

THE QUEER EFFECT OF MATRILINEAL GENEALOGIES IN PEDRO ALMODÓVAR'S *TODO SOBRE MI MADRE* (1999)

EL EFECTO *QUEER* DE LAS GENEALOGÍAS MATRILINEALES EN *TODO SOBRE MI MADRE* (1999) DE PEDRO ALMODÓVAR

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How can alternative kinship formations begin to challenge heteronormative and patriarchal family structures? Matrilineal genealogies are not subject to the limitations of patriarchal lineages. They do not necessarily rely only on biological connections between family members nor do they reproduce traditional Oedipal or nuclear family structures. The inclusion of substitute mother figures in matrilineal genealogies points to the anti-heteronormative potential of alternative kinships formed through formal or improvised networks of women. These figures queer the limitations of the category mother, questioning the boundaries of the term by operating both within and outside of patriarchal notions of motherhood. Pedro Almodóvar's 1999 film *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*) serves for me as a case study for investigating the matrilineal genealogies that obtain a spontaneous and improvised quality rather than reflect a normative family structure, instead incorporating friends, lovers, and even strangers. The matrifocal solidarity of the film indicates the subversive and utopian power of walking together. This paper begins by considering the idea of queer motherhood and then analyzes how Manuela as the mother without child, Manuela as substitute mother, and Lola as transgender father complicate the notion of family and the concept of mother.

Keywords: Motherhood Studies; Queer Studies; Spanish Film.

¿Cómo se comienzan las formaciones alternativas de parentesco a cuestionar las estructuras familiares heteronormativas y patriarcales? Las genealogías matrilineales no están sujetas a las limitaciones de los linajes patriarcales. No necesariamente se basan únicamente en conexiones biológicas entre miembros de la familia, ni reproducen estructuras familiares edípicas ni nucleares tradicionales. La inclusión de figuras maternas sustitutas en las genealogías matrilineales señala el potencial anti-heteronormativo de los parentescos alternativos formados a través de redes formales o improvisadas de mujeres. Estas figuras cuestionan las limitaciones de la categoría madre, planteando los límites del término al operar tanto dentro como fuera de las nociones patriarcales de la maternidad. La película *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) de Pedro Almodóvar me sirve como punto de partida para investigar las genealogías matrilineales que adquieren una calidad espontánea e improvisada en lugar de reflejar una estructura familiar normativa, incorporando amigos, amantes e incluso desconocidos. La solidaridad matrifocal de la película indica el poder subversivo y utópico de caminar juntos. Este trabajo comienza considerando la idea de la maternidad *queer* y luego analiza cómo Manuela, como madre sin hijo, Manuela, como

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madre sustituta, y Lola, como padre transgénero, problematizan la noción de familia y el concepto de madre.

Palabras clave: la maternidad; los estudios de género; el cine español.

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The prototypical figure of the Spanish mother evokes imagery of the Catholic woman who, taking inspiration from the Virgin Mary, gladly and selflessly engages in domestic work and childcare at the service of her family and country. This traditional concept of motherhood resonates transnationally with the category of mother as culturally defined and biologically determined. Fictional representations of motherhood in literature and film serve to question the constraints of rigid definitions of maternal identity. Additionally, contemporary motherhood theorists expose the limitations of these designations, problematizing the very foundation of traditional understandings of maternal practice. In fact, Adrienne Rich's groundbreaking 1976 text on motherhood, *Of Woman Born*, assesses the discrepancies between patriarchal cultural assumptions of motherhood and her own lived maternal practice. Articulating a separation between institutional motherhood and maternal experience corresponds to an expansion of the definition of maternal figure. Institutional motherhood, which prescribes patriarchal values, is distinct from maternal experience, which describes the intimate and dynamic nature of lived reality. The institution of motherhood proposes an impossible paradox of motherhood as innate while setting narrow and often contradictory constraints on the category of "mother." Alternative maternal figures, experiences, and practices confront the institution of motherhood by rejecting any limitations on the category. For this reason, I join many contemporary motherhood studies scholars in referring to maternal experience with the verb "to mother" to emphasize the processional and active qualities of mother work.

