

TO BE OR NOT TO BE A MOTHER: DOUBTFUL, FRAUGHT, AND DENIED ACCESS TO MOTHERHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY CATALAN THEATRE

SER O NO SER MADRE EN EL TEATRO CATALÁN CONTEMPORÁNEO: CONFLICTOS, DUDAS Y NEGACIÓN EN EL ACCESO A LA MATERNIDAD

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Abstract

Like many other regions in Europe, Catalonia has seen significant changes in the demographics of motherhood over recent decades, with decreasing fertility rates and an increase in the average age of women at the birth of the first child. Together with increased social awareness of gender and identity issues such as gestational loss or the sexual and reproductive rights of people with disabilities, this changing landscape seems to have had a noteworthy impact on contemporary Catalan theatre. Indeed, throughout the long 2010s, a significant number of female-authored plays focused on motherhood premiered in Catalan venues, and a significant portion of these addressed doubtful, fraught, and denied access to motherhood. This essay analyses four important works associated with this trend: *Júlia & The Empty Lot* (2018) and *To Be a Mother* (2021) by Clàudia Cedó, *Conversations With My Uterus and Other Interlocutors* (2018) by Núria Planes Lull, and *Stigmas* (2019) by Concha Milla. These plays respectively address the experience of perinatal loss,

the desire of women with disabilities to become mothers, doubts concerning one's maternal desire, and the consequences of infertility and assisted reproductive technology processes. The analysis is based on dramatic and video criticism, accompanied by a study of performance documentation and paratexts. This essay contends that the analysed plays shed light on the tension between hegemonic narratives around motherhood and the actual experiences of contemporary Catalan women in terms of access to motherhood, which can be fraught with social, political, or physiological obstacles, as well as denied to certain subjects who have historically been excluded from womanhood, such as women with disabilities. In so doing, the plays expand the available narratives for what we understand as motherhood while elaborating feminist responses to the lived experiences they bring to the stage.

Keywords: Catalan theatre; female playwrights; maternal desire; infertility; perinatal mortality; assisted reproductive technologies; disability; no mothers.

Resumen

Como otras muchas regiones de Europa, Cataluña ha visto suceder en las últimas décadas cambios importantes en la demografía de la maternidad, como el descenso de la natalidad o el aumento de la edad media de las mujeres en el nacimiento del primer hijo. Junto con el aumento de la visibilidad social de cuestiones identitarias y de género como las pérdidas gestacionales o los derechos sexuales y reproductivos de las personas con discapacidad, este paisaje en transformación ha producido un impacto destacado en el teatro catalán contemporáneo. En efecto, a lo largo de la última década se ha representado en los escenarios catalanes un número significativo de obras centradas en la maternidad, una parte importante de las cuales ha abordado el acceso dubitativo, difícil o negado a la maternidad. Este artículo analiza cuatro piezas importantes dentro de esta tendencia: *Una gossa en un descampat* (2018) y *Mare de sucre* (2021) de Clàudia Cedó, *Converses amb el meu úter i altres interlocutors* (2018) de Núria Planes Lull, y *ESTIGMES* (2019) de Concha Milla. Respectivamente, las obras elegidas tratan la experiencia de la muerte perinatal, el deseo de convertirse en madres de las mujeres con discapacidad intelectual, las dudas sobre el propio deseo materno, y las consecuencias de la infertilidad y el uso de las Tecnologías de Reproducción Asistida. El análisis de las obras se basa en la crítica dramática y videográfica, así como en el estudio de paratextos, como trípticos o vídeos promocionales. El artículo argumenta que las obras analizadas iluminan la tensión entre las narrativas hegemónicas sobre la maternidad y la experiencia efectiva de la población femenina contemporánea en el acceso a esta, que puede estar marcado por obstáculos sociales, políticos y fisiológicos, y puede ser negado a ciertos sujetos excluidos de la categoría 'mujer', como son las que presentan alguna discapacidad. De este modo, las obras estudiadas amplían los imaginarios disponibles para lo que entendemos por

maternidad, al tiempo que elaboran respuestas feministas a las experiencias vividas que trasladan a los escenarios.

Palabras clave: teatro catalán; dramaturgas; deseo materno; infertilidad; muerte perinatal; tecnologías de reproducción asistida; discapacidad; no madres.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism has long denounced the distance between lived experiences of motherhood and the narrative that has historically dominated political, religious, and social discourses, as well as, more recently, publicity, mass media, and mainstream audiovisual content. As María Lozano Estivalis puts it, Western societies have historically treated all women as one, the Woman, who is in turn conflated with the Mother, in a restrictive and monolithic representation of both femaleness and motherhood. These narratives seldom feature first-person female narrators, as patriarchal societies perceive women as «producers of life, agents through which the species reproduces, and bastions [...] of a male-tailored, androcentric tradition» (Lozano Estivalis, 2006, p. 126)¹. Consequently, a range of topics that contradict this hegemonic narrative—such as the rejection of motherhood, infertility, menopause, the failure to care for one’s children, or the image of mothers as sexual and independent beings—have been made invisible or systematically presented as negative (Lozano Estivalis, 2006, p. 107).

Throughout the 2010s, Catalan audiences have witnessed a growing number of plays that address this issue by attempting to rethink theatrical—and more broadly, cultural—representations of motherhood. Four main characteristics are common to these plays: they focus on motherhood by offering a critical perspective on some of its various aspects, they focus primarily on mothers’ voices and subjectivities, they are often based on (semi)autobiographical experiences or draw on research on women’s biographical experiences, and they address aspects of motherhood that have been omitted from hegemonic narratives. The most significant plays in this group are *Llibert* (2013) by Gemma Brió, *Santa nit, una història de Nadal*

1. All translations from Catalan and Spanish sources are mine unless indicated otherwise.

(2014) by Cristina Genebat, *Conillet* (2015) by Marta Galán, *La noia de la làmpada* (2017) by Marta Aran, *Fes-me una perduda* (2017) by Mercè Sarrias, *Converses amb el meu úter i altres interlocutors* (2018) by Núria Planes Lull, *Una gossa en un descampat* (2018) by Clàudia Cedó, *ESTIgMES* (2019) by Concha Milla, *Els diners, el desig, els drets* (2019) by Marta Galán, *Part* (2021) by Tanit Plana, *Mare de sucre* (2021) by Clàudia Cedó and *Tocar mare* (2022) by Marta Barceló. These plays explore a wide range of topics, such as obstetric violence, gestational loss, the double burden of women and mothers, social expectations regarding mothers, the penalisation of motherhood in the work market, mothers' exhaustion, and the tension between sexual desire and the monogamic family structure.

