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The merits of a masculine mother

Nicoz Balboa and the politics of softly queering motherhood
through comics

ABSTRACT: Nicoz Balboa is an Italian comics and tattoo artist based in La Rochelle, France. In his graphic novel, *Play with fire* (Oblomov 2020), Balboa undisclosed his queer sexual orientation and gendered identity by portraying himself as a lesbian woman in the first part of the book and as a non-binary subject ready to undertake an FtoM gender transition in the second. The artist's autobiographical effort to communicate the troubles of gender dysphoria and the socio-relational issues that generally accompany it is furtherly complicated by the representation of the author/narrator/protagonist's role as a mother. The article aims at reading *Play with fire*, Balboa's previous graphic novel *Born to lose*, his last work *Transformer* and the connected production of vignettes posted by Balboa on his Instagram page through the lens of theories on motherhood and queer motherhood that insist on the political value of making non-heterocisnormative parenting visible. Coupling this theoretical framework with a methodology that employs the tools of comics semiotics, the study argues that Balboa's graphic narratives contribute to partially de-essentialize motherhood by visually challenging its association with femininity. At the same time, the author's self-representation as a masculine mother fruitfully problematizes (trans)gender identity by means of a portrayal that explicitly criticizes the rhetoric of the "wrong body" and questions gender binarism.

KEYWORDS: queer comics; Nicoz Balboa; queer motherhood; Italian comics; Italian graphic novel.

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Notwithstanding its growing visibility, transgender parenting is still a seriously underrepresented issue in popular visual culture. Even among the few narratives that revolve around the challenges of parenting as a trans subject, transsexual or transgender men's parenting is almost completely occulted. This is confirmed by the fact that the small number of critically and popularly acclaimed cultural products with a storyline featuring transgender parents, such as the movies *All About My Mother* (Pedro Almodovar, 1999) and *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005), or the TV series *Transparent*

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(Amazon Studios, 2014-2017) and *I Am Cait* (Gil Goldschein 2015-2016), focus on the journey of transgender women who became parents before undergoing their MtoF transition.¹ In this context, the semi-autobiographical work of the Italian comics and tattoo artist Nicoz Balboa, an FtoM transgender person and “mother” himself, is an anomaly which is worth studying.

Balboa, who is based in La Rochelle, France, but writes his graphic novels in Italian and the graphic journals he regularly publishes on his Instagram account in English, came out as a transgender man with *Play with fire* (Oblomov 2020), his second graphic novel after *Born to lose* (Coconino Press 2017) and the book that precedes the author’s last work, *Transformer* (Oblomov 2022). In the book, he portrays himself as a lesbian woman who, while the story unfolds, questions his gender identity to the point of starting a process of mental transition. The progress in the path of transgenderness is further carried on in the author’s Instagram page, where so far, he has shared vignettes portraying his social and hormonal transition with his followers. Balboa’s effort to communicate the troubles of gender dysphoria and the socio-relational issues that generally accompany it is further complicated and enriched by the representation of the author/narrator/protagonist’s role as the mother (this is the epithet that Balboa himself decided to use to describe his parenting role) of Mimmi, the character that, in *Play with fire*, corresponds to the artist’s real daughter, Mina.

This article aims at reading *Born to Lose*, *Play with fire*, *Transformer* and the connected production of vignettes posted by Balboa on his Instagram page through the lens of theories on motherhood (RICH 1976) and queer motherhood that insist on the political value of making non-heterocisnormative parenting visible (e.g. ROSENBLUM 2012; GIBSON 2014; AVERETT 2021). Coupling this theoretical framework with a methodology that employs the tools of comics social semiotics (e.g. CHUTE 2017; COUNCILOR 2021; EL REFAIE 2012; MCCLOUD 1993; SCOTT and FAWAZ 2018), the study will argue that Balboa’s graphic narratives contribute to partially (or softly) de-essentialize motherhood by visually challenging its association with femininity. At the same time, the author’s self-representation as a masculine mother fruitfully problematizes (trans)gender identity by means of a portrayal that explicitly criticizes the (re)essentializing rhetoric of the

¹ On these and other popular culture products on trans motherhood, see Brook 2017; Cavalcante 2012; Izharuddin 2020; Välimäki 2013; Wallenberg 2015;

wrong vs. authentic body (BUTLER 2011; PROSSER 1998; ENGDAHL 2014) and questions gender binarisms.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL QUEER COMICS, TRANSGENDERISM AND MOTHERHOOD: PUTTING BALBOA'S WORK INTO CONTEXT

