

“Un corpo universale”: The Familiar and Familial Trans Self

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“Da quando il corpo ha cominciato / a mutare, ogni punto è una parete / sfondata. Non ci sono più angoli / inviolati a contenerci” (Vivinetto 70). So ends one of the poems in Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto’s 2018 debut poetry collection, *Dolore minimo*, which Interlinea Edizioni has marketed as “[il] primo testo in Italia ad affrontare in versi la transessualità.” In this particular poem, the pre- and post- transition selves dialogue with one another and, as these verses highlight, it is the corporeal changes that their mutual body undergoes that ultimately force the two selves to face each other.

The importance of the body and of materiality more broadly for the burgeoning field of Trans Studies is an issue that has not been sufficiently explored. Jess Pfeffer summarizes the state of the field by stating that “much of trans theory preserves [a] divide between material and immaterial as a way of honoring the trans body by making the material body less consequential than the felt or perceived body” (229). For instance, while Gayle Salamon’s 2010 monograph *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* attempts to destabilize the certainty of the materiality of the body, Pfeffer argues that Salamon’s book ultimately “reinforces the seemingly untouchable nature of the material: it is separated from the more malleable world of meaning-making, and thus materiality does not provide an avenue through which to question the contours of the body” (230-231). Another critical intervention into questions of Trans materiality came in Dean Spade’s 2011 monograph **[Slide]** *Normal Life*, in which Spade argues for a “critical trans politics,” or rather a politics “that demands more than legal recognition and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society security, and social equality” (1). Much of Spade’s work centers on the fact that, as a result of the “subtraction and

exclusion model” on which the American legal system operates, material circumstances remain unchanged by ordinary bids for inclusion (Liu 31). Yet Spade’s work, positioned as a project in legal studies, considers materiality mainly in terms of the inequalities that surround material living conditions. In short, the impact of materiality in empirical and corporeal, rather than economic terms, on trans studies has not been examined at length.¹ What’s more, even in those texts that do explore the corporeal existence side of materiality, such as Salamon’s monograph, there remains what Pfeffer calls a “sense that an interrogation of materialism and the body ultimately strengthens the divide between materiality and numerous iterations of immateriality (like culture, consciousness, projection, social structures, etc.)” (Pfeffer 230). Pfeffer’s own article on “Trans Materiality” analyzes an early modern book on anatomy, arguing that this work “gives trans studies a model for thinking through the materialization of sexual difference that does not insist upon an intrinsic sexual dimorphism, or, more radically, sexual embodiment as essential” (239). Leaning into the mutability of the body independent of intention or identity, or what Pfeffer calls the “the unruliness of materiality itself,” allows Trans Studies to question the very boundaries between trans and cis, boundaries that suggest that trans studies is only applicable to or valuable for trans subjects (239).

Dolore minimo offers an interesting intervention into the questions of Trans subjectivity and materiality. One of the most noted themes that emerges in the collection is that of motherhood. The maternal relationship that Vivinetto describes, in which she serves as both mother and daughter, allows the poet to recount her autobiographical gender transition journey. As our keynote speaker Danila Cannamela argues in her article [Slide] “‘I am an atypical mother’: Motherhood and maternal language in Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto’s poetry,” “More

¹ These three understandings of the material: economic, empirical, and corporeal existence, are found in Petrus Liu’s “Queer Theory and the Specter of Materialism.”

than a diary of transition, with which readers can briefly sympathize as a story of gender variance, Vivinetto's work is a creative laboratory where a language of resignification takes shape in order to reshape, in turn, the ways in which the symbolic order constructs divisive or homogenizing labels about gender, sexuality, and diversity" (91). Building off of Cannamela's work which encourages us to think of Vivinetto's poetry as a site where "*l'ordine nascosto / delle cose*" emerges, in this paper I turn to questions of corporeality in *Dolore minimo* in order to argue that Vivinetto's poetry provides a new way for trans studies to approach materiality (24). *Dolore minimo* allows us to interrogate the body as a site of equivocality rather than certainty, as both intertwined with and distinguishable from the trans self.

The poetic persona's relationship with the body is ever-changing through the 70 poems that comprise the collection *Dolore minimo*. Often, the poetic persona intentionally de-emphasizes the importance of the body in her transition. In the poem "*Non ho ferite che appaiono*," she asserts: "*I miei / dilemmi sono annidati ben oltre la carne. / Eppure chi mi definisce addita / il corpo come sola dimensione possibile*" (118). Throughout *Dolore minimo*, specific physical traits are often mentioned only as they relate to social contexts, as these verses and those that follow demonstrate. What is "*tra le gambe*" or the "*tono della voce*" only matter insofar as other people hyper-focus on such traits. Vivinetto insists that her gender incongruence stems from "*le menomazioni della mente*," reminding us as readers that not all trans subjects experience dysphoria and that not all dysphoria is physical in nature. Notably, throughout this poem the body is detached from the narrator by a lack of possessive adjectives and/or pronouns. This poem does not speak of "my body" but "the body," not "my tone of voice" but "the tone of voice," quite literally making the body into a dispossessed space. It is important to note, however, that the definite article "il" that most often precedes the word "corpo" throughout the

collection does not necessarily suggest that the body is definitive – an entirely “natural” entity whose socio-cultural interpretation generates the experience of gender.