This growing number of plays should be understood as reflecting the changes that the normalisation of female playwrights and practitioners in the theatrical field has produced. Unlike other artistic domains, such as narrative and literature, the number of female creators in the field of Catalan theatre only started to significantly increase from the 1990s onward. As María José Ragué Arias argued, this was a remarkable transformation for the field and was directly linked to the changing role of women in the late 20th century (Ragué Arias, 1996, pp. 262-263; 2000, pp. 91-92). During the two following decades, these numbers continued to grow; an important development since the increased presence of female creators is a crucial precondition for the normalisation of women in this field. In a context where male dominance still prevails, these changes have gradually allowed women to challenge their traditionally marginalised status, «becoming, thus, authorial models thanks to whom other women can imagine and (re)think themselves as writers» (Pérez Fontdevila, 2019, p. 43). Moreover, these changes have perhaps allowed women greater freedom to address topics perceived as feminine and to explicitly present feminist views; female practitioners have generally avoided addressing such topics and views to avoid their works being received negatively (Goodman, 1993, pp. 28-30; Aston & Harris, 2006, p. 6; Ragué Arias, 2013, p. 18; Garbayo Maeztu, 2016, p. 25-26). In the mid-2010s, another important factor contributed to the growth of the number of female practitioners: in the wake of both a local and global rise in feminist consciousness, Catalan theatre witnessed a rapid increase in the number of feminist claims concerning both gender inequalities in the industry and

the lack of representative justice with regard to women, LGBTI communities, and racialised communities. Among its other effects, this wave led to a striking increase in the number of explicitly feminist messages in plays and female-led performances and greater visibility for female practitioners and companies.

It should be noted that Catalan female playwrights have not unanimously embraced feminist trends and that their creations have been heterogeneous in form as well as in perspectives and interests. However, motherhood is an experience that is of major importance in many women's lives, and the emergence of a number of significant plays that critically engage with this topic attests to a significant desire to change and renew its representation in theatre. Despite some relevant political and legal advances, parenthood still has an undeniably stronger impact on women's lives than on men's. In Catalonia, the government's failure to provide significant resources to support family caregiving has ascribed the widest part of caregiving to families—that is to say, it has negatively impacted women (Flaquer & Brullet, 2000, p. 142). Furthermore, the effects of motherhood on the gender pay gap are drastic (Quinto, Hospido & Sanz, 2017, p. 17), a reality that can be linked to the fact that women continue to spend considerably more time taking care of children than men do (Ajenjo Cosp & García Román, 2011, p. 1002). Motherhood has both psychological and emotional as well as material consequences for women, as femininity is still very much linked to being a mother, and social expectations concerning mothering, such as that women engage in intensive mothering, take renewed forms (see Hays, 1998; Medina Bravo et al., 2014, p. 500; Arciniega Caceres, 2019, Chapter VI.1). The theatre industry is not an exception with regard to this state of affairs, and, given the generally precarious nature of the industry, motherhood has taken a toll on the careers of many practitioners (Gázquez, 2015, Chapter 6) and actresses (Juanico, 2018).

Therefore, the significant number of plays on motherhood staged in Catalonia during the last decade should be understood as reflecting one of the main factors of gender inequality in Catalan and Spanish societies and, thus, as part of a wider and more heterogeneous interest in feminist narratives in contemporary Catalan theatre (see Nicolau Jiménez, 2021; Saumell, 2012, p. 4, 2018; Saumell i Olivella, 2018; Corrons, 2019). This group of plays

may also be understood as representing a gendered engagement with broader contemporary trends in a theatre that is addressing real and contemporary concerns (Batlle, 2011, 2020; Sánchez, 2012). In addition, many of these plays reflect the growth of documentary theatre on Catalan stages (Prieto Nadal, 2020, pp. 33-34). The phenomenon of plays focused on motherhood, however, seems to extend beyond these labels, as plays have addressed subjects that have largely been invisibilised in the Catalan theatrical tradition, and several of these works thus feature significant innovations in themes, motives, and imaginaries². Furthermore, this group of plays appears to contest the traditional division between production and reproduction in terms of the male domain of creation and the female sphere of procreation and domestic care. Using different strategies, these plays reconcile the two in rich and diverse ways that validate the often-silenced subjectivities of women and mothers and serve as a statement on both theatre and society's treatment of the complex, multifaceted, and essential experience of motherhood.

2. THE LIMITS OF MOTHERHOOD ON STAGE

Within this context, it is striking to realise that a notable number of plays in this larger group deal with related topics that fall under a broad shared label: the lack of access to motherhood. Plays such as *Libert* (2013) by Gemma Brió, *Blanca desvelada* (2015) by Alejandra Jiménez Cascón, and *Una gossa en un descampat* (2018) by Clàudia Cedó address pregnancy loss or neonatal death. *Només sexe* (2008) by Daniela Feixas depicts a voluntary abortion. *Quebec-Barcelona* (2012) by Mercè Sàrrias features a case of male infertility, while *ESTIGMES* (2019) by Concha Milla reflects on the intersections of infertility and assisted reproductive technology (ART). *Converses amb el meu úter i altres interlocutors* (2018) by Núria Planes Lull is a reflection on the social pressures around maternal desire. *Els diners, el desig i els drets* (2019) by Marta Galán is a verbatim play on surrogacy. Finally, *Mare de sucre* (2012) by Clàudia Cedó is a pioneering work in that it defends the right of women with disabilities to become mothers.

2. Innovative representations of mothers in Catalan theatre have been sparse and often due to female authorship—we may recall *La Infanticida* (1898) by Víctor Català or *L'huracà* (1935) by Carme Montoriol.