The social effects of institutional motherhood in the Spanish context were exacerbated in the mid-20th century under Francisco Franco's decades-long dictatorship. Aurora Morcillo explains that Franco leveraged motherhood and Catholic discourses around gender by priming women to see their primary role in Spanish society as inextricably linked to their reproductive capacities while also repressing female sexuality. Furthermore, according to Morcillo, "The ultimate role model prescribed for women was the Virgin Mary, in whom both virginity and motherhood coincided" (Morcillo, 2008, p. 40). The conclusion of Franco's regime upon his death in 1975 was followed by the establishment of democracy in Spain as well as the counterculture movement known as *La Movida Madrileña*. This movement demonstrated a commitment to challenging all aspects of culture and social life, including gender roles. The filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, a prominent participant in *La Movida Madrileña*, often tackled these issues through his chosen medium. Almodóvar commented on the link between his 1999 film *Todo sobre mi madre* (*All About My Mother*) and the deconstruction of institutional motherhood, stating in an interview: "If anything is a feature of our end of century, it is precisely the break-up of the traditional family. It's now possible to create a family with different members, based on different types of biological, or other, relationships" (Strauss & Almodóvar, 2006, p. 186). Therefore, like the nature of maternal ideology itself, Almodóvar's films hold local and international significance, demonstrated by its Spanish setting and its universal themes. This paper will consider the possibilities for alternative family structures proposed by Almodóvar's film by offering an analysis of the film's depiction of maternal practice and proposing queer matrilineal genealogies as an alternative to institutional motherhood. It will first contextualize both the film and relevant motherhood studies scholarship. The paper will then explore in detail the

various depictions of maternal experience in the film as contributions to a unique matrilineal genealogy.

The mother to whom the film's title *Todo sobre mi madre* refers is Manuela, a nurse¹ and single mother to teenage Esteban, an aspiring writer. When Esteban dies after being hit by a car, Manuela makes the journey from Madrid to Barcelona to both share the secret existence of her son to Esteban's father, a transgender woman named Lola, as well as to inform Lola about Esteban's death. When she arrives in Barcelona, Manuela reunites with Agrado, a transgender sex worker who introduces her to Rosa, a nun who works in a clinic for sex workers and eventually reveals herself to be pregnant with Lola's child. Manuela takes care of Rosa throughout her pregnancy and eventually assumes care of Rosa's child, also named Esteban, after she dies in childbirth due to HIV-related complications. As Almodóvar himself explained in an interview with GQ España, "Es una película en términos casi épicos sobre cómo las mujeres se ayudan en momentos clave de su vida" [It is a movie in almost epic terms about how women help each other in key moments of their life] (GQSpain, 2019). In the same interview, the director/writer refers to Manuela as an "angel" to those around her, a term tied to institutional motherhood's connection to the "ángel del hogar" [angel in the house] figure. The term "ángel del hogar" itself elicits religious connotations while also reinforcing the allocation of women to the private, domestic sphere and gained popularity in the 19th century, through works such as Maria del Pilar Sinués de Marco's *El ángel del hogar* (1857). Manuela is an angel who performs maternal care beyond the limitations of patriarchally endorsed motherhood. In fact, Viki Zavales Eggert points out that the first landmark that establishes the new setting of Barcelona in the film is "that of Antonio Gaudí's La Sagrada Familia. Almodóvar shows us this landmark to emphasize the importance of family throughout the film and to contrast the traditional family with the unconventional family of choice that Manuela helps forge" (Eggert, 2014, p. 389). The plot constructs and complicates the relationships between the characters in *Todo sobre mi madre*, highlighting the spontaneous and improvised nature of solidarity and depicting alternative maternal experiences that operate outside traditional patriarchal norms.