Queer comics, which is to say “comic books, strips, graphic novels, and webcomics that deal with LGBTQ+ themes from an insider’s perspective” (HALL 2013: Editor’s note), emerged as a sub-genre in the United States during the years (the 1970s) of the underground comix movement, when comics artist belonging to gay and lesbian communities consistently started to use graphic narratives as a self-expression tool (CHUTE 2017, *Why Queer?*). According to Hillary Chute (2017, *Why Queer?*), queer comics’ process of surfacing from the underground to the area of mainstream culture was significantly influenced by the success of Alison Bechdel and her now cult graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Mariner Books 2007), where the artist recounts the suicide of her father, a closeted homosexual, and her coming out as a lesbian woman. Before *Fun Home*, Bechdel authored the collection of comics strips *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008), which also contributed to the visibilization of narratives centered on LGBTQ+-related issues.

Though still marginalized, nowadays queer comics achieved the status of a prosperous sub-genre. In Italy, the country where Nicoz Balboa’s work is read the most, graphic narratives by queer creatives are a promising reality that in some cases already entered the area of mainstream culture, as demonstrated by the nationwide success of Fumettibrutti, a comics artist who topped the Italian book charts with her trilogy of graphic memoirs (*Romanzo esplicito*, Feltrinelli Comics 2018; P. *La mia adolescenza trans*, Feltrinelli Comics 2019; *Anestesia*, Feltrinelli Comics 2020) based on her personal experience as a transsexual and bisexual woman.² Fumettibrutti is not an isolated case in the Italian comics scene. On the contrary, she is part of a plethora of authors belonging to the LGBTQ+ community who tend to represent either their own personal experiences as queer subjects and/or non-heterocisnormative subjects or issues that are relevant for the community. Examples include but are not limited to the openly lesbian Roman artists Frad, who authored, among other things, *Non facciamone*

² On Fumettibrutti’s work see Mandolini 2022.

un lesbodramma. Extended (Asterisco Edizioni 2019), the non-binary Percy Bertolini, author of *Da sola* (Diabolo 2021) and more recently animator of the fanzine *Bambin@ matte* (Catapecchia 2023), the FtoM trans comics creator Alec Trenta, who wrote *Barba. Storia di come sono nato due volte* (Laterza 2022), the transmasculine Samuel Spano, who authored *Nini Stones* (Editoriale Cosmo 2017), Dori Gatti, non-binary comics artist who published *Nantucket* (Asterisco 2022).³

Moreover, in the area of Anglophone research on media and the arts, queer comics are gaining an increasing amount of scholarly attention. Scholars have undertaken the effort of starting studying the history of LGBTQ+ comics (CHUTE 2017, *Why Queer?*) and publishing anthologies of queer comics (HALL 2013). They even went as far as providing definitions of comics as an inherently queer medium (CHUTE 2017, *Why Queer?*; SCOTT and FAWAZ 2018; COUNCILOR 2021). In the introduction to a special issue of *American Literature* they edited, Dairick Scott and Ramzi Fawaz argued that:

There's something queer about comics. Whether one looks to the alternative mutant kinships of superhero stories (the epitome of queer world making), the ironic and socially negative narratives of independent comics (the epitome of queer anti-normativity), or the social stigma that makes the medium marginal, juvenile, and outcast from "proper" art (the epitome of queer identity), comics are rife with the social and aesthetic cues commonly attached to queer life. (2018: 197)

Not only the traditional themes and iconicity of comics overlap with those of queer culture, and not only the modalities of graphic narratives' circulation and consumption resemble that of queer circles, as suggested by Scott and Fawaz. Researchers have argued that comics also possess medium-specific features that make them particularly suitable for representing the entropic ethos of queerness. One of comics' main characteristics, sequentiality (EISNER 2008), was read as a queer device that, thanks to its ability to display images as similar and always different, fruitfully force readers to confront with "deviant bodies that refuse to be fixed in one image or frame" (SCOTT and FAWAZ 2018: 203). Similarly, comics' propensity to exploit iconicity through seriality facilitates the creation of mobile and multifaceted characters that play with their identities (STARK 2018). In her

³ On the queer and non-heterocisnormative Italian comics scene, please consult the *Queer Graphics Podcast*, authored by Alice Parrinello with the support of Torch: The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities: <https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/queer-graphics-fumetti-lgbtqia-italiani> [last access 13/03/2023]

exploration of autobiographical comics, Elisabeth El Refaie noticed how in graphic narratives persons and bodies are often characterized as plural (2012: 52), which allows the portrayal of subjects as transiting between schemes, roles and positionalities. Finally, cartooning, to which the art of comics is inextricably associated, possesses the very political capacity to visually create futures “that have not yet been realized” (COUNCILOR 2021), thus opening up to the possibility of queerly re-imagining relationships as well as bodies.