This prevailing attention to difficult, doubtful, or denied access to motherhood reflects the changing demographics of motherhood. In Spain, natality rates have decreased over recent decades, a phenomenon that is mainly due to poor working conditions (Esping-Andersen, 2013, p. 200). Furthermore, Catalonia is one of the world's regions with a higher mean age of women at the birth of the first child (Vallespín, 2018); the reasons for this include a precarious job market, a lack of government funds, high housing prices, the pressure exerted on women by the labour market, and the prioritisation of professional careers. Nevertheless, most women have children throughout their lives—in Catalonia, the percentage of women without children across all ages was 32.2% in 2007 (Idescat, 2007)—and a significant percentage of Spanish women have fewer children than desired (Esping-Andersen 2013, Chapter 1). Concurrently, femaleness and motherhood are still deeply entrenched in the common imagination, some political discourses reproduce the conception of women as «the biological reproducers, the life-givers and nurturers» of Catalan society (Iveson, 2017, p. 61), and traditional ideologies around motherhood are transmitted to young generations (Arciniega et al., 2020, p. 50). In other words, consequential changes in the demographics of motherhood coexist with the traditional idea that women are mothers by default. Thus, those who do not want to or cannot become mothers transgress the male symbolic order:

The lack of a symbolic order of motherhood and infertility is evident since the second concept is articulated as something negative: non-motherhood. In a structure of meaning where motherhood is the norm, the positive, the axis of female sexual identity, any opposition or impossibility is qualified as a dysfunction and evaluated in terms of marginality, rebellion or, at best, disease. (Lozano Estivalis, 2006, p. 109)

Therefore, it seems crucial to consider the influence that hegemonic discourses on motherhood may have on women who are not (yet) mothers, and how this influence translates to the stage. For the purposes of this article, I analyse four plays that focus on lack of access to motherhood and feature as their leading roles characters who have not been mothers: *Una gossa en un descampat* (hereafter *Júlia & The Empty Lot*) by Clàudia Cedó, *Converses amb al meu úter i altres interlocutors* (*Conversations With My Uterus and Other Interlocutors*) by Núria Planes Llull, *ESTIGMES* (*Stigmas*) by Concha Milla,

and *Mare de sucre* (*To Be a Mother*), also by Clàudia Cedó³. Only one of these plays has been edited (Cedó, 2018a), and all are written mainly in Catalan, with interpolations of Spanish that range from occasional to an extent where works essentially become bilingual. My predominant methodologies are dramatic and video criticism, as I scrutinise both the textual and the scenic dimensions of these plays. I also analyse performance documentation, such as videos and leaflets, to reflect on the promotion and reception of these works.

In this article, I argue that these four plays create space for the representation of forms of pain and grief that are often invisible—for a lost child, for lost motherhood, for a lost idea of the self—and for the hardship of not being a mother—by choice, due to infertility or pregnancy and labour complications, or because the possibility of motherhood is not even considered. In doing so, I argue that these works make evident the pervasive identification of femininity and motherhood as well as the blame, ostracization, and pain that women endure due to their incapacity or unwillingness to become (good) mothers. In other words, I contend that the analysed plays shed light on the tension between hegemonic narratives around motherhood and the actual experiences of contemporary Catalan women in terms of access to motherhood, which can be fraught with social, political, or physiological obstacles, as well as denied to certain subjects historically excluded from womanhood, such as women with disabilities. As I seek to analyse how these plays pay particular attention to the edges of motherhood, I examine the extent to which they expand the available imaginaries for what we understand as motherhood, as well as the feminist responses they elaborate to the lived experiences they bring to the stage.

3. The Catalan expression *de sucre* refers to participants who take part in a game but are exempt from losing—a role accorded, for instance, to smaller children. Hillary J. Gardner, translator of Cedó's plays, states that she avoided a literal translation of *Mare de sucre* to forms such as *Sugar mother* or *Sweet mother*, which would have other connotations in English. Instead, she chose *To Be a Mother*, which echoes a comparison that director Sergi Belbel made between *Júlia & The Empty Lot* and *Hamlet* (personal email, 25/05/2022). Besides, the change stands as a significant shift that underlines the broader existential dimension of the access to motherhood implied in this and the other analysed plays.

3. AN EPIC OF (LOST) MOTHERHOOD

Júlia & The Empty Lot was the result of Clàudia Cedó's residence in Sala Beckett for the 2017–2018 season, and it premiered in the summer of 2018 as part of the Festival Grec, the summer theatre festival of Barcelona⁴. The play explores perinatal death, a subject that Catalan theatre, with the exception of *Llibert*, had not previously addressed. It presents the story of Júlia, a 35-year-old woman who, in the fifth month of her pregnancy, loses her amniotic fluid and must be admitted to hospital. As the days go by, her amniotic sac does not close. Therefore, as the danger of infection increases and the pregnancy becomes increasingly unviable, Júlia must face two decisions: whether to end the pregnancy and whether she wishes to see her child—who will die in childbirth—following his birth. As the playwright explains in the promotional video issued by Sala Beckett (Cedó & Belbel, 2018, 00:34), she based this plot on the experience of perinatal loss that she suffered at the beginning of her residence.

The promotional video for the play also contains declarations by director Sergi Belbel, who praises the work by comparing it to *Hamlet* and states that, given that the play addresses the essential dilemma of «to be or not to be», Cedó has written a female Hamlet. Whether or not one agrees with understanding women's works through male-authored canonical works, it is certain that *Júlia & The Empty Lot* addresses this quandary. The play does so in two ways: first, choosing to end her pregnancy and thus the life of her son would mean that Júlia will *not* become a mother; second, Júlia's decision will directly result in her son *not being* anymore. The play also offers a more tenuous third possibility, namely that Júlia could simultaneously be and not be her own son, whom she imagines and talks to in a nightmare, and thus is and is not someone different, at the same time an otherly being and a construction of her mind.

These dilemmas, together with all Júlia's feelings and questions, are put to the forefront thanks to the doubling of the leading role, which is split into Júlia, a «Pregnant mother who loses her child. A schoolteacher», and Júlia II, an «inner voice» and «invisible friend of Júlia» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 4). They have

4. All the excerpts from the play are taken from the English translation by H.J. Gardner.

multiple exchanges in an empty lot, a metaphor for Júlia's troubled mind that constitutes the scenography of the play, and in the memories of the days that she spent at the hospital with her partner, Pau. Through the externalisation that the dialogue implies, we see the confrontation between a more resolute and brave side of the heroine and a more fearful and guilt-ridden one. Most importantly, their dialogue makes apparent a direct relationship between fear and guilt and the heroine's lack of knowledge of gestational loss. In the promotional video, Cedó recalls the fear she suffered while in the hospital, and she notes that her experience may have been different had she known what she was faced with. In being incorporated into the play, this issue acquires structuring importance, and the heroine explicitly links it to the practical non-existence of cultural representations of perinatal death and to the social taboo that surrounds it: «I know my Nana lost a baby at nine months. But she never spoke about it. You never hear about it anywhere. Maybe if you saw it in the movies or in books or somewhere...» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 32). Due to her lack of knowledge regarding gestational loss, she experiences extreme guilt and feels that losing a child represents a defeat in the «race» to become a successful mother: «I'm the one who feels like this. At fault. Like dried salt cod. I thought I'd be able to do this. I thought I'd be good at it» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 57).