The improvised network of women represented in *Todo sobre mi madre* constitute a kind of matrilineal genealogy. Luce Irigaray establishes the idea of matrilineal genealogies as a "female family tree" with a "special quality" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 19). For Irigaray, matrilineal genealogies play a crucial role in identity formation and hold significance not only for biological connections along matrilineal lines but also for cultural feminine inheritance. In this way, she posits, "Let us not forget, moreover, that we already have a story, that certain women, despite all the cultural obstacles, have made their mark upon history and all too often have been forgotten by us" (Irigaray, 1993, p. 19). Psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés' understanding of "matrilineal lines of initiation" adds nuance to the idea of matrilineal genealogies to include all individuals who perform maternal practice rather than just biological mothers and their blood relatives (Estés, 1992, p. 263). In this way, expanding the idea of genealogies beyond biological or legal boundaries opens the possibility for also broadening the definitions of maternal practice, maternal figures, and maternal experience. Therefore, Irigaray's understanding renders matrilineal genealogies as nonlinear, connecting individuals to their identities, the "other mothers" in their lives, and the larger web of feminine experience.

¹ Furthermore, Manuela's professional life as a nurse and personal assistant suggest connections to mothering and the commodification of care work.

Understanding matrilineal genealogies and maternal experience as an alternative to institutional motherhood serves to “queer” motherhood by challenging the expected “gendered, sexual, relational, political, and/or symbolic components” of motherhood (Gibson, 2014, p. 6). To queer something, especially the category of woman or mother, is to explore the gap left between traditional heteronormative social prescriptions and the deviation from those norms. Michael Warner, for example, points specifically to the potential of familial language to either “be a language of exile for queers or a resource for irony” (Warner, 1993, p. xviii). Almodóvar’s *Todo sobre mi madre* depicts both of these possibilities of familial language as a source of exile and irony, hinging on concerns for alternative kinship configurations involving mutual maternal care from nonbiological mother figures. Almodóvar’s characters act as mothers to one another beyond patriarchally genealogical ties. To borrow Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Albilla’s terminology in regard to *Todo sobre mi madre*, the film represents “queer motherhood” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2017, p. 66). The idea of extreme mothering constitutes another way of understanding the alternative maternal experience depicted in the film. Susan Fraiman applies this idea to domesticity in her book *Extreme domesticity: A view from the margins* in which she suggests that removing traditionally feminine acts from their patriarchal constraints, such as domestic work without a husband (to which Fraiman gives the example of Martha Stewart’s domestic expertise work after her divorce), unbinds this labor so that “domesticity is liberated from protocols of service to others and, more wickedly still, reinvented as service to the self” (Fraiman, 2017, p. 98). Extreme or queer motherhood demonstrates a potential for maternal care work to be performed not for the benefit of a patriarch, but rather “as a language of female self-sufficiency, ambition, and pleasure”, just as extreme domesticity accomplishes this for Fraiman (Fraiman, 2017, p. 22). Mothers like Manuela in Almodóvar’s film can perform mother work for others free from the obligation of fulfilling patriarchal fantasies about motherhood and womanhood. Almodóvar achieves a depiction of queer or extreme motherhood by bringing characters who occupy the border spaces of feminine and maternal practice to the foreground, problematizing the taxonomy of what it means to be a woman and a mother. The transgender characters in the film, especially Lola and Agrado, highlight the ambiguous and nuanced nature of womanhood in postmodern society. However, Lola in particular also underscores the complicated category of mother through her identity as a trans woman and father to two children. Furthermore, the loss of Manuela’s son early in the narrative coupled with her relationship to Rosa questions the idea of the mother without child as well as the figure of the nonbiological surrogate mother.