More recently, Nicoletta Mandolini and Giorgio Busi-Rizzi have suggested that the current hybrid era of comics production does not align with the entropy of queerness. On the contrary, it should be better described as aligned with the tendency of “seeking order through disorder” (2023: 113) that, according to some critics (LONG CHU 2019), characterizes transness. This is because contemporary comics creation features web-based publications and web-based productions that often obtain recognition only when ultimately adapted into printed works. In this context “the openness that was rapidly introduced by the digital continuously intertwines with the firmness of traditional publishing” (2023: 113-114) in the same manner as a desire for normativity and belonging often interweaves with antinormative practices that the trans subject puts in place.

To this set of characteristics that make comics both suitable for the representation of LGBTQ+ issues and possibly adjacent either to the queer or trans ethos, one can add that the comics’ medium easily supports the autobiographic narrative form, which, in turn, comfortably serves the unfolding of queer/trans stories. This has proven particularly true in recent times, when comics production has clearly started following two major (and often interchangeable) modalities. On the one side, artists’ tendency to consistently build their work around the graphic novel format, which is historically linked to the practice of narrating the self (BAETENS and FREY 2014: 10-13). On the other, comics creative’s habit of using social networks (e. g. Instagram and Facebook) or other internet platforms (e.g. Patreon, Tumblr) to share their autobiographical vignettes on a daily or weekly basis. Balboa combines the two modalities (one – the graphic novel – a controlled and structured work of fabulation that necessarily re-imagines personal events; the other – internet vignette posting – an agile type of narration that consists in a more immediate transfer of present flows of thoughts) to provide the readers with an in-depth experience of the

joys and troubles of living a trans life. And so do other LGBTQ+ artists. Among these, Yao Xiao, the Chinese but New York-based queer author of the collection of vignettes *Everything is Beautiful and I'm Not Afraid: A Baopu Collection* (Andrews McMeel 2020);⁴ Maia Kobabe, creator of *Gender Queer* (Lion Forge 2019), a book that touch upon issues that the author constantly deals with even in their Instagram page: non-binarism and asexuality; Erin Nations, the FtoM transgender creator of the acclaimed *Gumballs* (TopShelf 2018); the Brazilians Alice Pereira and Luiza Lemos, authors of *Pequenas felicidades trans* (2019) and *Transistorizada* (2018), both autobiographical works that were first published on social media and later adapted into books. Other successful queer artists who experimented with the autobiographical form are Nagata Kabi, who authored the manga *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* (Seven Seas 2017); Tillie Walden, author of the queer memoir *Spinning* (First Second 2017); Eleanor Gewes, who wrote *The Times I Knew I Was Gay* (Scribner 2020), and Trung Le Nguyen, author of the graphic coming of age *The Magic Fish* (Round House Graphics 2020).⁵

It is not surprising that transgenderism and transsexuality appear to be among the more discussed queer experiences in the aforementioned titles. If we generally define these two correlated phenomena as the processes of adapting one's body and/or appearance so to match the gender identity that the subject feels more comfortable with, transgenderism and transsexuality are inescapably connected to the representation of changing bodies. These bodies deviate from the patriarchal norms of binarism and essentialism, which predicate that people are either boys/men or girls/women and that a person's gender is rigidly linked to his/her/their biological sex. In light of this, autobiographical comics and their capacity to visually transpose on the page the perception that the drawers have over their bodies and identities as well as to represent the various phases of this process of identity negotiation (EL REFAIE 2012: 63-71) are a privileged site for the portrayal of transition from an insider perspective. Similar statements could be made about the representation of gestation, childbirth and lactation,

⁴ Xiao publishes her series of vignettes called *Baopu*, from which the book is taken, on the platform Autostraddle: <https://www.autostraddle.com/author/yaoxiaoart/> [last access 10/03/2023]

⁵ The list of texts produced on these topics is long and constantly growing. For this reason, this is not a comprehensive list of titles engaging with the practice of producing autobiographical LGBTQ+ comics, but a mere mention of some of the most successful ones.

practices that are traditionally associated to the sphere of motherhood. If compared to gender transitioning however, they imply the depiction of bodily transformations that, despite not escaping the patterns of abjection and deviancy (CREED 1993: 83), are commonly linked to normative existential paths when they involve biologically female individuals.

