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SUMMARY

This article proposes an analysis of the narrative ecologies of Sereni's autobiographical novels, *Casalinghitudine* and *Il gioco dei regni*. It includes a discussion of the utopian discourses present in her family and childhood, of her relationships with the maternal figures in her life, and of her take on the cultural concept of mothering – with its connotations related to origin, desire, and genealogy. In the context of assessing the bio-politics of Sereni's testimonial writing, the article teases out, perhaps against the grain of the author's intention, the queer aspects of Sereni's autobiographical accounts, and it places these aspects in the context of today's global ecological concerns – especially those related to fertility and water. The utopian discourses brought to bear on the analysis include those focused on modern science, revolutionary socialism, communism, and Zionism.

KEYWORDS

Queer utopias, narrative ecologies, mothers, waters, the matrixial

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UTOPIAS, METABOLIZED
QUEERING COMMUNISM AND ZIONISM IN CLARA SERENI'S
TESTIMONIAL NARRATIVES

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NARRATIVE ECOLOGIES AND THEIR UTOPIAN PATHS

Clara Sereni's work is at the intersection of three current personal and professional interests of mine, which include the interconnections of ecology and culture; the study and production of testimonial narratives that involve tropes like memory, outness, and trauma; and the elaboration of, as well as participation in utopian visions, families, and laboratories. There is also an important similarity in our lives: both of our fathers were politicians who genuinely believed in their calling to contribute to a better future for the planet, and both of our biological mothers died from cancer when we were quite young.¹ This, I submit, involves a preoccupation with the mother, both as a conventional – and often anti-feminist – social construct, and as a lost – or imagined – utopian space of amniotic liquidity and prenatal hospitality. My reflection on this contrast has been further stimulated by the theoretical work presented by Bracha Ettinger, based in Israel and England. She focuses on the matrixial as a border space modeled on prenatal life where identities collapse and singularities co-emerge in the transsubjective sharing of memories and traumas. In the context of my preoccupation with waters, health, wombs, and mothers, this concept enables interesting readings of the ecology of Sereni's narratives, where the seduction of interrupted female genealogies often seems to compete with the instinct to survive via lateral moves that leave Oedipal origins aside.²

Much as this study is inspired by shared preoccupations and multiple alignments, it focuses on the two books by Sereni that reverberate with memories related to her family, *Casalinghitudine* (1987), and *Il gioco dei regni* (1993). The former is the book that established her reputation as a writer, calling the attention of second-wave Italian women and feminists to her gender-inflected themes and style. The latter is a family saga that confirms and expands this reputation with a wider perspective on the intricacies of twentieth-century history and culture. Both can be viewed as testimonial narratives where the author figures as a witness of personal and family experiences that are significant in the writing of what I have elsewhere called the 'her/stories' of the disempowered and the marginalized.³

Here I propose to read these two books in the context of Sereni's ambivalent relationship to Israel, Judaism, and the utopian discourses therein implied, an

ambivalence which, as I claim, comes from her experience of growing up in a highly utopian early- and mid-twentieth century family where a number of utopian discourses intersected, including Socialism, modernism, Communism, and Zionism. At this early stage of the new millennium, most of the enthusiasm for these utopias has subsided. On the other hand, other utopian discourses have arisen, including those embedded in queer and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) lifestyles and studies, in ecofeminist theory and activism, and in sustainability and gender studies. We live in a time of what ecofeminist Vandana Shiva calls 'water wars', a time of increasing scarcity, privatization, and lack of access to the fresh water all humans need to stay alive. Sea water and its salinity produce increasing desertification in a global-warming climate. Israel, with its evocative power of a land 'promised' as hospitable and fertile, is inevitably inscribed in a wider ecological narrative, as are other utopian gardens built in the desert, including the city of Los Angeles and its surrounding irrigation-based agriculture.⁴ At this junction, the arts loving humans need most are not reproductive, and the scarcity of life-giving liquids needs to be thought, as I propose, through cultural metaphors about pre-natal life and mothers and their related narrative and theoretical deconstructions.⁵

Indeed, if one reads *Il gioco dei regni* with Vandana Shiva's *Water Wars* in mind, one realizes that the early Jewish *kibbutz* founded in pre-World War II Palestine were part of a utopian vision designed to bring fertility and abundance back to the Middle East, an area that had once been the 'fertile crescent' that functioned as the proverbial 'cradle' of western culture. But if one looks at the satellite map of today's Israel and its neighboring countries, as well as at the map of its Integrated National Water Distribution System in the highly documented study by historian Howard Sachar, it becomes apparent that the transformation of Israel's territory into a garden is partly responsible for the expansion of the human-made deserts that surround it.⁶ The former shows scorching deserts east, north-east, and south of Israel's green area; the latter an aqueduct plan, implemented around 1957, designed to pump the fresh water of Lake Galilee, at the border with Syria – and near the area often contended with Lebanon – into Israel's southern irrigated agricultural valley.