The inclusion of alternative mother figures in matrilineal genealogies points to the anti-heteronormative potential of alternative kinships formed through formal or improvised networks of women. These figures queer the limitations of the category mother, questioning the boundaries of the term by operating both within and outside of patriarchal notions of motherhood. *Todo sobre mi madre* is a relevant case study for investigating matrilineal genealogies of a spontaneous and improvised nature instead of reflecting an Oedipal nuclear family structure, convening friends, lovers, extended family, and strangers. Many scholars have pointed out the recurrent theme of motherhood in Almodóvar’s work. In the case of *Todo sobre mi madre*, existing scholarship has focused on the distinction between authenticity and performance or the film’s use of intertextuality. Furthermore, Eggert has highlighted the themes of maternity in *Todo sobre mi madre* through the lens of maternal frustration. This paper analyzes the concept of the mother without child, the nonbiological mother, and the

transgender mother/father to shift the focus to the construction of matrilineal genealogies in the film as queer and liberatory. As such, it considers the matrifocal solidarity of the film as indicative of the subversive and utopian power of walking together, or sharing the burden of feminine existence in patriarchal culture and performing maternal care for one another. It presents a reading of Almodóvar's film as offering an alternative to traditional kinship formations by expanding the definition of matrilineal genealogies and queering the category of mother.

In this way, matrilineal genealogies can and should include not only biologically connected female family members but also what Nancy Chodorow calls "substitute mothers" (Chodorow, 1999, p. 16). Alternatively, Rich refers to substitute mothers figures as "nonbiological mothers" or even "spirit sisters" (Rich, 1976, p. 252). Nevertheless, Hirsh cautions against the use of "sororial" metaphors as they are inherently non-matrifocal and appeal to intragenerational rather than intergenerational relations between women (Hirsh, 1989, p. 164). Chodorow also refers to them as "a small but stable number of mother-surrogates" (Chodorow, 1999, p. 75). This concept also relates to the Black feminist theory of othermothering², which Stanlie M. James describes as "those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of childcare for short- to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements" (James, 1993, p. 45). Matrilineal genealogies are not subject to the limitations of patriarchal lineages which assert the name of the father and biological ties as the only path to legitimacy. They do not necessarily rely only on biological connections between family members, nor do they reproduce traditional Oedipal or nuclear family structures. They instead expand to include even nonbiological mothers like neighbors, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, friends, or strangers who perform mother work. The fact that women rather than men often adopt nonbiological mother roles points to the social reproduction of mothering rather than an inherent essential feminine maternal instinct. Chodorow's work aims in part to provide an answer to the question of "whether it is biologically more natural for a woman who has not borne the child in need of care than for a man to provide this care" (Chodorow, 1999, p. 16). Chodorow further emphasizes the fact "that women have the extensive and nearly exclusive mothering role they have is a product of a social and cultural translation of their childbearing and lactation capacities. It is not guaranteed or entailed by these capacities themselves" (Chodorow, 1999, p. 30). Rich sees potential criticism for nonbiological motherhood as a way to include non-reproducing women (elderly women, unmarried or celibate women, and infertile women) in the process of mothering because "the woman who is not tied to the family" is a "great threat to male hegemony" (Rich, 1976, p. 12, p. 252). Rich also identifies the nonbiological mother figure as a possible "counter-mother" who could serve as an alternative to the patriarchal mother (Rich, 1976, p. 247).

While Manuela eventually adopts a role as nonbiological mother to Rosa and her child, the film first depicts her as embodying the role of the single mother and subsequently that of the mother without child. Elaine Tuttle Hansen investigates the figure of the mother without child in detail, noting that the terms mother and child are "relational words, marking partial, quasi-temporary identities" that rely on one another for definition (Hansen, 2021, p. 225). Bearing this in mind, Hansen posits that a unique maternal subjectivity arises when one element of the mother/child equation

² It is important to note that the idea of othermothers is specifically rooted in a "traditional African world-view" and holds unique implications for Black feminism's theorizations of social transformation through shared responsibility of childcare (James, 1993, p. 45).