Nicoz Balboa's work, where the portrayal of the author's practice of motherhood is originally interlaced with the graphic description of the artist's transitioning body, offers an advantageous perspective to investigate issues concerning the visualization of bodily transformations that are socialized as normative or anti-normative and whose combination might have productive unsettling consequences both on readers and on critics working in the field of queer cultural studies.

QUEERING MOTHERHOOD SOFTLY

Motherhood is a crucial subject matter in Nicoz Balboa's work as a graphic novelist as well as in his activity as an Instagrammer. A collection of graphic journal entries produced over the course of a year and before his coming out as transgender, Balboa's first graphic novel, *Born to lose*, opens with a double page vignette illustrating a mother and her daughter while they sleep together (2017: 10-11). The explicit evocation of cute feelings is not disturbed by the clear red eye bags that mark the mother's exhausted face, nor by the woman being half-naked due to breastfeeding, or by the messiness of the bed where open books by the Italian pedagogue Maria Montessori are scattered as a sign of the protagonist's obsessive interest in providing the child with a good education. "La cosa migliore del mondo è dormire con Mina"⁶, reads the caption, which testifies to the autobiographical self's attachment to the physical dimension of the mothering practice. Throughout the whole graphic novel, Mina features as an omnipresent character that inadvertently feeds the protagonist's frustrations of being a precarious single mother, though compensating her with a warming and delighting presence that grants constant empathy, connection and vitality. The book's dedication is emblematic in this sense, as it emphasizes the role of Mina as her mother's unaware life teacher and as constant stimulus towards personal growth and transformation: "A Mina che da quando è nata – forse anche da un po' prima – mi insegna la vita (questo libro, e

⁶ The best thing in the world is to sleep with Mina

la persona che sono oggi, non esisterebbero senza di te)”⁷ (BALBOA 2017: 1). The mother-daughter almost symbiotic relationship of mutual nourishment is well emblemized by the frequent scenes where Balboa represents himself as a breastfeeding mother or by the vignettes in which the author and Mina are portrayed while drawing together. In a one-page panel (Figure 1), the two acts are depicted simultaneously so to activate a productive metarepresentation where both drawing and lactation clearly qualify as linked performances of (mutual) recognition through which the subjects gain awareness over their (always relational) bodies. Here, the caption testifies to this mutual exchange of practices of nutrition and representation: “Oggi Mina prendeva la tetta mentre disegnavo e mi ha detto: ‘tu disegni Mina e tetta? E allora ci ho disegnate”⁸ (BALBOA 2017: 65).

The centrality of motherhood in Balboa’s work is also corroborated by the project Momeskine, a closed Instagram page made available to the artist’s Patreon subscribers where vignettes of quotidian parenting experience are uploaded on a regular basis in a graphic journal format (from which the word pun with references to the brand of notebooks, diaries and planners Moleskine derives).

Play with fire, the work of graphic autofiction with which Balboa came out as a transgender subject, also includes Mina (now called Mimmi) as one of its main characters. Here, Mimmi and her mother are represented in a similar fashion throughout the whole first part of the book, where the protagonist comes to terms with his lesbianism, one of the intermediate steps in the process of self-discovery that will later lead to the realization and implementation of a transgender identity. Mimmi, the act of breastfeeding and the bond established between mother and daughter through a common interest for drawing and painting is crucial to the portrayal of a continuity between the pre and post-coming out self. In particular, the girl is described as the most valuable product of the failed heteronormative marriage the protagonist had with Mimmi’s father, G. (BALBOA 2020: 13). She also accompanies her mother in his identity journey with a mostly non-verbal and, again, corporeal participation in her progressively growing sense of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. An example is the set of vignettes

⁷ To Mina, who teaches me life since she was born – and maybe even a bit before. (This book and the person I am today would not exist without you).

⁸ Today Mina grabbed my tit while I was drawing and said to me: ‘do you draw Mina and tit?’ so I drew ourselves.



FIGURE 1 – N. Balboa 2017: 65.

representing Nicoz and Mimmi's trip to New York, where the child wears a rainbow dress that perfectly complements the mother's LGBT Pride t-shirt and dances at the historical gay bar Stonewall Inn (BALBOA 2020: 23-24).

Even Balboa's social network presence, which we have already labelled as constitutive of the author's practice as a comics artist, frequently features Mina, who is represented in some of the vignettes posted on Instagram and appears, together with her mother, in pictures and videos where both play with their gender identity (sometimes even using Instagram filters to highlight Nicoz's masculine features and the daughter's feminine ones). In other words, Mina fully contributes, both as a character in Balboa's graphic novels and as a person with a clear reference in the social media world, to the legitimization of her mother's figure as queer.