The feeling of guilt is also partly incarnated in the figure of the Shadow, a personification of the non-born child who still haunts the empty lot and who is simultaneously a mental projection similar to Júlia II and a different being. A metaphor for facing her fears, once Júlia dares to look at her stillborn, the Shadow disappears, and «what could have been will vanish, because he is, and he is real. 270 grams of real» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 71). In the course of the play, Júlia is also surrounded by other characters, who provide her with information (e.g., the hospital psychologist; see Figure 1)—inspire her with courage, and decrease her disorientation and overwhelming sense of guilt. In particular, a nurse who also lost a son tells her, «Whatever happens, this baby of yours will always exist. You'll get to see him, you'll get to meet him. And he'll be your baby. Always» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 55). It is indeed after talking to this nurse—after finding a referent and after learning that she will nevertheless *be* a mother—that Júlia finally finds the courage to face the Shadow in the empty lot and, eventually, end the unviable pregnancy.



Figure 1. Júlia in the hospital with her boyfriend, the hospital psychologist and Júlia 2.

Along with these characters, Júlia also surrounds herself with an imagined collective, the members of which are variously identified with her female ancestors or with a wider spectrum of entities related to the cycle of life—«humanity», «Life», «Earth and its people» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 69). These invisible presences help her face the feelings of isolation and disorientation that she experiences due to the lack of referents:

And I remember how strong I was. I have no idea where I found such strength. [...] As if I was being propelled by the women who died before me, my Nana, my grandma, Pili. All of them there with me. (Cedó, 2018b, p. 12)

Furthermore, these evocations underline Júlia's identification with women as a group, particularly during labour—«A deep, dark scream of extraordinary brilliance carried you away into the arms of all women who had ever been» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 69)—and during faltering moments—«And I thought... if I can't do this, if my baby doesn't survive, they will make it happen. As if we were all experiencing motherhood together, as one» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 23).

These passages may appear problematic because they elevate motherhood to a defining trait for women and conceptualise it as a mission, a perspective that is very close to that of hegemonic narratives. However, these visions are also of a nuanced and complex character and far removed from the stereotyped and dehumanised patriarchal vision of mothers. They also do not serve to define the whole experience of motherhood. On the contrary, they are often vague and transient: «it was just this fleeting thought I had, a frightened little fish that jumped right back into the water and disappeared before I could put it into words» (Cedó, 2018b, p. 23). Therefore, these visions can be seen as an attempt to reproduce perceptions that, in Sonia Kruks' words, exceed «the boundaries of the discursive» (Kruks, 2001, p. 13) but «often significantly inform our commitments and shape our predispositions» (Kruks, 2001, p. 14).

Moreover, these images are part of an attempt at explaining women's subjective perceptions of maternity, an aspect of human experience that has seldom featured in cultural representations and that the Western philosophical tradition has denigrated (Lozano Estivalis, 2006, p. 233). Given this historical background, some authors claim that «the creation of discourses that empower motherhood and restore its management and symbolic prestige onto women's hands should be an essential feminist task» (Merino, 2017, p. 28). In Cedó's play, facing a gestational loss, giving birth, and bidding farewell to a lost infant are depicted as painful but are also imbued with epic tones through the repeated use of heroic and warlike metaphors in the text and the staging directions: for instance, David Bowie's «Heroes» is played during the labour scene. Thus, while she problematises the unity, bodily obliteration, and lack of vulnerability of the androcentric modern subject (Braidotti, 1991, Chapter 3; Grosz, 1994, Introduction; Jones, 1998, Chapter 2), Júlia represents a contemporary heroine who incarnates courage and strength; whose experience is equal to other, more valued human experiences; and who can serve as a model with whom everyone, not just the women in the audience, can identify.

The serene acceptance that Júlia achieves at the end of the play suggests an understanding of courage and grief as processes that do not deny one's fallibility, pain, or loss. In *Júlia*, the question of possible future pregnancies does not arise precisely because the heroine insists on the importance of her

love for this child and implies that giving birth to a dead son also represents a form of motherhood. The process of empowerment she undergoes therefore widens her conception of what motherhood is and transports her from a silent, deserted, and barren place to a populated and more enlightened region, as, at the end of the play, the empty lot is furnished with colourful, illuminated balloons. In the process, Júlia acknowledges women's strength as her own, and the narrative links perinatal loss to other human experiences, such as overcoming grief and searching for existential meaning. In this sense, *Júlia & The Empty Lot* can be interpreted as demanding that women's experiences should be treated as equal to men's in cultural and theatrical works.

4. DOUBTS ABOUT MOTHERHOOD CAN BE SERIOUS FUN

Conversations With My Uterus and Other Interlocutors was created as a final degree project at the Institut del Teatre, Catalonia's principal higher education centre for theatre. One year later, the play premiered in the professional circuit at the Antic Teatre, a self-managed leftist fringe venue. The play, a one-woman show, was created and directed by Núria Planes Lull. This work is undoubtedly the most comic of the four considered in this article due to the mix of irony, sarcasm, and black humour it employs in questioning the creator's maternal desires. Although interpreted only by Planes Lull, several characters appear throughout the piece: her mother in voice-over, three personified kinds of gymnastics (one of which she practised as a child), her unconscious mind (which presents itself as necessary to convey the whole story and communicates through subtitles), and the arms of a mannequin, which embraces her while sleeping and may represent the otherwise absent figure of a potential father.

The most significant of these characters is Núria's mother, whom Núria interrogates in various passages that reflect the differences between them. While the daughter engages in radical questioning of society's influences, Núria's mother explains that she became mother without having had a particular desire to and appears surprised that her daughter is so concerned about the matter. Furthermore, she implicitly denies that she was subject to social pressure to become a mother while inadvertently pointing at it—she

states that she played with dolls—and tends to minimise past suffering, such as postpartum depression. As we learn, Núria started questioning her own desire to become a mother after watching *Home*, a documentary about the climate crisis. However, her mother distances herself from ethical concerns around parenthood and implicitly equates motherhood to a kind of mission: «without a mother there would be no humanity» (Planes Lull, 2019, 27:44). Because she reproduces many hegemonic conceptions about motherhood, Núria's mother somewhat incarnates society's voice, which pretends to respect women's free will while pressuring them to choose a normative life: «You have to make the decision. [...] I think you would enjoy [being a mother]. [...] If you don't have children you won't know» (Planes Lull, 2019, 26:54). Concurrently, we may choose to see in the differences between mother and daughter a generational transformation in the conception of motherhood, especially between Catalan women who began their adult lives in the first years of democracy and those who came of age in the 21st century.