is eliminated. Hansen observes the potential of this figure to explore maternal subjectivity since, “The story of the mother without child frees us, experimentally and provisionally, to focus on the mother, and in doing so to see her as a multifaceted and changeful subject” (Hansen, 2021, p. 238). *Todo sobre mi madre* achieves this through the character of Manuela. Nevertheless, though Manuela obtains protagonist status throughout the narrative, she does not serve as the author of her own story. This narrative condition is reiterated by the film’s title – *Todo sobre mi madre* – which positions Esteban, a self-proclaimed writer and demonstrated observer of life, as the author of this account. Upon Esteban’s death, the maternal subjectivity of the mother can be explored in undeterred detail in a film “all about his mother” rather than about him. Therefore, it is important to note that the film’s creator has stated that he sees himself most represented in the character of Esteban (Strauss & Almodóvar, 2006, p. 189). Additionally, the director’s mother died a few months after the film’s release, and in his interview with Frédéric Strauss, taken before the passing of his mother, also expresses a certain level of psychological preparation on Almodóvar’s part to ready himself for the role of child without mother. Specifically, the director professes a desire (which seemingly did not come to fruition) to take time to record videos of his mother reading from his favorite books as Manuela reads a Truman Capote book to Esteban (Strauss & Almodóvar, 2006, p. 184-85). The film’s commitment to the figure of the mother without child reveals a preoccupation with the director’s inevitable reality of the alternative side of this equation: the child without mother.

Though Manuela exchanges her identity as a single mother for the distinction of mother without child upon Esteban’s death, she continues to engage with maternal care throughout the film. As Ernesto R. Acevedo Muñoz posits, “The problems of identity presented in *All About My Mother*, are not suggestive of actual ‘settled’ identity but of the understanding and coming to terms with one’s own ‘authenticity’ even if that which is authentic is paradoxically marked by reinvention” (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2004, p. 31). By leaving Madrid and the home she shared with Esteban, she leaves the traditional domain of the mother, uncovering alternative maternal experiences outside the domestic and patriarchally sanctioned realm. In fact, she initially leaves Madrid to find the transplant recipient of her son’s donated heart in A Coruña (Galicia). Furthermore, when Manuela first reunites with Agrado, she performs maternal care by intervening when Agrado is assaulted by a sex work client. She also acts as a nonbiological mother figure to Rosa and eventually Rosa’s baby Esteban. Paul Julian Smith calls attention to the film’s depiction of this kind of mother work as what he calls “cohabitation without limits” (Smith, 2014, p. 167). Smith cites the successful transplant of Esteban’s heart after his death, the transmission of HIV from Lola to Rosa, the circulation of letters, and photos and children between characters as evidence that “creation and procreation (cinema and motherhood) are thus impeccable masters, God-given gifts that become self-inflicted scourges” (Smith, 2014, p. 167). Rosa, a nun who works with transgender sex workers like Lola and Agrado, sets another kind of cohabitation without limits in motion when she asks Manuela for help after discovering she is pregnant with Lola’s child. Despite the initial hesitation from Manuela to help Rosa, both due to her own traumatic connection to Lola as the estranged father of her deceased child and her efforts to convince Rosa to seek aid from her biological mother instead, the two women begin a relationship of “cohabitation without limits” uninfluenced by their status as virtual strangers. At first, Manuela resists the role of nonbiological mother, telling Rosa, “Rosa, tú estás pidiendo que yo sea tu madre y no tienes derecho. Tú tienes una madre aunque no te guste. ¡A los padres no se los elige! ¡Son los que son!” [Rosa, you’re