Notwithstanding Mina's role as endorser of the author's gendered and sexual anti-normativity, Balboa has spoken about his experience as a parent in pretty normative terms, to the point of stating that, despite his well undergone FtM transition, he is willing to continue labelling himself as a "mother", a category that he associates to an idea of motherhood that is inextricably linked to the female body's biological functions. In an interview released for the Youtube channel of Lesbica Moderna, an LGBTQ+ blog by the Italian journalist Margherita Sanna, Balboa declared:

Mi rivendico il "madre". Non vorrei mai essere padre [...] La mia identità di genere non intacca in nessun modo il mio "motherhood" – l'essere madre di Mina, mia figlia. Se c'è una persona con cui non mi importa di avere il misgendering [...] è mia figlia, nel senso che è come se questo corpo che era diventato funzione quando aspettavo Mina, è come se questa funzione rispetto a lei rimanesse nonostante lei adesso abbia 11 anni [...]. Ma quel tipo di rapporto là, quel tipo di incontro là, quello in realtà non cambia con la mia transizione. (LESBICA MODERNA 2021: 13:50 - 15:14)⁹

These declarations are perfectly coherent with the type of representation that Balboa offered in his graphic novels, where motherhood is portrayed as a tie that mostly deploys at a corporeal level. To say that in another way, despite not neglecting the dimension of social motherhood, the author of

⁹ [I claim the "mother". I would never want to be a father [...] my gender identity does not affect, in any way, my motherhood – being a mother to Mina, my daughter. If there is a person I would not mind to be misgendered by [...] she is my daughter, because it is like this body, which became a function when I was pregnant of Mina, it is like if this function towards her has remained even though she is now 11. That type of relationship, that type of entanglement, it really does not change with my transition.]

Play with fire highlights with his representation the bodily aspects of motherhood and insists on the graphic depiction of those biological physical components (female reproductive organs) that insure the bonding of gestation, childbirth and lactation. In front of this symbolic operation, one could easily argue that Balboa's work reinforces that essentialist conception that links motherhood to a supposed female nature (and, in turn, reduces the female body to its childbearing and childrearing functions), a conception from which the majority of theories produced in feminist circles in the last half century have tried to emancipate.

Since the times of Simone de Beauvoir, who in *The Second Sex* recognized mothering as one of the social practices that contribute to the othering of women and to their relegation to the a-social realm of natural immanence (1953: 484), feminists have criticized the patriarchal assumption according to which motherhood is an essentially natural process for women and have preferred to stress on the idea of a socially constructed motherhood that could liberate women from the burden of compulsory childrearing (NEYER and BERNARDI 2011: 165-166). This theoretical tendency has been furtherly sustained by the reflections of Marxist feminists, who have argued that it is precisely on the mystique of motherhood as women's natural destiny that the societal mechanism of unpaid reproductive work, which contributes to the maintenance of capitalist and patriarchal systems of exploitation, is based (166). On the same idea of motherhood as a social construct and, consequently, as a pillar of the patriarchal symbolic order, poststructural feminists have then advanced, since the 1980s, the proposal of a re-symbolization of motherhood that, though the re-evaluation of the principle of women's difference, aimed at re-qualifying as positive and empowering the experience of maternity (167). In the Italian context, this last trend lead to feminist theorizations on the "madre simbolica" [symbolic mother], a figure that in feminist circles substituted that of the biological mother and was associated to the belief in the strength of female social and cultural genealogy.¹⁰

More recently, scientific progressions in the area of artificially reproductive technology (ART) re-ignited a feminist debate on the possibilities to detach motherhood from the imperative of biological procreation (NEYER and BERNARDI 2011: 167-172), as recommended by Shulamith Firestone in her forerunner *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970. Similarly, the emergence of queer

¹⁰ On this, see Muraro 1991.

studies as a growing popular sub-branch of feminist studies facilitated the emergence of theories that promote an emancipation of the social category of motherhood from its existing connections to the heterocisnormative system of identity formation and relations. In 2012, Darren Rosenblum advocated for “unsexing mothering” in the area of legislation. He proposes to eliminate any automatic juridical connection between the parent’s sex and the categories of “mother” or “father”, with the aim of “elevating them from biodeterminist brandings to chosen classifications or roles” (2012: 60). Furthermore, Margaret F. Gibson talked about “queering motherhood” as an imperative, in contemporary times. This allows not only the inclusion of queer subjects in the discourse on motherhood, but also to destabilize our notion of motherhood, which is traditionally linked to the idea of primary parental practice and gestation, by means of this inclusion (2014: 5-6). Kate Hanley Averett, recuperated the long-standing feminist intention to de-essentialize motherhood though denouncing the failure in bringing this cultural process to completion. She defended the urgency of starting to conceptualize motherhood as a condition that does not depend on the act of giving birth but rather involves a complex negotiation between parenting practices, the parent’s individual identity and his/her/their socially mediated embodiment (2021: 298).