Together with ecological considerations, another ethical concern contributes to Núria's reluctance to become a mother, namely that she—as, in her imagination, the child she will have will be female—will not decide her own existence. The practitioner opens the play by saying that we did not choose to be born and recalls that, had her mother not had an abortion after her first child, she would not exist. Then, her unconscious mind explains to the public that Núria had an infantile obsession with non-existence and that, whenever she was bored or in pain, she played a game that involved imagining that she did not exist. The evocation of her infantile years subtly combines with her awareness that she constantly thinks about what she will do when she has a daughter, as if she is trying to imagine the thoughts of her child on existence through the ones she knows—her own. Implicitly, she seems to ask whether she would wrong her daughter were she to choose to not have her, or, in having her, would she condemn her to an existence she cannot undo?

Furthermore, the contrast between Núria's juvenile certainty that she wanted to be a mother and her current critical views on the narratives of motherhood materialises in the distance between the two songs she sings. The first song recounts a conversation that she had with a friend when she

was 17. When he asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she «was possessed by a force bigger than all women and [she] sang this song»: *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a Mother* (Planes Lull, 2019, 12:42). The lyrics feature ironic images of perfect motherhood that indicate an idealised vision of a straightforward, devoted, and fulfilling experience: «I will be happy, I will be a better person, I will be patient and understanding. Empathetic, funny, and generous, and of course organised» (Planes Lull, 2019, 13:42). Conversely, in the second song, the distance she takes from her desire for motherhood takes the form of black humour:

When someone asks me: why don't you have children? I would love to tell them that nothing would make me happier, that I have been trying for a long time [...] that I am seeing a psy and spending all my savings on in vitro fertilization [...] that I have already suffered three miscarriages [...] that I had a son and he died [...] that the brother of that child survived, and that one, I keep him in the basement to blow off steam with him. (Planes Lull, 2019, 38:47)

The audience responds to the escalating harshness of the answers with amused and shocked laughs: Núria's hypothetical answers reflect taboos of failing, unable, monstrous, and unspeakable motherhood. Simultaneously, however, they suggest that responding with a broadside to the assumption that all women desire motherhood would be an exhilarating experience. The audience may imagine the social awkwardness that individuals receiving such an answer might experience or even consider the possibility that, for some, it would be preferable to continue to believe that women are filled with maternal desire—even should they be incapable of becoming mothers—rather than to acknowledge that, for some women, motherhood might not be a desirable choice.

Notwithstanding her critical views on the social discourses around motherhood, Núria experiences her loss of the certainty that she wishes to become a mother as a critical loss of identity, and, in one of the exchanges with her mother, she mumbles, «well, I don't know, I am nobody anymore» (Planes Lull, 2019, 42:40). The performance of motherhood she enacts at the end of the show is symptomatic of this dislocation between individual desires structural to the self and the awareness that these desires are determined by social narratives. First, a mechanical doll appears walking on all fours at

the back of the stage: it is a grotesque image, one that is very distant from the idealised representations of babies as desirable beings. Then, wearing a leopard maillot and a donkey mask, the practitioner places herself next to the doll in the same position and starts to walk by its side, imitating the slow-paced walk of an animal mother with its offspring, while the audience hears rhythms and sounds from the jungle (Figure 2). The scene alludes to the animal dimension of motherhood and maternal desire, but, in a play that constantly refers to social pressure, it has also an ironic layer, especially because the offspring of this animalistic mother is mechanical, an artificial representation of a baby engineered by society—just like the child Núria continuously imagines in her head.



Figure 2. Planes Lull unsettlingly embodies an animal mother to a mechanical child.

At the end of the scene, Núria removes the donkey mask and faces the public to explain the paradox of Buridan's ass, linking the fatal inability to choose between food and water to her decision regarding whether or not she will become a mother. Although still comic, this ending adds a more serious note to a narrative that proposes critical reflection not so much on maternal desire itself but rather on the social conditions in which it develops. Two paratexts, namely several hashtags included in the description of the play

on the website of the Antic Teatre and the accompany leaflet, reinforce this interpretation and confer a more explicitly political dimension to the piece. The hashtags indicate a much more explicit defence of non-motherhood; the underlying assumption seems to be that for a significant portion of Catalan women, defending the possibility of a fulfilled and complete life without children is more difficult than the alternative; these hashtags include «#nomo», «#withoutchildrenbychoice», and «#withoutchildrenandhappy» (Antic Teatre, 2019). In parallel, the Antic Teatre greets the audience by presenting a leaflet containing a text titled «FUTURE POTENTIAL MOTHERS' MANIFESTO». This manifesto denounces the lack of political consideration of reproductive labour and claims that should the negative and alienating experience around motherhood that most mothers describe today not change, «WE WILL NOT HAVE CHILDREN!». To prevent this outcome, the manifesto demands a «Work and family life balance national plan», which would need to involve both the state and future fathers. Together with its paratexts, *Conversations With My Uterus* reflects the crucial choice that, unlike many women of previous generations, contemporary women may face: whether or not they will become mothers. The narrative only recognises one subject as having standing to make this choice, the potential mother herself, and suggests that the choice to be or not be a mother has to do with striking a difficult compromise between an inner interrogation—a conversation with the self and one's referents, emotions, and body—and the awareness of the social conditions that highly determine the way in which women experience motherhood and maternal desire—including, among others, the extreme taboo of regretted motherhood (see Donath, 2017), which renders the decision of becoming a mother definitive. The closing evocation of the dying Buridan's ass leaves Núria's interrogation open and therefore allows the audience to identify not with a particular life choice but rather the difficulty of making such a decision.

5. MOURNING THE UNFULFILLED PROMISES OF ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY

While Cedó and Planes Lull have careers as practitioners, Concha Milla is an actress who, with *Stigmas*, made the leap to creation to bring her own

experience to the stage.⁵ Similarly to Planes Lull in *Conversations With My Uterus*, in this one-woman show, Milla plays herself in the process of overcoming a facet of motherhood that has historically been surrounded by stigma: infertility. The original title, *ESTIGMES*, is a wordplay between the word «stigmas» and the Catalan for «you love». Milla's piece is, without a doubt, the darkest of the four considered in this text—this is also true in a literal sense, as, throughout the 1-hour performance, the stage is never lit with anything other than dim lights, as if to match the generally desolate tone of the text. In addition, the scene is filled with technology, especially in the small venues where it has generally been performed—it premiered at La Gleba in 2018 and was included in the programme for the following year at Sala Flyhard, a space dedicated to contemporary Catalan texts. Milla's body appears surrounded by several screens, microphones, a keyboard, a portable induction plate, and headphones, among others, as though to translate to the stage the highly technified character of ART processes.