asking me to be your mother and you have no right. You already have a mother even if you don't like her. We don't choose our parents! They are who they are!] (Almodóvar, 1999). Additionally, Manuela exemplifies a layer of confusion between familial terms that blurs the boundaries of relational categorization, introducing Rosa to others as her sister though they are strangers who eventually act like mother and daughter. She also describes Rosa as “como una niña pequeña” [like a little girl], further confusing their link to one another by infantilizing a pregnant woman under her care. Manuela, the figure of the mother without child, now adopts a new identity as the nonbiological mother figure to Rosa. She tells Rosa one evening as they lay in bed together, displaying a deep level of intimacy that defies the few short months they have spent living together, “Ojalá estuviéramos solas en el mundo. Sin ningún compromiso. Tú y tu hijo para mí sola. Pero tienes familia, Rosa. Voy a peinarte y maquillarte un poco” [I wish we were alone in the world. With no obligations. You and your son for me alone. But you have a family, Rosa. I'm going to brush your hair and put a little makeup on you] (Almodóvar, 1999). This interaction discloses key features of Manuela's nonbiological maternal practice that demonstrate its unavoidable connection to the mother without child figure in this case. On one hand, Manuela expresses a strong, intimate connection with Rosa. Her desire to be alone in the world with Rosa and her child reflect a longing to experience a maternal bond with Rosa. On the other hand, she facilitates the reconciliation with Rosa's real mother, pushing aside her own desires for maternal bonds by recognizing the significance of a pre-existing maternal relationship between Rosa and her birth mother. Manuela understands the experience of the mother without child and works to eliminate this experience for Rosa's mother by reconciling the two women. Nevertheless, she maintains that even the significance of this bond between Rosa and her biological mother should not come at the expense of Manuela's maternal care of Rosa. Because of this, she tells Rosa's mother, “Usted es su madre. Pero creo que Rosa está mejor aquí” [You are her mother. But I think Rosa is better off here] (Almodóvar, 1999). Manuela's bond with Rosa queers the category of mother, both through the care she provides for a mother-to-be and her commitment to carrying out motherly duties despite a lack of connection based on the biological criteria of patriarchal lineages.

Because of this experience of cohabitation without limits between Manuela and Rosa as nonbiological mother and daughter, Manuela eventually takes on the role of nonbiological or surrogate mother figure to Rosa's child, also named Esteban, after Rosa dies from HIV-related complications during childbirth. In this way, a new figure emerges – the child without mother who becomes a surrogate child to a surrogate mother – and an old one returns – Rosa's mother becomes yet another mother without child. However, Manuela's ties to Rosa's son indicate an inheritance beyond the connection between the child's biological (Rosa) and nonbiological (Manuela) mothers. Rosa tells Manuela, “Este niño va a ser de las dos” [This child will belong to both of us] and also names her child after Manuela's dead son (Almodóvar, 1999). That is, the mother without child figure of Manuela gains a synchronous identity of nonbiological mother with child made more complicated by the interchangeability of the children's names (Esteban) and father(s) (Lola). Interestingly, the name Esteban comes from the children's father Lola whose name before transitioning was Esteban. This repetition of the name Esteban holds further traumatic connotations for Manuela since the name now conjures memories of her estranged ex, Lola, and her deceased son. Additionally, the nature of inheritance between Manuela and Rosa's child suggests the persistence of certain unexplained biological similarities. Particularly,

Rosa's Esteban displays a miraculous lack of inheritance of both his parents' HIV. Esteban's status as HIV-negative suggests the miraculous influence of inheritance from his alternative mother figure, Manuela, who is also HIV-negative. Furthermore, Manuela ends the cycle of intergenerational trauma with baby Esteban since she agrees to Rosa's terms that "no ocultarás nada del niño" [you won't hide anything from the child] as she had with teenage Esteban by not telling him about Lola (Almodóvar, 1999). While both sons remain primarily associated to a matrilineal genealogy rooted in Manuela, the other members of this improvised matrilineal genealogy including Rosa and Lola also affect their identity formation.