In light of these theories, no much doubt is left on the fact that Nicoz Balboa’s graphic narratives do not have the potentials to inspire in the reader a radical re-thinking of the category of motherhood. Balboa queers motherhood in a soft and cautious manner. Despite not neglecting the portrayal of the burden that social mothering (the act of functioning as a kid’s primary carer) entails, the artist represents his own mothering as a practice that can be labelled as such on the basis of the eminently bodily connection that the (at the time) female body guaranteed. In this sense, he aligns with Adrienne Rich’s school of thought, according to which motherhood is, first of all, a physical enterprise where female’s biological ability to connect bodily contributes significantly to the establishment of the bond with the fetus/baby (1976: 11-12).¹¹

¹¹ Rich does not erase from her discourse the contribution that non-biological mothers gave and give to the, also physical, act of childrearing. However, these subjects are biological women as well who often contribute to childrearing with breastfeeding. This prevented Rich from clearly emancipating her discourse from the idea of a connection between female biology and mothering practices.

In the following section, the portrayal of the FtoM transition will be analyzed in detail, especially in relation to the representation of mothering practices, with the aim of describing Balboa's operation of queering motherhood softly and of evaluating the potential impact that this has not only in the area of motherhood but also in that of transness theorizations.

BEYOND ABSOLUTE NORMALITY AND ANTI-NORMALITY. THE MERITS OF A NORMATIVE REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD TO CHALLENGE TRANSNORMALITY

In *Play with fire*, the coming to terms with the reality of the protagonist's transgender and queer identity is portrayed as a slow and gradual process that starts with isolated and playful experiments of cross-dressing conducted by Nicoz in front of the mirror of the bathroom (BALBOA 2020: 38-43) as well as with sexual games with a strap-on (117-120). The turning point arrives towards the end of the graphic novel, when Nicoz attends the concert of the Against Me, a band whose singer is a transsexual woman, Laura Jane Grace (156). From here, the protagonist undergoes a quick turnover that results in the radical questioning of his sense of belonging to the feminine gender and, eventually, to the interest in a non-binarism that adopts explicitly male features.

This development and the mental confusion that Nicoz experiences in front of the increasing awareness over his own transgenderism is accompanied by the presence of recurring symbolic elements. Among these, the symbol of the fire (from which the book's title, *Play with fire*, stems) that epitomizes the chaos derived from the struggle between the always interiorized patriarchal gender classifications and the necessity of queering one's identity, which is to say of questioning the "notion of faithful reproduction" of the same categorizations (GIBSON 2014: 1). Another symbol that Balboa uses intermittently is that of the siren, the half-human half-fish that he associates to the practice of resisting gender dichotomies, of positioning oneself in-between two polarities without never fully conforming to one or to the other. By drawing juxtaposed female and male transsexual sirens (BALBOA 2020: 171) or sirens whose bodily features mix female and male characteristics (193) as imaginary guiding figures for his transition, the comics artist finds a powerful image for representing the entropic ethos of queerness. Here, cartooning proves crucial for carrying out this symbolic operation in light of its already mentioned capacity to facilitate the

creation, on paper, of imagined shapes, anatomies and associations that easily overcome the burden of realness and its connected social restrictions. Both the fire and siren symbols are also closely linked to the protagonist's (and author's) activity as a tattooer, as they are commonly featured in the tattoo-related scenes included in the book and in Nicoz Balboa's Instagram page, where the artist often uploads photos of his tattoos. This is not surprising if we take into consideration the growing amount of scholarly research that have established a theoretical and social link between transgender body modification and body art or cosmetic surgery (CHRISLER 2016; ROSS 2018; SULLIVAN 2006).

The queering re-imagining operation is further amplified by the mechanisms through which text and image, the two constitutive modalities of comics, are assembled by Balboa. As the comics scholar and artist Scott McCloud famously indicated, different types of relationship exist between the verbal and the graphic components of graphic narratives. Among these, one of the most common is the duo-specific relationship, through which words and images collaborate to convey a unique message (1993: 153). In *Play with fire*, this technique is frequently adopted, as in the one-page panel where the two transsexual sirens, one a MtoF holding a penis in her hands and the other an FtoM holding two tits, appear pensively looking at each other on the two sides of a long caption that reproduces the protagonist's confused thoughts about his embodied self and gender identity (BALBOA 2020: 171). Here, the selected form – the breaking of the polarization word-image that pertains to the medium of comics – mirrors the message – Nicoz's indecision over (and ultimate rejection of) taking a rigid positioning between the poles of femininity and masculinity.

