying Volcano Mothers’ activism resonate with Postcards’ Mothers, particularly the concerns for cancer diagnoses in the community, especially among children, and the threats illegal dumping poses to their families. Volcano Mothers’ mobilization relies on a different discursive and material repertoire from Postcards Mothers. Volcano Mothers for example have held extensive picket lines in 2010: “To prevent trash trucks and police forces from expanding and accessing landfills in the Vesuvius National Park”. The group was willing to hold their picket lines even through civil disobedience, as they did by “Launching ourselves right in front of moving trucks” or “Holding our ground as police commanders stared at us and order to charge, in the name of the law” (Zagaria, 2011 b).

Volcano Mothers’ activists and sympathizers publish regularly on the alternative newsletter Parallelo41. Their statements contain messages of solidarity for their peers in the northeast region and denounce, “The Italian state for opening a landfill in the middle of Mount Vesuvius, where they hid toxic waste under urban trash” (Brancaccio, 2013; Puglia, 2013). “The government has been feeding industrial lobbies, national and international, with its antidemocratic laws” (Puglia, 2013). Motherhood, a central feature of the group’s self-presentation, appears clearly in their manifestos and introductions “We are mothers, and as such,

we don't make promises but we take action. It is through this uncontainable strength that only a woman, only a mother can have, that we have come together to protest state ecocide" (Puglia, 2013).

Although Volcano Mothers do not seek religious figures to intercede for them with politicians, elements of Catholic religiosity recur rather frequently in the group's public demonstrations. Relying on the area's historical appeal for pilgrims visiting a major shrine honoring the Virgin Mary located at the base of Mount Vesuvius, protestors blend in political and religious symbols in occasion of anti-waste protests and of religious holidays (Malafronte, 2010). Rosary beads for example become useful ways of shaming police forces threatening to charge against the group's pickets, while anti-waste slogans make their way into psalms and hymns performed in religious processions. These hymns blend in Italian, local dialect and English (perhaps to appeal to the large number of tourists visiting the ruins of Pompeii, the shrines and the natural park), alternating prayers of mercy directed at the Virgin Mary with their demands for environmental justice "Nobody listens to us, the Virgin Mary helps us" (Chetta, 2010)

According to mainstream newspapers, Volcano Mothers do not hesitate to take a confrontational attitude towards police and state authorities, which show hardly any interest in talking or meeting with them. Minister Balduzzi, as well as the regional president Caldoro employed armed forces to keep them outside of the venues where they held press conferences or meetings, "Keeping the Volcano Mothers outside the door" (Belardo, 2013). Members of this group have never denied mistrust and hostilities for governing figures: activist Anna Brancaccio for example has declared multiple times: "We will no longer tolerate the state to be an accomplice to this ecocide" (Puglia, 2013). However, it would be reductive to define Volcano Mothers' activism uniquely in terms of verbal and physical clashes with political authorities and

law enforcement: the group has also organized peaceful demonstrations where families could learn or illustrate their ability to reuse and recycle materials within the households, for example in their “Recycling&Playing” event (Zagaria, 2011)

### **Motherhood in Campania’s environmental protests**

Comparing mainstream and grassroots’ narratives of women’s mobilization against toxic waste in Campania illustrates some of the ways in which women are contesting the structural violence resulting from neoliberal governance. Such narratives highlight how in the context of Campania’s long-lasting waste crisis, gender relations change and challenge social hierarchies within local communities and at the level of civil society.

Women have been making a substantive contribution to environmental justice movements in Campania. Women’s groups are mobilizing through various means, discursive and material: these include silent protests and pickets, but also public demonstrations and teaching protests by which communities illustrate their ability to manage their waste production in an environmentally friendly fashion. At a discursive level, women’s groups have challenged governing bodies for the damage that their waste politics have brings upon their families, children in particular, but also communities at large by prioritizing the needs of industrial waste over local development and health. . Volcano Mothers and Postcards mothers construct motherhood as members’ main social identifier and catalyst for their mobilization; however, the way the two groups construct a yet traditional notion of motherhood is rather different, and so is the way they perceive governing bodies. The centrality of motherhood to activists’ claims prompts further reflections on the notions of womanhood, and motherhood, emerging in the context of Campania’s waste crisis.

Volcano Mothers define motherhood as a guarantee of their commitment to social justice and the interests of their communities, a commitment that “Only a woman, only a mother, can have” (Brancaccio, 2013 a) and that will endure, with a volcano-like energy, any attempts of repression from the state or the army. Combining the images of Campania’s explosive volcano with the self-sacrificing devotion of Italian motherhood presents a challenge, almost a dare, to political authorities. Traditional images of women’s roles in society are also present in Volcano Mothers’ educational mission, such as teach-in demonstrations where they entertain their children by showing them, and the community, how to sort and reuse domestic refuse.