I have lived near the border between Southern California and Northern Mexico long enough to know how precarious the lives of migrant Mexicans are – especially when they manpower California's agricultural production – and to empathize with their fellow country people who resent the damming and pumping systems that hoard most usable water out of the Colorado and turn this powerful river into a trickling stream as it reaches the other side. The dystopian character of this contrast is persuasively argued in *Cadillac Desert*, a study of the American West and its disappearing water. As I became involved in this study, I picked up on the similarities between the two situations. As one reads Sereni with these coordinates in mind, the possibility occurs that in both Israel and California some form of utopian modernism was not relinquished on time. This is not meant to imply that either Sereni or I accuse Israel of intending to cause desertification in surrounding areas,

nor of deliberately or intentionally stealing other people's water. Rather, the utopian modernity that inspired Israel and Southern California's development styles was deluded to assume that, if scientifically made to irrigate and fertilize, available water would multiply, just like the amniotic liquid in the uteri of mothers constructed as a culture's natural bodies of reproduction rather than subjects in their own right. The dystopian effects of this presumption can be easily imagined.

To come back to the utopian discourses at play in Clara Sereni's family, predictably we find Zionism. According to historian Walter Laqueur, this utopian discourse was based in forms of secular Jewish nationalism tinged with socialist communitarianism. Its claim to a homeland was founded on nineteenth century romantic sense of patriotism. Historically, the desire to found Israel results from the combined effects of the progressive emancipation of Jews in European countries following the French Revolution, and its resulting successes and backlash – all of which were compounded with post World War II gentile and Jewish survivor guilt about the horrors of the *Shoah*.⁷ However, in Israel the Zionist utopia did not become actualized. According to political and economical scientists Ilan Peppé and Daniel McGowan, dystopian effects manifested early enough: with the end of the British mandate on the region of Palestine in 1948, they note the beginning of what Palestinians call *Nakba*, or 'disaster', which in that culture's historical memory is associated with the massacre of the Arab population in the village of Deir Yassin, near Jerusalem, in the same year of 1948.⁸ In 1967, the Six-Day War allowed the expansion of Israel almost all the way to Egypt – an expansion later on contained, but nonetheless understandably threatening to its neighbors at the time.⁹ Today, the AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) has acquired a reputation as one of the strongest conservative lobbies in Washington, and Israel is often seen as a proxy of the 'good empire'. Many speak of a *de facto* Israeli-Palestinian *apartheid*. Sereni's narratives are testimonial to the need to create more alignment between culture and ecology in view of assuaging these violent contrasts.

Despite or perhaps because of the early and idealistic supporters of Zionism, today's Israel is oddly positioned at the intersecting nodes of major global and local ecologies. Cultural ethnographer Jared Diamond has good reasons to claim that 'fertile crescent' is a cruel misnomer for the desert between two rivers called Mesopotamia.¹⁰ Sadly enough, in ecological terms this largely human-made degradation reads as a measure of the long-term effects on nature of the unsustainable Western predatory mentalities. By the same token, the establishment of Israel in the aftermath of World War II can be read as the military-industrial complex's strategy to put a new Danzig corridor on the world's map – a time bomb predisposed to make military and violent solutions to cultural and environmental conflicts appear necessary enough. Why would otherwise the same military-industrial complex that had produced the anti-Semitism that led to the *Shoah* now want to send all surviving Jews to Palestine? Military build-up feeds on the same fuels as industrial production, and a foot in the Middle-East keeps an eye on its blood supply.

Considerable environmental risks are inherent in this course of action at any time. But today's climatologists agree that if global temperatures go further up by more than just two Fahrenheit degrees, the oceans will rise by an estimated 80 feet.¹¹ This, as Al Gore's documentary AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH demonstrates very graphically, places most of Manhattan, Haifa, Tel Aviv, Beirut, LA, and many other shoreline cities positively under water. Ironically enough, in the perspective of these cataclysms, the military ideology that constructs war as the 'world hygiene' that resolves overpopulation problems and its ensuing impact, might prove just as unnecessary as it is otherwise known to be highly cruel and impractical.

This global ecological perspective, I claim, puts a new spin on Clara Sereni's testimonial narratives – and their stories of survival from utopias-turned-dystopian. Due to their cultural, religious, racial, and political affiliations, Sereni's parents and grandparents had an uncanny affinity for, and familiarity with, utopian discourses. Sereni's father Emilio, *aka* Mimmo, *aka* Uriello, was born to highly educated Jewish parents in the significantly integrated Jewish middle-class of pre-Fascist Italy. He lived beyond the *Shoah* that killed his two brothers thanks to the shelter offered by the utopian networks of clandestine communist activism – only to bury his comrade wife Xeniuška, *aka* Marina, *aka* Loletta, shortly after. Xeniuška was born to a biracial couple of Jewish-Gentile revolutionary socialists in pre-revolutionary Russia. Her father participated in the insurrections of 1905. After his execution, her gentile mother Xenia took Xeniuška to Italy to escape persecution from the Czars. She was a writer, an intellectual, and a stateless single mother who eked a living by running a boarding house.