The most symbolic of these objects is the induction plate, together with the pot of rice that Milla starts to boil at the beginning of the play. Later in the show, a technician tells the performer that her rice is overcooking: in Spain, when addressed to a woman without a partner or children, this phrase means that one's biological clock is ticking. The pun introduces a protest against all of the disapproval faced by older women who attempt to become pregnant, as was the case for Milla, who started the process at 37. As the audience learns at the end of the play, after several failed insemination attempts, Milla fell pregnant, but the pregnancy was unviable because the embryo positioned itself in one of her fallopian tubes. Due to the risk that both the ectopic pregnancy and her endometriosis entailed, the embryo was removed. The operation caused her a severe peritonitis infection, which led to a new intervention. Together with a strenuous recovery process, these complications annihilated her hopes of ever having a biological child—an important condition, as the genetic reproduction of physical features plays a central role in Milla's desires.

5. Other Catalan actresses have leapt to creation after traumatic experiences related to motherhood, such as Gemma Brió with *Llibert*. These cases reinforce the idea of an existent desire to bring first-person narratives focused on motherhood to the stages.

However, this chain of events is not made explicit until the end of the play, when the practitioner presents herself to the public and narrates her story in chronological order. The rest of the piece focuses on the process of mourning and recovery—which includes at some points the creation of the piece itself—which is conveyed through a fragmentary patchwork of recorded diary entries, phone calls, Google searches, and explanations addressed to the public. The references to Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and James Rhodes' reflections on the redeeming power of Bach's *Chaconne* mark the narrative as one of grief and recovery. Other aspects of the play that reinforce this tone are the numbering of the diary entries, which emphasise the length of the recovery process, and the announcement at the beginning of the play that Milla «will have decided to close the door to the NOT BEING ABLE» (Milla, 2019, 10:08) once she can dance and sing madly, which she does towards the end of the show. In the dance scene, several explanations based on *Infertilidad y reproducción asistida* by Carmen Moreno Rosset start to appear on the screens while she dances to the sound of «Girls just wanna have fun». The explanations indicate, among other facts, that infertility is a growing issue across Europe and that ART processes are stressful and harsh and often result in the dissolution of otherwise functional romantic relationships. Additionally, these explanations recall that, historically, women have taken the blame for infertility and thus have been legally discriminated against; and signal that the social pressures linked to fertility represent an extreme form of the stress that women experience in their daily lives. The simultaneity of the dance and the passages seems to suggest that Milla's process of recovery has involved a growing awareness of the political dimension of her experience while also underlining that Milla's personal story is representative of many other cases.

In making the consequences of ART in women's lives visible, *Stigmas* reflects a crucial question concerning a feminist approach to (late) motherhood in the 21st century: «if formerly feminism was concerned with contraceptive technology, it now has to address the issue of how, or indeed whether, women can take advantage of the new reproductive technology, without themselves being taken advantage of (emotionally, economically and medically)» (Aston, 2003, pp. 157-158.). Milla's story provides a rather pessimistic answer to this question. Her five-year experience of ART processes

represents a major emotional strain and requires her to forego a more organic and intimate process of conception, as the ART procedures amount to an «absolute and repeated invasion of my privacy: hands, machines, treatments...» (Milla, 2019, 50:15). Moreover, once the ART process has ended without having brought about the much-desired baby, it leaves Milla physically devastated, suffering from acute health complications and having lost several reproductive and digestive organs, as well as the loss of large amounts of money, partly donated by family and friends; a job; her romantic relationship; and almost all her self-esteem. To borrow Dror Harari and Gillit Kroul's words concerning Israeli one-woman shows about infertility, the emphasis of *Stigmas* on the vulnerability and distress that result for Milla «effaces the split between performer and character to the effect that the performer's embodied presence and experience and her vulnerability and discomfort cannot be overlooked» (Harari & Kroul, 2019, p. 128).

While other plays address the opposition between motherhood and non-motherhood in existential terms, *Stigmas* conceptualises access to motherhood in terms of ableness by opposing being and not being able to gestate a child—«pots» and «no pots» mean «you can» and «you cannot» in Catalan (Figure 3). This opposition defines the gap between the narrative of possibilities offered by some medical agents and the failure of many of these processes: «Doctors are not God, they are not, they cannot create when they intend to do it. Neither can you» (Milla, 2019, 26:16). However, most of all, it applies to Milla and her (in)ability to conceive a child, which reveals the «patriarchal association between barrenness and failure [...] that, in the popular imagination, locates infertility as a social stigma and leads to emotional despair» (Komporalý, 2007, p. 113). Milla's position swings between the painful interiorisation of this imaginary and the awareness of its injustice: «Women do not feel completed and fulfilled until we get pregnant and give birth? [...] I wanted to, I assure you. But the torture when you cannot do it is so savage, so ruthless, so animal [...] Is it worth it to suffer that much?» (Milla 2019, 30:39). However, in the closing lines of the play, Milla suddenly reduces her critical distance from the patriarchal discourse:

I have been a mother, yes, I have. I saw the heart of my child bombing inside me. I saw this point of intense light that was the life inside me. I'm clear that I will never be able to get pregnant but there is a certainty that

will accompany me forever: for a month and a half, I COULD. (Milla, 2019, 55:39)



Figure 3. Milla under big neon lights reading «You cannot» in Catalan.

In these final remarks, Milla concludes the narrative around her recovery process by noting that she was able to be a mother for a brief period of time. Therefore, she situates herself on the side of women who have been able to conceive, thus implicitly perpetuating the idea that infertile women are less valid than others. This affirmation may correspond to an intimate truth for the practitioner; nevertheless, it does not challenge the patriarchal notion that women must be able (and should) create life within themselves. As in *Júlia & The Empty Lot*, an unviable pregnancy does not prevent the lead from considering herself a mother. However, in Cedó's play, the heroine's sense of motherhood seems to be more based on the overcoming of guilt and fear, the consequences of the hegemonic discourse on motherhood. Milla's narrative, in contrast, culminates on a note that leaves little space for an empowered overcoming of infertility or a deeper exploration of the broader social causes

that lead Catalan women to become mothers at later ages. Nevertheless, we might wonder whether she chooses these pathetic closing lines as a reminder that, even if feminist consciousness can help, in some cases it still falls short of offering real consolation.