In light of this analysis, *Play with fire* embraces an eminently queer aesthetics that clearly pursues and promotes an anti-normative stance. This is not a given when it comes to transgender and transsexual autobiographical or autofictional narratives where, as Jay Prosser noticed, normativity is often an element that allows the protagonist to embody that “gender realness” that allows them to be recognized as member of the desired gender (1998: 11-12). In order to describe this tendency, which has also been observed by social psychologists dealing with transsexual subject's identity negotiation (BRADFORD and SYED 2019), Austin H. Johnson has introduced the concept of transnormativity, namely the ideology that prescribes the adoption of specific social behaviors (the unambiguous identification

with the gender that was not assigned at birth and a process of hormonal and surgical transition) while marginalizing those who do not conform to medicalization and gender binarism (2016: 466-467).

The rejection of normativity is, interestingly enough, supported by the representation that Balboa offers of motherhood which, as we have seen, proposes a somehow essentialist praise of the biologically feminine features that guarantee gestation and lactation. In the middle of the crisis that initiates transition, Nicoz reflects on his bodily characteristics and activates an intimate debate on how the most feminine ones (namely the large hips and the breast) could coexist with the masculine image that he has of himself. Despite not being able to find definitive answers to his puzzling questions, the protagonist lets himself go to a cluttered and chaotic graphic reflection in which the memories of the pregnancy and its direct aftermaths emerge as an illuminating factor that fruitfully problematizes Nicoz's internal rhetoric on his gender identification. The page reproduced in Figure 2 is emblematic in this sense. Here, the protagonist is drawn while touching the breasts and is placed between two male transsexual sirens who clearly show the scars of their mastectomy. The caption reads, "che poi io non odio queste tette perché mi hanno regalato una delle esperienze più galattiche della mia vita: allattare Mimmi. Produrre cibo dal mio corpo per nutrire un altro essere umano!"¹² (Balboa 2020: 172). Just below, a flash-back vignette represents the protagonist and Mimmi while united by the corporeal bond of breastfeeding.

The acceptance of the feminine physical parts and of the role they played in the pre-transition past of the protagonist corresponds, in *Play with fire*, to a renunciation of the dominant and transnormative rhetoric of the wrong body, where wrongness is "understood in relation to how the body is gendered, connoting that the body is wrongly gendered in relation to a self-identified gender identity" (Engdahl 2014: 267). The presence of this rhetorical feature or trope is what determines, in many autobiographies by transsexual subjects, a clear narratological break between a pre-transition and a post-transition self or, to use Prosser's words, "the split between the I of the *bios* and the I of the *graphs*" (1998: 112), which in turn corresponds to the production of a double self. A few scholars in feminist and queer

¹² At the end of the day, I do not hate these tits because they gifted me with one of the most galactic experiences of my life: breastfeeding Mimmi. Producing food with my body in order to feed another human being.



Figure 2 – N. Balboa 2020: 172.

studies have labelled the rhetoric of the wrong body detrimental because it supports an essentialist idea of gender identity, thus reproducing gender dichotomies and preserving normativity.¹³ As Ulrica Engdahl explained, in the wrong body trope:

The body is assumed wrong in relation to an inner, real, and authentic gender identity, thus giving the impression of an essence that the body constrains, producing a reified image of both body and self as static and separate entities and thereby correlating an essentialism of genital materiality that disputes the realness of transgender experience. The idea of authenticity underlies essentialism and produces norms of naturalness and realness. Essentialism therefore reinforces the norms of a gender binary, resulting in misrecognition of gender-varied bodies and expressions, risking stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion. (2014: 267-268).

When, a couple of pages later, Balboa represents the protagonist while letting somebody tattooing on his skin the expression “Gender is over” (2020: 176), the portrayal of transition as a process of transformation, as opposed to a disruption between an “untrue” and a “true” self, is enunciated even more clearly, together with the author’s non-binaristic view of gender. It is not by coincidence that in the last double-page of the graphic novel Balboa represents himself as a queer siren who, while diving into the sea, exposes his masculine facial features (a beard) together with his breasts, the feminine body part that he learned how not to reject by remembering the experience of lactation.