The various names Sereni's parents used in life are reflected in their daughter's family narratives, and they testify to the multiple yet coexisting personalities they developed to survive. Emilio, the father's given name, shorts to Mimmo for the family. Uriello is the coded love name he used with his comrade wife. Xeniuška has the same given name as her mother, since, as Clara suggests, when she was born her parents imagined that, as political insurgents, they would die young. Marina is the name of her integration into Italian society by way of marrying Emilio, while Loletta is Uriello's counterpart. These lateral moves denote in-flux identities that theorize as highly Deleuzian and rhizomatic survival strategies. Their youngest daughter Clara became a writer in the context of second-wave feminism and the radical transformations it effected in Italian families and society. The life-writing work of this feminine/feminist family bard must imply an appreciation for these strategies. Yet, while *Regni* acknowledges this gratitude more than *Casalinghitudine* does, both narratives also fiercely denounce the dangers of not giving up one's utopias on time.

I now turn to this work to facilitate the interlocking reflections it invites. *Il gioco dei regni*, or *The game of the kingdoms*, appeared in 1993, as the Cold-War order was about to subside. In a political commentary designed to address her audience at that time, Clara Sereni observes:

Sionismo, comunismo. Parole che hanno assunto negli anni significati e sfumature diversi: e per chi ha oggi vent'anni il sionismo si identifica nell'espansionismo dello Stato di Israele, e il comunismo nelle bandiere ammainate sulle cupole d'oro del Cremlino. (Sereni 1993, 205)¹²

In the next paragraph, her voice shifts back to the mid-century reality of the two secular Jewish brothers, Emilio Sereni (Clara's father) and Enzo (her uncle), who are young adults during Italian Fascism and the European political climate that anticipated the Holocaust. Sereni claims that "In quelle e in altre parole [trovavano] un denominatore comune: la speranza di un mondo diverso, più giusto ed umano" (205).¹³

Here communism and Zionism enter the testimonial narrative of Sereni's family saga as parallel utopian spaces and discursive laboratories. Each one is 'queer' in the sense that Judith Butler, as a Jew who speaks against Israel's current expansionism, recuperates to this word in *Precarious Life*. It is closeted, clandestine, yet meaningful and necessary, in a world that, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ensuing propaganda – as in Fascist Italy – is too disappointing to be accepted as it is. In these pages, Butler's 'we' is a generic queer population that includes herself and hides its diversities for the sake of claiming equal rights, yet is often grieving from loss and internally divided. The recognition of this pattern is key, I claim, for Butler, and for Sereni, to the acceptance of one's precariousness in life, and hence one's inevitable bondage with those 'others' political polarizations often represent as irreducible enemies.¹⁴ Sereni, possibly even more than Butler, is highly aware of the self-defeating contradictions inherent to each utopian discourse:

Lotte feroci dilaniavano i due gruppi, e non soltanto sul piano verbale: fra i sionisti, il rapporto con le popolazioni arabe era già una discriminante; fra i comunisti, la cultura del silenzio e del sospetto già mieteva le prime vittime. (205)¹⁵

Yet, in the wider cycle of what might be seen as a Marxian, Deleuzian, and perhaps slightly Hegelian, historical becoming, Sereni insists that both discourses were, each in its way, necessary. As she explains:

Per chi cercava un sogno da vivere, per chi voleva essere parte attiva della forza che porta avanti il mondo, una scelta si imponeva comunque. (205)¹⁶

In the discursive context the narrative outlines, one is invited to ask what 'game' the title of Sereni's family saga alludes to. With what 'kingdoms' are characters playing around? The answer I propose is that the game is the interplay of the four utopian discourses, or 'kingdoms', at the crossroads of which Clara Sereni's life is founded. The testimonial experience that emerges from *Casalinghitudine* is that, to a young second-wave feminist, one's family utopias are both inevitable and crushing. In this book Sereni resents her father, whose involvement in politics, she claims, made him a permanent absentee from his own and his daughter's emotional life. The revisitation thereof Sereni offers in the family saga points to the mature person who recognizes

that these utopias are also necessary. Indeed, in *Il gioco dei regni* Sereni comes across as a daughter who has metabolized the utopias of her childhood, and she now admires her ancestors for their eccentricity and courage. Predictably, in the current discursive regime about ecologies and mothers, the only one who is not fully redeemed by the narrative is Sereni's biological mother, Xeniuška/Marina/Loletta, to whom I will return later. For now let me just say that what makes her attractive to Clara's father is the foreignness and courage she has inherited from her mother – a fact her character never acknowledges.

In an appendix to *Regni* Sereni describes how and why she chose this project, thus indicating that healing from Oedipal resentments was part of the process of writing about them. From the rift between Sereni's voice in *Casalinghitudine* and in *Regni* a lesson can be gauged about the role of utopias in one's life. Utopias are like umbilical chords that must be severed on time. Much as they are necessary, Sereni's narrative ecologies imply, it is also necessary to surrender them before they become dystopian, and therefore destructive and self-destructive. Utopias, I learn from Clara Sereni, are stored with remarkable socially and spiritually transformative powers, yet surrendering them on time is a gendered strategy designed to avoid heart-consuming conflicts and extreme rivalries.