6. WHEN MATERNAL DESIRE SPARKS A REVOLUTION

To Be a Mother premiered at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya in 2021, and it is the only public production that I analyse in this essay. While it is very similar to Cedó's previous piece in its dramatic language, it nonetheless features a crucial difference: there are four characters with disabilities in the play, all of whom are played by performers with disabilities. This choice stems from Cedó's long commitment to putting theatre at the service of disability communities and people at risk of social exclusion: in 2006, she founded «Escenaris Especials» (Special Scenes), a social project dedicated to this goal, in Banyoles⁶. Thus, the staging of *To Be a Mother* in the National Theatre of Catalonia is the culmination of many years of efforts outside the institutional focus for a less discriminative treatment of people with disabilities and thus undoubtedly a significant landmark in terms of the inclusion of disability in Catalan theatre. The play allows for a larger analysis of the multiple intersections between theatre and disability (Kuppers, 2017, p. 6); however, in this article, I focus on its treatment of motherhood and the connections it establishes between feminism and disability.

Several interrogations of the representation of female heroines and the renewal of epic tones that appeared in Cedó's previous piece are clearly resumed in *To Be a Mother*. In this play, Cedó succeeds, as playwright and director, at highlighting certain realities linked to disability being under-represented in theatre and that may be unknown to most of the audience—such as how supported housing works or how women with disabilities have their fertility controlled—while conveying claims that overlap with those of different groups, such as feminist or LGBTI communities. In this sense, the play takes *Júlia & The Empty Lot*'s demands for new kind of heroines a step further: Cloe, the leading role, is a 27-year-old woman who suffers a 65%

6. For more information, you can browse Special Scene's site: <https://www.escenaris-especials.com/>.

intellectual disability and wants to become a mother—a desire that Cedó has repeatedly identified among her students (Carmona, 2021). Moreover, Andrea Álvarez, a user of the organisation for people with intellectual disabilities Fundació Ramon Noguera and a theatre student at Special Stages, plays this character. Throughout the play, Cloe's figure problematises the traditional image of the hero to point out that that women with intellectual disabilities have seldom been leading roles, through, for instance, identifying with Antigone—Cloe plays her role in a performance for the Disability Day party, and some of her asides contain intertextual references to Sophocles' text.

The play presents Cloe's maternal desire as the core of a larger desire for autonomy and fighting the limits of the social perceptions of her disability. These perceptions find a voice in her well-intended but overprotective mother, with whom she lives until the introductory scenes of the play; in Albert and Maria, respectively the director of and an educator at the Oak Foundation; and in Marc, Cristina, and Consuelo, Cloe's flatmates at the supported flat tutored by the Foundation. The variety of characters allows for a multifaceted approach to a sensitive issue: can women with intellectual disabilities become mothers? This is a question that, throughout the course of the play, leads to multiple other questions: is it ethical to suppress the fertility of women with disabilities against their wishes, and is it ethical to allow for motherhood that could potentially endanger the life of future children? To what extent are women with disabilities required to assume a greater responsibility than the rest of the population? Are the protocols of supported houses androcentric?

Despite the multiplicity of voices allowing for confrontations between different perspectives on the matter, Cloe's subjectivity is assigned a privileged status through her asides, as she is the only character who has them. Significantly, many of the images that Cloe uses in her monologues to describe her desire to become a mother evoke that which is hidden but cannot be suppressed or ignored—a cat under a car or a volcano exploding in the depths of the sea, for example. Many other plays focused on motherhood deal with the difficulty of translating to words an experience that is invisible in cultural discourses: in contrast, the main point of *To Be a Mother* is that some voices are already being raised but are systematically ignored.

As Cloe exclaims, «I want to be a mother, but it's like I'm not allowed to say that» (Cedó, 2021, p. 27).⁷ The narrative underlines that Cloe is not an isolated case through presenting several similar examples, such as that of Consuelo, who was once pregnant and had her reproductive organs removed without her knowledge. These cases remind us that, just as with mandatory motherhood, the historical ban on parenthood for particular populations—through, among other methods, compulsory sterilization of homosexual people, transgender individuals, or indigenous populations—has functioned as a tool with which to reproduce an order exterior to people's, and, more particularly, women's own desires.

Cloe's restricted access to motherhood is an undeniable mark of her exclusion from womanhood, and, because she is repeatedly discouraged to pursue a goal that is considered to define women in patriarchal cultures, she might view motherhood as even more desirable: «Sometimes, I'm not sure why I want so much to be a mother. Maybe it's just because I've seen it on TV. Or because my sister is one. But it feels so real inside of me. Sometimes I think, if I was a mother, I could be normal» (Cedó, 2021, p. 50). This claim is in agreement with Claudia Malacrida's observation that, for mothers with disabilities, «pregnancy and motherhood [are often] ways to lay claim to a full adult sexuality, and to erase their invisibility as gendered beings» (Malacrida, 2009, p. 114). Therefore, Cloe's desires are also a feminist issue, precisely because, despite the overlapping of her demands with some founding feminist issues—as the right over one's own body—women with disabilities rarely appear as the default subject of feminist discourses:

What is a revolution? [...] The woman rebel. What is that exactly? [...] A woman who doesn't follow the expectations of her time. [...] Daughters who don't agree with the expectations of their mothers. [...] To be who they want you to be? Or to be free. To be seen and not heard? Or to make some noise. People prefer that persons with disabilities not say a word. No sudden movements. They like us to be predictable. (Cedó, 2021, p. 15)

Cloe is very aware of the differences between her and women without disabilities, as she makes it clear to Maria when the latter tries to discourage

7. All the excerpts from *To Be a Mother* are taken from the English translation by H.J. Gardner.

her from attempting to become pregnant speaking «girlfriend to girlfriend»: «Don't say girlfriend to girlfriend. You mean girl-without-a-disability to girl-with-a-disability. You mean social worker to resident. You're up high and you give the orders» (Cedó, 2021, p. 28; Figure 4). These differences in terms of power and social recognition also manifest in the triple-spaced theatre set formed by Cloe's room in the supported flat, the shared kitchen, and the director's bureau at the Foundation, which respectively stand for Cloe's individuality, the disability community, and those who make decisions regarding the members of the disability community.



Figure 4. Cloe (right) arguing with Maria (left) in the kitchen of the tutored flat.