Postcards’ Mothers narratives of motherhood are ones of loss and grief, and their pain denounces the unaccountability of criminal organization and the failure of state power in their community. Activists speak of their late children’s with the insider knowledge of the person staying at home caring for them, traditionally a mother’s task. In these stories, they are grounded experts on the risks of toxic waste, and victims, of organized crime and of bad governance. From their exemplary position as mothers of very young victims, they can rely on media’s propensity for extreme stories to gain audience with political elites (Bail, 2012) as well as rector Patricello’s access to Catholic media (Demarco and Patricello, 2013).

Feminist political ecologists have argued that framing and discussing women’s activism in primarily, or in the case of mainstream Italian newspapers, exclusively in relation to traditional gender roles can both facilitate and constrain women’s activism (Bellows et al., 1996). Mobilizing around motherhood can generate support for activists’ immediate concerns but not necessarily a space for them to participate to the decision-making process, or resources that those in charge allocate to these issues (Miller et al., 1996). At a discursive level, organizing around traditional gender role risks essentializing women’s role in society, reinforcing the kind of

biological determinism that ultimately contributes to women's over-exposure to the burdens of environmental hazards. At the same time, resorting to seemingly traditional notions of womanhood among women's groups and feminist scholarship may also underlie a strategic use of essentialism. This would allow vulnerable individuals to identify as a group, and to reclaiming a dignity to their identity (Spivak, 1990). In the context of eco-feminist scholarship, Carlassare (1994) has highlighted how feminists may employ seemingly essentialist notions of womanhood or motherhood to deconstruct political discourses justifying women's oppression.

In the case of Campania's waste crisis, mainstream national newspapers started discussing illegal dumping of toxic waste in rural areas, rather than trash accumulation in Naples, in conjunction with the postcards' initiatives and the mothers' appeals to President Napolitano. However, the image that these articles render of the mothers are anguishing, and evoke compassion rather than suggesting empowerment. Volcano Mothers received much less attention in large national newspapers, where they usually appear as an angry, working-class group of protestors that some journalists even mock. In both cases, the newspapers in question are focusing on an emotional – on an irrational- component of their mobilization. This irrationality derives from motherhood: in one case, pain and loss, in the other, anger against an environmental hazard that they allegedly do not or cannot understand.

Clearly, constructing women's mobilization as irrational reproduces gender inequalities and tropes of women as lesser human beings. Disregarding activists' teaching and community outreach programs, in schools and in their neighborhood, is another aspect of this oppressive discourse, which ultimately allows the police brutality that Volcano Mothers have denounced (Zagaria, 2011).

In spite of these diverse forms of top-down, structural violence, women in Campania are actively resisting the oppressive politics of re-territorialization in Campania. Keeping a distance from party politics and their discursive apparatus is not necessarily harmful to activists' efforts: as Alvarez (2002) suggests, such distance may rather earn social movements some credit and support at the grassroots level. Volcano Mothers and Postcards mothers refuse to associate with any particular political party, which they and many of their fellow citizens view as corrupt, and focus their discourse on the daily struggles that the prolonged waste crisis demands for many local communities.

If mainstream national newspapers presented women's struggles in terms of mothers' emotionality, such stereotypes become an occasion to challenge governing bodies. For both groups discussed in this paper, women have presented themselves as mothers to testify to their commitment and expertise. In the case of Volcano Mothers, traditional notions of mothers as self-sacrificing flip gender disparities around as activists refuse to obey to specifically male politicians whose environmental plans would threaten their families. When Postcards' Mothers made their pain public, they shamed governing bodies into accountable for and to solve the environmental degradation affecting their towns. While the claims that these activists make are not necessarily nor explicitly feminist, both groups are de facto using traditional gender roles to challenge the authority of unreliable male politicians.

By focusing on their children's illness and on the deteriorating quality of life in their towns, these groups have undermined institutional narratives presenting Campania's waste crisis as problem of trash collection in a large, informal city. In identifying the role of governing bodies and industries in the environmental degradation they experiences, these women have identified Campania's waste crisis as a transnational problem (Brenner, 1999). The latter point is

particularly relevant as a variety of scholars had missed or dismissed it (Pasotti, 2009; Corona and Fortini, 2012). Basing their advocacy on the material realities that homemakers in the region experience these groups are putting into a practice a feminist claim linking the domestic sphere to the realm of politics (Alaimo, 2010; Armiero, 2014). The diverse ways in which various mainstream commentators responded to the groups' politics however demonstrates a widespread lack of interest for women's concerns and agency, even among traditionally progressive and feminist circles. While the claims that Postcards' Mothers and Volcano Mothers make are not formally feminist, the consensus that they obtained at the grassroots level might generate more, tangible opportunities for women's participation to local politics in the near future.



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