And indeed the writer is an expert in utopian discourses from her experience of family life. The combined analysis of *Casalinghitudine* and *Regni* manifests four intersecting utopian paths in Clara Sereni's early life. They include the revolutionary socialism of her gentile grandmother Xenia and her Jewish partner Lev in pre-revolutionary Russia. Lev was a leader in the early uprisings against the Czar. After Lev's execution in 1905, Xenia was left alone with their child, yet she never completely sacrificed her intellectual aspirations. Xeniuška, cut off from the cultural context in which her mother's utopian discourse was alive, grew up resenting her and the inevitable bond that tied them to one another. Xeniuška is presented as child who never forgives Xenia for being different from more conventional mothers, and only acknowledges her debt to her in extreme circumstances.

The next utopian path is the one pursued by Sereni's Jewish grandfather Lello and his oldest son Enrico Sereni. Lello was a physician who believed in the objectivity of modern science and in the professional excellence that, in the early twentieth century, made way for gradual integrations of Jews in secular western societies. His son Enrico followed in this path, as did, to a large extent, his wife Alfonsa and her sister Ermelinda. Lello turned up to be such a model in his path that in the early twentieth century the Italian royal family chose him as their doctor. Yet Lello and Enrico's delusions of a seamless integration were obviously shattered by the *Shoah*. The ecology of Sereni's narrative shows modernity as it bites its tail when Enrico dies of a power accident while in the bathtub. His accidental electrocution from a boiler gone awry certainly smacks of suicide. Yet one wonders if Enrico's act of exiting life via electricity is not an uncanny message to symbolize the failure of utopias, modern style.

The utopian path pursued by Sereni's parents is that of communism, in the democratic centralist version proposed by Stalin for the USSR. During the twenty-something years of Italian Fascism, the moral imperative that governs this path is that men be either political prisoners or exiles/ clandestine activists, with their spouses completely devoted to helping them and their shared cause. Accordingly, Emilio Sereni, Clara's father and the second of the two bothers, is imprisoned twice. Xeniuška, his comrade wife, becomes Loletta in the secret code they use to communicate through the prison censorship system. Their passion is augmented by their utopian understanding of their separation and suffering, and their daughters are spaced out based on his releases. When Emilio's father Lello pulls the strings left in his power to get his child out, the young family sneaks out to France, where their activism resumes, with both partners now involved as peers. Their first child, Clara's older sister Lea, becomes French by taste and culture. By understatement, Stalinist utopianism comes across as powerful – for all its aberrations – as it is the hidden network of complicity and activism that protects the family and keeps its members alive. It is the force that later, after the armistice, Xeniuška/Loletta celebrated in her memoir *I giorni della nostra vita* (the days of our life). The book is authored as Marina Sereni, Xeniuška's Italian name by which she was known in the Party.¹⁷ Clara was also conceived at this time, which is why, she explains, her parents used to call her child of peace, *figlia della pace*. She also, of course, owes her existence to Stalinist utopianism and its party line.

The fourth utopian path is the one chosen by Enzo Sereni, the middle bother, who in the early days of Italian Fascism marries Ada, an Italian woman from a Jewish family, and moves to Palestine to live in a *Kibbutz*. Initially he believes that his younger brother Emilio, *aka* Mimmo, will follow him, as the two correspond passionately about which utopian path will most effectively offset and counter the obscurantism and bone-headedness of fascism. Yet Enzo slowly realizes that Mimmo has found another path. The rift between the two bothers as well as the bond that ties them is registered in their correspondence, published in 2000. However, as the racial laws go into effect in Italy, both Lello and his wife Alfonsa join Enzo in Palestine. This new life brings out the best in Alfonsa, who is simple, without vanity, and easy to adapt to rustic *Kibbutz* life. Shunned by her daughter and alone in life, Xenia also moves to Palestine and is welcomed by the new, utopian society. However, Zionism ends up not protecting Enzo from the *Shoah* well enough. During a trip to Germany as the war has already started, he is caught and sent to a camp where he is executed.

In both books Sereni also of course describes her two older full sisters, Lea, "the daughter of war", and Marinella, "the daughter of clandestine life" (Sereni 1987, 66), as well as her younger half sister, born to Emilio's second wife, whom he marries after Xeniuška's death from cancer. (In *Casalinghitudine* Marinella's and Lea's fictionalized names are, respectively, Ada and Giulia.) Yet while in *Casalinghitudine* one gets the sense that Clara suffers from her being born at these intersecting paths – she'd rather be 'normal' – in *Il gioco dei regni* one realizes her growing awareness of the privilege of her position, and its inherent responsibility for exploring why, which

is, admittedly, the inspiration for her work. So *Casalinghitudine* presents Clara at the crux of an un-scrutable, unusual past, whose conflicting narratives appear as phantasms, while *Il gioco dei regni* explores this past, discovers its utopias as separate, conflicting narratives, and also integrates them in a wider narrative ecology that allows Clara to fulfill her mission as the family bard.