Vivinetto complicates the imagination of the body as a site of biological facts that culture can do no more than interpret in the first poem of the section “*La traccia del passaggio*” or “The Trace of the Passage,” which begins “*Dev’esserci stato in questo corpo / un punto scoperto, indifeso / un angolo lasciato illeso, / un grumo di nervi intoccato*” (68). The poetic persona’s exploration of the body as a physical site in this particular poem combines typical corporeal language like “a cluster of nerves” with more abstract indicators of space like “a... point” and “a corner” and, later in the poem, nouns indicative of human industry like “a bridge” and “a cell tower” (68-9). This eclectic mixture of spatial descriptors for the body calls into question the body’s supposedly “natural” constitution, suggesting that the body is as much a site of human artefice as it is the product of biology. An oversimplified reading of this poem would argue that Vivinetto’s insistence on the constructed nature of the body is indicative of her trans identity, given that trans subjects often, though not always, rely on medical interventions such as access to hormone replacement therapy and/or surgical interventions to ensure their physical and mental health, wellbeing, and safety. Yet, I would argue, though Vivinetto’s poetry speaks about trans experiences and to a trans audience, its applicability and reach also extend beyond these boundaries.

Returning to the ideas of the dispossessed body, I would like to clarify that Vivinetto does not shun the corporeal, but rather recognizes the limited capacity of the body to explain any and all trans experiences. The body is omnipresent throughout the collection, whether through the mention of the “*corpo*” (which appears 65 times, only claimed by a possessive adjective 6 times) or parts of the body such as “*mani*” or “*gambe*.” However, beyond these more literal and explicit

representations of the body, questions of materiality are also present throughout the collection as the poetic persona grapples with the simultaneous presence and absence of her pre-transition self. This version of the self is addressed directly in the poem “*Non esisti più, Giovanni,*” in which the poetic persona addresses her past self whom she likens to “*la polvere / depositata sulle conche delle mani / in un ventoso lunedì mattina*” (126). This image of what is left of the past self is key to understanding the relationship between past and present for Vivinetta: Giovanni has become an amorphous, almost inconsequential collection of particles so fine that they often go unnoticed. But not always, as the poetic persona reminds us in the following verse: “*come polvere ti sei piantato in gola*” (126). Furthermore, while the poem abounds with language that suggests the finality of the past self’s leave-taking, such as the “*prassi dell’addio*” and the “*ceneri dell’estinto,*” the final three lines call into question the project of the entire poem, namely, to insist on Giovanni’s non-existence. The ending of the poem reads: “*Non esisti, mi convinco, tamburellando / sulle guance le dita. Quelle stesse dita / che un tempo furono le tue*” (128). In these final verses, the insertion of the phrase “mi convinco” in the present tense and the agitated gesture of “tamburellando sulle guance le dita” suggest a certain degree of anxiety around the assertion that Giovanni does not exist. The final recognition that Giovanna’s fingers “un tempo furono le tue” suggests that Giovanni’s presence lingers on in the body that, once his, is now Giovanna’s. The persistent imagery of dust and ashes – of material remains – throughout the poem suggests that, despite the poetic persona’s assertion otherwise, Giovanni continues to exist in a certain form, linked as he is to the material body he once shared with Giovanna.

Giovanna and Giovanni are treated as subjects who are not entirely discrete – they are intertwined, their identities continually collide and separate, and neither self is ever completely absent. In one of the poems in the first section of the collection titled “*Cespugli dell’infanzia*” or

“Briars of Childhood,” the voice of the pre-transition self (Giovanni) addresses the post-transition self (Giovanna), reflecting on the experience of allowing her in, of birthing her. The ending of the poem reads: “*Di tutto quel fondersi violento / capii che darti spazio non fu / annullamento né mutilazione, / non fu rinuncia, non negazione: / fu cederti lievemente il passo, / farmi fiaccola della tua luce*” (55). Giovanni’s material presence is central to these verses through the decision to make “space” or, to use Fee and Malech’s translation, a “clearing” for Giovanna and through the sacrificial act of burning away like a torch. Yet in spite of Giovanni’s waning physical presence, the consciousness of the pre-transition self is still able to narrate the poem in retrospect, notably in the *passato remoto*, suggesting that the transition period has long since passed. And yet, Giovanni continues to exert influence on the present in both material and psychological terms. This poem insists on both the cognitive and physical links between the pre- and post-transition selves, presenting Giovanni not as an alien figure to be renounced but rather as a facilitator of Giovanna’s present “light.”

I would like to return to the maternal language with which I began introducing Vivinetto’s poetry, as maternal language is linked to the questions of corporeality and materiality I have been exploring, though perhaps in a surprising way. I would like to read the entirety of the first stanza of “*Sono una madre atipica*,” which brings together the ideas of motherhood and the material. “*Sono una madre atipica, madre / di una figlia atipica. Ci sono / voluti diciannove anni / per partorirti, c’è voluta / la fragilità che prende / a diciannove anni, l’ansia / adolescente di metter mano / dietro le proprie paure. Forse / se non l’avessi fatto allora / non l’avrei mai fatto – fecondarmi / per ridiventare minuscola / materia di un corpo universale*” (52). The motherhood journey described here, what Dacia Maraini calls in her introduction “[l]a fatica di essere madre di se stessa,” is one that does not generate a single body that then detaches itself from the mother,

becoming an independent individual (Maraini in Vivinetto). The “*corpo universale*” here is not the pre-transition body or the post-transition body, it is not the specific trans body characterized by “*Un filo di barba residua*” or “*lo sporgere virile delle clavicole*” as we see elsewhere in the collection (108). The many dispossessions and refusals to claim the body that abound throughout *Dolore minimo* are perhaps explainable by this idea of the “universal body,” the “*corpo universale*” of which each of us comprise only “*minuscola materia*.” Insofar as we are just a piece of a larger tapestry, just a part of the “material” (or perhaps, matter) that composes this “universal body,” we are inextricably linked to each other, to the whole that we create together. This is true not just across people but across time – our past, present, and future selves, trans or not, are connected through the greater body whose matter they form.

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