Cloe's revolution consists in breaking her *stillness* by behaving as a subject with full agency and requesting a degree of freedom that both her mother, who thinks of her as an asexual young girl, and Albert, who, although he strives to improve the autonomy of the Foundation's users, had not even considered that some of them might desire to become mothers, do not appear to expect. Cloe goes to extraordinary lengths to achieve her goal despite the

numerous restrictions she faces: she attempts to become a baby-sitter, she demands that her Implanon—a birth control implant— be removed and then secretly avoids taking contraceptive pills, and she manages to maintain sexual relationships with three different men she finds through Tinder. On her third attempt, Cloe becomes pregnant, but she suffers a miscarriage amid severe threats regarding the guardianship of her future child and decides to attempt suicide, an act she perceives as the closest she has ever been to freedom—that is, to full control over decisions regarding her own body.

The final scene, which takes place by a hospital bed, serves as a bitter-sweet epilogue: we learn that Cloe partly obtains the autonomy she desired, as she moves to her own flat and develops a romantic relationship with Marc, but she declares that she will not become a mother because her desire was «A frightened creature. A cat under a car, who in the end, darted out into the sun» (Cedó, 2021, p. 61). Thus, rather than offering an upbeat ending, the play does not gloss over Cloe's pain, which stems from the profound psychological and physiological consequences of not being considered an independent subject with complete autonomy. However, thanks to her, the Foundation takes a necessary step to allow some users to become mothers: it hires a motherhood assistant. The play ends with the whole cast entering the scene to greet Cloe and embrace one another, which serves as a way of softening the tragic end for the heroine, who has contributed to the future wellbeing of others but has not seen the benefits of her protests herself.

7. CONCLUSION

This essay has attempted to show that, in the last decade, Catalan female playwrights and practitioners have paid particular attention to the various difficulties and concerns women may encounter when attempting to access motherhood and that, in doing so, they have problematised the hegemonic narratives concerning this experience. As is the case for most Catalan contemporary plays concerning motherhood, plays focused on the lack of access thereto have assigned utmost importance to the subjective experience of the leading roles through recourse to means such as conversations between different parts of the self, diary entries, or interior monologues. Therefore, these plays have been able to place the subjective effects that the normative

and exclusionary nature of the hegemonic motherhood narrative has on women at the forefront of their narratives. Feelings such as guilt, fear, and disorientation are prominent in the four analysed plays, and all the leading roles find that the lack of access to motherhood challenges their inner sense of self. When the project of being a mother fails, a strenuous process of reconstruction begins, amid which an exhausted Milla exclaims, «I want to stop fucking reinventing myself once and for all» (Milla, 2019). At the end of the plays, Cedó's characters have important landmarks to relate to beyond motherhood—such as their male partners—although this might be due to the narrative nature of Cedó's plays, which stands in contrast to the more fragmentary productions by Planes Lull and Milla.

Furthermore, it is significant that in narratives that depict stages prior to motherhood, the hegemonic ideal of the good mother is already present: Júlia and Concha are guilt-ridden; Planes Lull elaborates a list of «Things that my parents did to me that I do not want to do to my kids» (Planes Lull, 2019, 11:59); and Cloe, when she realises she has fallen pregnant while unable to retain the guardianship of her child, exclaims, «It was a stupid idea of mine. I'm already a bad mother» (Cedó, 2021, p. 54). Rather than offering a binary critique of the desire to mother itself, these plays attempt to disentangle the strong effects of hegemonic narratives on inner perceptions, with these efforts varying in terms of critical depth. Júlia points to the lack of referents, and Núria denounces the social pressure to become a mother. Concha Milla denounces the negative sentiment towards older women who want to become mothers, but she does not explore at any point the social conditions that push women to have children at later ages. For her part, Cloe's demands serve to critique her status as a woman with an intellectual disability rather than to question the hegemonic imaginaries of motherhood—an attitude that seems to match the behaviour of mothers with disabilities in real life (Malacrida, 2009, p. 113). Additionally, some passages of the plays also interrogate the strangeness of maternal desire through distancing perspectives, such as Planes Lull's animal scene or this insightful observation by Cloe:

How strange to want what you don't have. The seed and the tree are so different. I wonder, what's it going to be like for me? Like being thirsty and not able to drink. Like loving someone you've never met. (Cedó, 2021, p. 24)

In paying close attention to the subjectivity of the leading roles, the analysed plays also shed light on issues that hegemonic narratives have historically rendered invisible and disparaged and that, in some cases, feminisms have also tended to neglect, such as gestational loss and grief—perhaps due to the closeness of gestational loss to voluntary abortion (Browne, 2016, p. 387)—or the impact of ideal discourses of motherhood on women with disabilities (Malacrida, 2009, p. 114). In most cases, the attention to the subjectivity of the leading roles stems from an autobiographical basis and, in the case of *To Be a Mother*, constitutes a political gesture towards the disability community, which is almost non-existent as a subject in Catalan theatre. However, this tendency towards autoreferentiality does not impede these plays' representative potential: the four works link their first-person narratives to wider communities and extend an implicit or explicit sense of solidarity—for instance, Cloe states that she wants to create a precedent through her demands.

In exploring the fissures between being and not being a mother, these plays prompt reflection on the borders of motherhood, arguing for a wider conception of motherhood that may also include non-motherhood; this is particularly the case in *Júlia* and *Stigmas*. Nevertheless, one might wonder whether the importance assigned to the status of mothers does not somewhat reproduce the patriarchal injunction to mother in a group of plays in which an explicit lack of maternal desire is seldom addressed, as it appears only in the *Conversations With My Uterus* paratexts. In the larger group of plays around motherhood, the absence of maternal desire is also marginal—there is only one play that depicts a voluntary abortion, *Només sexe*. Similarly, the importance assigned to the reproduction of biological traits in *Stigmas* is symptomatic of the fact that most narratives do not challenge biologic and heterocentric representations of motherhood. In this sense, feminist theatrical takes on motherhood could benefit from further exploring *queer* motherhoods, adoption, or alternative forms of mothering.

Notwithstanding the many challenges that Catalan stages still need to overcome in terms of diversity, equality, and subversiveness, several recent plays concerning the lack of access to motherhood have created space for the validation of lived experiences prior to, or in the absence of, effective motherhood by questioning hegemonic narratives and exploring maternal

desire. Given its unique capacity to allow for the affective exploration of ideas, the theatre has proven to be an excellent forum to address current political debates and through which to transmit first-person embodied narratives in an experience-driven manner. Catalan female theatre practitioners, therefore, have made and can continue to make significant contributions to feminist views on this aspect of motherhood, that is, the (lack of) access to it.

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