A QUEER, GENDERED, AND UTOPIAN SPACE FOR THE MOTHER

My proposal in this study is to claim that, in the context of the utopian discourses and laboratories at play in Sereni's two ecological narratives, this pattern is both queer and gendered, and, more precisely, that it is queer because it is gendered, and it is gendered because it is queer. I will also submit that this reciprocity is uncannily related to the question of the mother, and to how that question becomes reformulated as the matrixial in the context of a narrative ecology that reaches back for lost female genealogies even as it moves laterally in rhizomatic anti-Oedipal fashions. In her study of utopian spaces, feminist Deleuzian theorist Elizabeth Grosz argues that in classical philosophy utopia is associated with 'no place', as per its Greek roots, *u/no* and *topos/place* (Grosz 2001, 134). As she explains, in a discursive arena traversed by the force fields of gender and queer awareness, the utopic is cradled in-between a "past (which) [...] is the virtuality of the present", and a "future [...] (which is) prefigured, rendered potential, through and by the past [...] (and therefore) overwrites and restructures the virtual which is the past" (141). Therefore, Grosz proposes, a utopian that is queer and gendered is indeed enfolded rather than abstract.

Much in the fashion Grosz describes, in Clara Sereni's narrative ecologies, utopia is 'written on the body', as UK lesbian novelist Jeannette Winterson would put it. It is the anorexia that clasps Clara's stomach when she eats with her hypercritical father; the queerness of her grandmother Alfonsa's men's shoes and her cross-dressing at *Purim* family parties; the food as body of inexpressible emotions in *Casalinghitudine's* recipes; and the association of women and animals in that book's narrative as David Del Principe aptly argues. In *Il gioco dei regni*, this overhauling utopia is the narrator's deep-seated awareness of how Bateson's schismogenesis, or the desire to be different from those in one's group, assuages ancestral fears of inbreeding and excessive similarity between the three Sereni brothers, and ultimately functions as a homophobic divider for then and the women in their lives.

The characters sketched out in *Casalinghitudine* reappear enfolded and fully rounded in *Il gioco dei regni*. This, one might say, is Sereni's way of "going at [her own family] history backwards", Irigaray style (1985), namely turning around from the forward path of life, and going inward to follow a pre-Oedipal desire to reenter one's birth channel and get a taste of one's prenatal life. Thus *nonna* Alfonsa, who, in *Casalinghitudine* is sketched out as a woman who wears men's shoes and raises chicken in Palestine, becomes enfolded in the novel as a woman who understands her role, has a quiet intelligence and a staunch commitment to life, believes in strict

parenting, demonstrates resilience in the most challenging circumstances, is accustomed to concealing her emotions and to transferring her ambitions on her sons, and is very adaptable. Emilio starts as the absentee father intent in being "il primo firmatario di un'interpellanza parlamentare contro lo Stato d'Israele" (Sereni 1987, 76)¹⁸ whose comments at the dinner table kill Clara's appetite. In *Il gioco dei regni* he features as the devoted partner who sits at Loletta's death bed as she is dying of cancer. He is capable of complete presence as he sends his beloved a coded "messaggio senza più parole [che] passa fra le mani di Uriello e Loletta, tre colpi col dito sul palmo per dirsi l'amore" (Sereni 1993, 414).¹⁹

In *Casalinghitudine, nonno* Lello is described as a man shorter than the notoriously short King Umberto I, who was so diminutive that the government had to lower the minimum height for enrollment in the military. The implication is that the royal family liked him for he made the king look tall by comparison, rather than for his competence as a physician. In *Il gioco dei regni*, however, Lello is described as a man proud of his dearly earned upward mobility, good humored, and dedicated to his job. Finally, Clara herself, sketched out as "la figlia della pace" ("the daughter of peace") in the early narrative, becomes en fleshed in the book as a sickly infant and child to whom Emilio acts a bit like a mother as they are in Russia for Loletta's illness. Clara's fragility makes her mother Marina/Xeniuška (the comrade) feel guilty about the special care necessary for her.

With this context outlined, let me come back to Xeniuška, the biological mother whose daughter's resentment is, I claim, not fully metabolized in the ecological narrative of the family saga. In 1952, when Clara is six, Xeniuška/Marina Sereni/Loletta dies from cancer in a private Swiss hospital, after a medical trip to the USSR that has been duly approved by the party and turned out to be to no avail. Like a healthy post-modern Deleuzian schizo, she is three characters in one.²⁰ She represents the narrative's anti-Oedipal impulses, as she is neither unified nor central. Indeed, Clara represents herself as a child who has two mothers, her defunct biological parent, and Emilio's second wife, with whom she grows up and whom she calls *mamma*. Yet I claim that some un-metabolized resentment lurks behind this image. It transpires in the seams between Xeniuška's different personalities. In Clara's narrative saga, Xeniuška is the part-Jewish daughter of Xenia, her stateless single mother from Russia, who grows up in Rome and wants to integrate into western modernity and repudiate her past, including her mother. Marina Sereni is Emilio's happy wife; the 'new blood' in the Sereni family who, by marrying Jewish finds her new Italian nationality; the faithful comrade whose popular post-war memoir testifies to Emilio's commitment to the cause and their clandestine anti-Fascist activism from France. Loletta is the lover with whom Emilio shares his closet utopian personality of Uriello, and the secret code that enables them to feel happy, united, and proud during his prison years under Fascism. *Il gioco dei regni* also in some ways denies the integrity of Loletta/Marina's narrative as that of one who was not a feminist because she did not claim an identity of her own distinct from her partner.