After the publication of *Play with fire*, Balboa continued to represent his FtoM, but always eminently queer,¹⁴ transgender journey through his Instagram vignettes and in the graphic novel *Transformer*. If in the first two graphic novels the act of queering motherhood is conducted in an extremely cautious way and normative patterns of representation (which, in turn, function as a rhetorical tool to avoid transnormativity) are frequently

¹³ On this, see Judith Butler’s famous critique of the documentary on the Harlem queer ballrooms *Paris Is Burning* (1991) by Jenny Livingston, where the scholar alerts towards the risks of confirming hegemonic norms with a de-naturalized but still binary depiction of gender identity (2011: 85).

¹⁴ In this path, gender dysphoria – which is to say the transgender/transsexual subject’s feeling of being trapped in a body that does not meet the gender requirements needed to match with the selected gender – is one of the main recurring topics. This testifies to the problematic dimension of Balboa’s queerness, which is always dialectically opposed by the desire to be fully recognized as a male. However, Balboa never aligns with transnormative discourse and proposes a representation that, especially at a visual level (for example with the recurring symbol of the siren or the flower), questions gender binarisms.

employed, in the vignettes and in *Transformer* Balboa does not avoid to represent himself as a truly masculine mother. An example is a post published on the 25th of November 2020, where Mina complains about her heavy backpack and Nicoz takes it replying: “Those are the bright sides of having a transmasc mom who takes testosterone” (figure 3).



FIGURE 3 – Nicoz Balboa, screenshot from nicoz_balboa Instagram profile: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIBwEadhVhU/> [last access 13/03/2023].

Here the mother-daughter relationship is unequivocally queered by means of the association, which happens at a graphic as well as at a verbal level, between the category of masculinity and that of motherhood. The reader who is familiar with Balboa’s work, however, is aware of the fact

that this representation is the result of a long process of symbolic negotiation in which the mothering practice does not cease to be linked to the (past) presence of essentially feminine features. Not by coincidence, the author selected this online post to be included in the graphic novel *Transformer*. Here the vignettes, which in the in-print publication are altered to match the colour palette and the language (Italian) of the entire book but maintain their content (Balboa 2022: 95), are preceded by a set of panels (figure 4) in which Nicoz discloses to Mimmi his transgenderism. Not only Mimmi reacts well to the revelation, she even contributes to the symbolic operation of queering motherhood by aligning with her parent's desire to be called "mother" notwithstanding the FtoM transition and further validates it by creating the expression "il mio mamma", which combines the masculine article and possessive pronoun with the noun "mother".



FIGURE 4 – N. Balboa 2022: 94.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out on *Born to lose*, *Play with fire*, *Transformer* and Balboa's Instagram vignettes, brought to light a rare example of graphic narrative dedicated to the representation of motherly practices from the point of view of a FtoM transgender person. In the case of Balboa, the decision of maintaining the epithet "mother" as a descriptor of his relationship with the daughter Mina even after the start of a FtoM transition clearly corresponds to the will of preserving the memory of a physical bond

guaranteed by feminine bodily characteristics that are generally linked to a traditional/patriarchal conception of motherhood. In light of this, it is possible to talk about Balboa's work as an operation in which motherhood is queered softly. The representation of the parenting methodology constantly highlights queer aspects (lesbianism first and transgenderism afterwards) though ultimately maintaining an essentialist outlook. However, the apparently reactionary facet of this portrayal cannot but be questioned when one discovers that a representation of the mother-daughter bond based on constant references to the mystique of the female body as nurturing is precisely what allows the author to reject normative (or trans-normative) stances when it comes to the depiction of transition. In other words, the autobiographical self's acceptance of his feminine body parts (breasts and hips) as crucial elements in the establishment of the relation with Mimmi/Mina prevents Balboa from availing the rhetoric of the wrong body, which risks to reproduce patriarchy's binaristic thought on gender. The case of Nicoz Balboa testifies to the importance, both for queer theory and for the analysis of queer cultural products, of overcoming a strict conceptualization of normativity and anti-normativity as mutually exclusive. Despite anti-normativity being generally recognized as one of the main tenets of queer theory and discourse, scholars such as Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson have argued that oppositional stances are not necessarily beneficial to queer theory and, notwithstanding anti-normativity's highly rhetorical value. On their own, oppositional stances fails to describe what queer subjects experience (2015). These realities would be better served and represented by a re-introduction of a non-prejudicial reflection on normative desires and attitudes that should complement, without any fear of embracing the paradox and losing political radicalism, the anti-normative discourse. Because reality – and what is best than a graphic memoir where images assist words in the constant effort of referring the entropy of experiences – is often complex enough.

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