Rosa's Esteban maintains a level of separation from his biological parentage not only in regard to his HIV-negative status, but also in his distant relationship to his maternal grandparents and father. In fact, his grandfather (who suffers from dementia) never learns of his biological connection to Esteban since Rosa's mother tells him that the child is Manuela's son. She does this to eliminate confusion since he has forgotten about Rosa entirely due to his dementia as well as to fend off potential jealousy that the child is the illegitimate offspring of his wife and another man. This kind of confusion in kinship bonds likewise surrounds Lola who occupies the role of father in the sense of giving sperm to fertilize the eggs that would become both Estebans, but Lola never meets the first Esteban and only briefly encounters the second one when Manuela introduces them. Lola longingly tells Manuela as she holds the child, "Ojalá fuera mío" [I wish he were mine] (Almodóvar, 1999). However, female-presenting Lola does not occupy the role of mother in the same way. In fact, upon learning that the child is Lola and Rosa's, Lola lovingly tells Esteban, "Estás con papá" [You're with daddy] (Almodóvar, 1999). Lola deliberately chooses the identity of father for herself in relation to her child. This claim, in addition to Lola's absence from her child's life and upbringing, suggests a disinterest in adopting a maternal role despite her feminine identity. When Rosa's mother later tells Manuela she doesn't like strange women kissing Esteban, Manuela informs her, "Esa mujer es su padre" [That woman is his father] (Almodóvar, 1999). This paradoxical phrasing both recognizes Lola's transgender identity while also defining the relationship between Esteban and Lola as father/son rather than mother/son, reserving the latter distinction for herself as a substitute mother figure. Neither Esteban has a present, traditional father figure and both share Manuela as a mother figure. Almodóvar's film queers both the category of mother as well as that of woman, establishing alternative kinship orders that resist patriarchal limitations and challenge traditional, Oedipal nuclear family configurations.

The infant Esteban's family, which includes biologically Lola and Manuela, and Agrado by extension, in his matrilineal genealogy, unravels the term mother from the term woman. Gutiérrez-Albilla connects Agrado's repeated explanation of her pseudonym ("Me llaman la Agrado porque toda mi vida sólo he pretendido hacerle la vida agradable a los demás" [They call me Agrado because all my life I have only tried to make life pleasant for others]) to her embodied action of attempting "to offer kindness and com-*passion* to others by giving them pleasure and caring for them, even those who were physically violent towards her" (Almodóvar, 2019 and Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2017, p. 101). The scene in which Agrado outlines what it cost her literally to assume her place as a woman through the adoption of feminine physical characteristics emphasizes this point when she states, "Cuesta mucho ser auténtica, señora. Y en estas cosas, no hay que ser rúcana. Porque una es más auténtica cuánto más se lo parece a lo que ha soñado ser" [It costs a lot to be authentic, madam. And in these things, you can't be stingy. Because one is more authentic the more one

resembles what one has dreamed of being] (Almodóvar, 1999). Agrado's performance, set in front of a closed curtain and devoid of any theatrics, "denotes neither crisis nor the making of counterfeit identities" (Acevedo-Muñoz, 2004, p. 36). Agrado tells her life story on stage, blurring the lines between the self and the character, between authenticity and acting. Lourdes Estrada writes that "Es, pues, esa capacidad innata de ser actriz, que Almodóvar señala en las mujeres, la que abre las puertas a una multiplicidad de posibilidades más allá de la organización binaria de los sexos" [It is, then, that innate capacity to be an actress, which Almodóvar notes in women, that opens the doors to a multiplicity of possibilities beyond the binary organization of the sexes] (Estrada, 2014, p. 539). Here, Almodóvar's characters echo Judith Butler's understanding of gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" rather than "a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow" (Butler, 2006, p. 178). Agrado and Lola's feminine identities complicate the category of woman and by extension that of mother as "strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them" (Butler, 2006, p. 187-188). Lola in particular obscures the gender binary since the character both exhibits a commitment to an ideology of machismo, such as through her "embodiment of patriarchal violence and domination that Manuela denounces in a conversation with Rosa," while also identifying as a transgender woman (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2017, p. 75). According to Almodóvar, this impossibly contradictory character was based on reality: "The character Lola is inspired directly by a transvestite who had a bar by the beach in La Barceloneta. He lived with his wife and would never allow her to wear a miniskirt, although he himself went around in a bikini" (Strauss & Almodóvar, 2006, p. 183). Lola embodies a kind of internalized misogyny that adopts feminine identity while also maintaining an allegiance to patriarchal ideology. Perhaps the most patriarchally aligned quality of Lola's remains her duality as transgender mother/father since she embodies the definition of fatherhood that assigns paternity based on conception of the child alone rather than any commitment to parental care or cohabitation without limits, endearingly referring to herself as "papá" and expressing desire for a childlike Esteban despite her lack of interference in the child's life or performance of parental care. As Eggert writes, "If Agrado represents the successful creation of an alternative reality in which gender differences are blurred, tantamount to an evolutionary triumph, Lola stands in stark and unsettling contrast" (Eggert, 2014, p. 393).