However, in a self-contradictory mode that testifies to her own integrity as a testimonial writer, Clara also outlines the discursive space of Uriello and Loletta's love, whose utopian character places them outside the narrowly defined erotic normativity of modern western culture. No adversarial force can divide them, since their coded language turns any clandestine or closeted situation into a reason for them to feel more united. While still lucid and aware of her impending agony, Loletta writes Uriello a letter, to be opened only post-mortem, which encourages him to find a new comrade/wife. In a daring move, Clara publishes this very personal family document. Hence, the queer aspect of Loletta's personality, which is, arguably, what ultimately made her attractive to Uriello, is left to be revealed in her own voice. Loletta urges Uriello to remarry, in a letter that fully embraces the polyamorous principle that humans are capable of loving more than one. As she explains:

Tutto l'amore che hai avuto e che sempre avrai per me non sarà in nulla intaccato da un nuovo affetto che domani potresti avere per un'altra donna. (Sereni 1993, 216)²¹

As if she was writing a proto-manifesto for 'polyamory', Loletta proceeds to recommend what kind of new partner: "E come moglie che consigliarti? [...] Una ragazza [...] che non abbia paura del nostro amore" (417).²² I hear Clara's mother willing herself included in the new love, not forgotten, in a non-normative, queer, non-exclusive manner. Yet I don't know how aware her daughter is of the radicalism this implies, a radicalism impossible, at least in Loletta's time, outside the bounds of the communist utopias her parents inhabited.

Further in the document, we learn that Loletta thinks of their love as a transforming energy in the utopian space of communism, Stalin style, where all possible gender and sexuality conflicts are resolved. Uriello's new partner is imagined as a comrade as self effacing as Loletta has been, and as capable as Uriello of becoming just a speck of life in the wider body of the living party. As Loletta writes,

Il Partito invece si è fuso per me con la mia vita privata, così strettamente e completamente, da darmi sempre la certezza di essere una particella di quella immensa forza che porta il mondo in avanti. (417)²³

So Loletta wants posterity to remember her as perfectly content with her role of comrade/wife and speck in the wider life of the Party. Yet in her effort to reach back through past utopias for a usable legacy from her Russian grandmother, her daughter Clara undermines this construction and exposes its misogyny and patriarchy. Emilio Sereni became a minister in the popular-front government that wrote the new Italian constitution after the fall of Fascism, in 1946-48. Marina got cancer. Would Uriello be prepared to accept Loletta's role in their couple? Is there any connection between the two destinies? Why is the woman (who also happens to be Clara's mother) expendable and what does that say about the utopian discourse

she inhabited? These, I claim, are the thorny questions the child can't answer. (And they are, not coincidentally, also central questions in *Eros*, my own self-writing narrative).

Clara's trajectory teases out the glitch in her mother's construction: in becoming part of Uriello's life, Loletta has chosen to imitate her mother, who had also fully embraced the utopia of her revolutionary socialist lover Lev. Yet she has forgotten her body in the meanwhile just as she never acknowledged the matrixial embodiedness of her mother. Her utopia had become dangerously masculine and abstract. In *Il gioco dei regni*, Clara also chooses to publish a 1937 letter by her mother, written from her French exile to her own mother Xenia in Palestine, a testimonial to her mother's utopianism comrade Marina Sereni was eager to hide. The letter acknowledges Xeniuška's debt to Xenia, even as it is ever so cruelly designed to interrupt any communication between mother and daughter, due to the need for security for the clandestine party and the alleged deviance of Xenia's utopian past.

As Xeniuška transforms into Loletta, she repudiates the *petit-bourgeois* aspirations she displayed while growing up, and claims she has come to a fuller appreciation of her mother. She writes her: "Io ti amo come prima, e forse di più perché ora amo rispetto in te non solo la madre ma anche la persona" (Sereni 1993, 316).²⁴ Loletta goes as far as admitting that without her mother's utopian model, she could not be what she is now because "la tua fiducia assoluta di allora [...] ha lasciato in me un segno profondo" (317).²⁵ Yet, with the iron-fist logic of the party, she concludes that by way of superior necessity: "Non ti scriverò, non mi scriverai" (317).²⁶

Clara wonders if by virtue of being homonymous, by having the same name, Xenia and Xeniuška are incapable of inhabiting the same planet. When utopias are still coded as masculine, heterosexist, and abstract, fears of the body are too powerful and women's names cannot form genealogies. Yet Xenia comes back in her daughter's life when, *via* Alfonsa, she finds out that her daughter is dying of cancer in a private Swiss hospital, just a few years after the utopian dreams she and Uriello shared have partly become actualized. But this return of the mother is tangled with suffering because it implies that she will bury her child. And there is no redemption of the emotional aspects. Xenia is only called to help Loletta in practical matters, while Uriello continues to be the only participant in her utopian love. As Clara explains:

Quando Mimmo era lì sua figlia non la voleva nella stanza: solo quando lui si assentava [...] Xenia entrava per piccoli gesti utili, muta. (411)²⁷

Yet, in the crux of precarious life inhabited by the multiple utopias that Clara has resulted from, and which her narrative ecologies explore in her attempt to make sense of her life, the body works its magic, as maternal knowledge proves necessary to the dying child, and Uriello learns from Xenia how to get Loletta's consumed body to take in some water:

Mimmo [...] mise il braccio sotto il cuscino per tirare su Loletta [...] Xenia [...] gli porgeva un tubicino flessibile [...] Loletta s'innervosiva [...] con gli occhi [Mimmo] pregò Xenia di provvedere, pochi gesti precisi e Xeniuška riuscì a succhiare. (411)²⁸

The rivulet of water that seeps up through the straw is the body of the mother morphed as lymph for the dying child. Perhaps in the space of this fleeting matrixial encounter, Mimmo understands what Loletta's love for him has cost her mother. Perhaps Loletta/Xeniuška imagines how he could have loved Xenia, how she, too, could have been included in their diad. Perhaps Xenia imagines how she could stay and help Mimmo raise her granddaughters instead of returning to Palestine. In the matrixial encounter, identities break down and water becomes the vehicle for the exchange of transsubjective energies in the female genealogy. Utopia becomes matter. The water from the mother's straw into the dying daughter's mouth is like the rivulet trickling down to Mexico from the river Colorado. The ecology of the narrative brings down all the utopias-turned-dystopias at once. Modern medicine cannot save Clara's mother, because modernity itself causes cancer. Neither can Stalin because his utopia too is abstract. Zionism, like the revolutionary socialism of Lev's time, is a distraction that attracts Xenia away from her granddaughters.

But the fleeting moment quickly fades out as Clara proceeds to narrate how Loletta still remained unforgiving to her mother. Loletta's voice has been lost to her cancer, yet, as accidentally Xenia mentions Russia, Loletta grabs a pencil and writes: "Abituati a dire Urss, una buona volta" (Sereni 1993, 412).²⁹ Until the day she dies, Xeniuška blames her mother for being bereft of a male partner able to grant her utopia value. Until the day she buries her child, Xenia feels rejected by her child for the very reason that her choice of being single defines her as a parent prior to being a party member or spouse. In the tragedy of interrupted female genealogies, Clara shows the divisive results of not giving up one's utopias on time.

In her testimonial effort, Clara Sereni is clearly reaching behind her lost mother for a female genealogy Loletta and her legacy denied her. This agrees with Sereni's project of warning her audience that utopias are as transforming and empowering as is the imperative to give them up on time. But, as I would like to argue, what really stands between Xenia and her dying daughter Xeniuška is the impossibility to imagine utopian love beyond the narrow confines of exclusive two-gender couples, the modern normativity which in itself bespeaks its own monogamous, sexist, and heterosexist tyranny. How can female genealogies be traced when a woman cannot even pass her family name to her child? Xeniuška's first name was after her mother, yet she never saw their bond as an equal partnership. Each woman found her utopian space in becoming part of the body of the man who embodied that imagined reality, and so could not embrace or recognize the other woman as a utopian space in and of herself. This traps the feminine into its role of provider for the house that a masculine utopian thought will inhabit, and also traps this thought into separate houses that will, eventually, divide it. Thus the game of the kingdoms that casts the three Sereni brothers into different utopias, is also,

ultimately, the game that kills two of the brothers, Enzo, the Zionist, and Enrico, the scientist. Emilio is left alone to age in a solitude that becomes increasingly dogmatic, even as his daughter Clara belatedly acknowledges her gratitude for this survival that has made her birth possible.

CONCLUSION

Clara Sereni's *Il gioco dei regni*, together with her *Casalinghitudine*, can be seen as testimonial narratives that revolve around the tropes of memory, outness, and trauma, and invite a reflection on ecology and culture. In *Casalinghitudine*, Clara's memories of her traumatic past at the crux of her family's four utopian narratives is the impulse to out her ancestors as different, unaligned with prevalent ideologies and their conventions. The process of healing from these traumas distills into *Regni*, a family saga that outs Clara as one of them, as she revisits this past in a narrative ecology that weaves the utopian discourses together. The narrative testifies to their value in helping humans imagine the other possible world we need, even as it remains highly aware of the dangers of not giving up one's utopias on time. Like communism and Zionism, Western modernity proves to be one such necessary yet failed utopian narrative.