Almodóvar summarizes the central thesis of his film in the dedication that precedes the end credits: "A Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider... A todas las actrices que han hecho de actrices, a todas las mujeres que actúan, a los hombres que actúan y se convierten en mujeres, a todas las personas que quieren ser madres. A mi madre" [To Bette Davis, Gena Rowlands, Romy Schneider... To all the actresses that have played actresses, to all the women who act, to the men who act and become women, to all the people who want to be mothers. To my mother] (Almodóvar, 1999). This dedication stresses the performative nature of maternal practice. Just like the film itself, this dedication also recognizes the nongendered character of maternal experience for "las personas" that wish to be mothers. The analogy between maternal figures and actors points to the ways that maternal practice does not require biological connections nor the presence of a cisgender female. In fact, Isabel Maurer Queipo identifies the principal theme of Almodóvar's film as "el teatro de la vida" [the theater of life] as a fictionalization of reality that questions

authenticity and artifice by demonstrating the comedic and dramatic nature of life (Maurer Queipo, 2011, p. 21). This extends to Manuela who, when asked “¿pero tú sabes actuar?” [But do you know how to act?] by Huma, the actress whose car killed Esteban and for whom Manuela works as a personal assistant, claims, “Sé mentir muy bien y estoy acostumbrada a improvisar” [I know how to lie well and I am accustomed to improvising] (Almodóvar, 1999).

This appeal to mothering as performance offers a reframing of Gutiérrez-Albilla’s definition of alternative kinship formation as “an ethics of motherhood and ‘embodied care’, beyond patriarchal, phallic and heteronormative conceptions of maternal relationality” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2017, p. 67-68). Like the idea of cohabitation without limits, Gutiérrez-Albilla defines this kinship configuration as “com-passionate hospitality” which “is articulated beyond heteronormative and patriarchal conceptions of the family, not in opposition to them or within them, so com-passionate hospitality, associated with the feminine matrixial sphere, can take place beyond the mother and child relationship within and outside the immediate family” (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2017, p. 96). Therefore, com-passionate hospitality’s distance from the traditional Oedipal family structure positions it as an alternative to the patriarchal understandings of institutional motherhood. The mother is no longer confined to the home nor the restrictions of gender binary or biological connections but rather glorifies the line from the intertextual work *A Streetcar Named Desire* which is repeatedly referenced and acted out within the film, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” As Almodóvar explains, “It’s also a film about the solidarity that exists between women, but one that arises spontaneously in the course of life’s trials” (Strauss and Almodóvar, 2006, p. 193). The characters depicted in *Todo sobre mi madre* illustrate the ways that matrifocal thinking can shatter patriarchal ethical modes and open up the possibilities for other mothers – queer mothers, nonbiological mothers, transgender mothers/fathers, mothers without children – to become folded into matrilineal genealogies.

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