What further transpires in the seams between the two testimonial works is the unprocessed trauma of being inscribed in a utopian discourse that still conflates utopias with heterosexist masculine abstractions. Sereni's writing is clearly anti-Oedipal in its non-linear, rhizomatic style. Yet in *Regni* her search for female genealogies is evident in her gesture towards her maternal grandmother, and in her emphasis on her mother's identity as divided and in-flux. Sereni rescues Xenia from the indifference of her child, and this opens the narrative to Xeniuška's queer and polyamorous desire to play an active part in helping Emilio choose a new wife and thus feel included in their love. That this desire is post mortem does not count, because when she wrote the letter Loletta was alive. Yet Xeniuška was unable to teach Loletta how to love her mother, Xenia disappears from her granddaughter's life, and Clara is still the orphaned child of a woman who paid for the diseases of modernity with her life. The writing of *Il gioco dei regni* was clearly a therapeutic process for Clara, yet some residual grief transpires as resentment towards the Loletta/Xeniuška who never became self-possessed and unified enough to survive, and admiration for Xenia's long and poignant life. As Marina dies, Emilio's new wife takes her place in Clara's life. In *Casalinghitudine* Clara calls her *mamma*. The oscillation between Oedipal and anti-Oedipal tropes outlines the trajectory of Sereni's trip back into the fluidity of pre-natal life in search for utopias of the flesh that intertwine metaphors about mothers, ecologies, fluidity, and survival without conflating them into one another. With respect to today's pressing global political questions about energy, peace, ecology, and survival, Sereni's work invites new ways of thinking about problems too often considered intractable. Sereni's family, and its female bard, offer models of utopians with an awareness of the necessity of giving

up one's dreams when one's utopias turn dystopian. This can only auspicate a similar outcome from today's political leaders, who share with us the responsibility of giving up one's utopias while there is still time.

NOTES

¹ For my own biographical circumstances, I refer to Anderlini 2007, 131-42.

² Ettinger's matrixial borderspace is both pre-oedipal and anti-oedipal. It is a transsubjective space of fluidity where identity dissolves and where the co-emergence of different singularities is made possible by co-poietic access to memories and traumas (2006).

³ Anderlini 1997, 101-03 and 155-58.

⁴ Reisner 2003.

⁵ Besides Ettinger, another inspiring theorist about mothers as cultural metaphors and their necessary deconstruction is Rosi Braidotti (2002).

⁶ Sachar 2006, 521.

⁷ Laqueur 1972, 3-8; 270-337; 505-63.

⁸ Prior 2005, 71-103.

⁹ Sachar 2006, 615-66.

¹⁰ Diamond 2005, 48.

¹¹ Hansen 2006, 13.

¹² "Zionism and communism: over the years these words have acquired different meanings and nuances. For today's twenty year olds Zionism is identified with the expansionism of the State of Israel, communism with the flags hauled down on the golden domes of the Kremlin". Unfortunately no English translation of *Regni* has been published yet. Throughout the essay, this and other translations from this text are mine. Parenthetic page numbers refer to the established Italian text.

¹³ "in those and other words [the brothers found] a common denominator: the hope for a different world, more human and just".

¹⁴ Butler 2004, 22-26.

¹⁵ "Ferocious disputes tore both groups apart, and they weren't just verbal squabbles. Among the Zionists, the style of relating to the Arab populations was already cause for divisiveness; among the communists, the culture of suspicion and silence was already harvesting its first victims".

¹⁶ "[F]or those who were looking for a dream to be lived out, for those who wanted to be an active part in the force that moves the world forward, choosing, one way or another, was inevitable".

¹⁷ This book promises to be a valuable historical document which is unfortunately out of print. It is my hope that my inquiries with Clara Sereni as to how to locate a copy of the text will yield some results.

¹⁸ "the first to sign a parliamentary petition against the state of Israel".

¹⁹ "message with no more words [that] passes between Uriello and Loletta's hands, three knocks of his finger on her palm that tell their love".

²⁰ For the concept of the post-modern schizo I refer to Deleuze and Guattari's work on capitalism and schizophrenia, where they claim that a certain dosage of schizophrenia is not only typical of people who live under capitalism but also necessary to navigate post-modern cultural landscapes in a somewhat healthy way (1983, 1987).

²¹ "All the love you've had and always will have for me won't be even remotely injured by a new affection that in the future you could have for another woman".

²² "And for a wife, how to advise you? [...] A young woman [...] who won't be afraid of our love".

²³ "On the other hand, the Party has become fused with my private life as closely and completely as to give me the certitude that I am at all times a particle of that immense force that moves the world forward".

²⁴ "I love you as I did before, and maybe more because now I also love and respect in you not just the mother but also the person".

²⁵ "the absolute trust you had at that time [...] has left a deep mark within me".

²⁶ "I won't write you, you won't write me".

²⁷ "When Mimmo was there, her daughter did not want her in the room. Only when he went out [...] Xenia got in for small, useful acts, silent".

²⁸ "Mimmo [...] placed his arm under the pillow to pull Loletta up [...] Xenia was handling him a thin flexible pipe [...] Loletta got nervous [...] with his eyes [Mimmo] begged Xenia to help out, a few precise gestures and Xeniuška managed to suck".

²⁹ "Get used to call it USSR, for once!"

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