SINGING GENDER:  
CONTESTED DISCOURSES OF WOMANHOOD  
IN TUSCAN-ITALIAN VERBAL ART

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the presentation and contestation of discourses of womanhood in verbal art performance. In Tuscan-Italian Contrasto verbal duels the artists, both males and females, may impersonate female characters as they exchange insults between each other. In doing so, they deploy multiple discourses of womanhood to demonstrate their wit and verbal artistry. As a consequence, they often subvert and contest “appropriate” female behavior as well as ideas of morality, which might be connected to those behaviors. This highlights the manipulability of discourses of womanhood to obtain particular goals. We analyze Contrasti performances where characters of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are impersonated. We further argue that the contraposition of different discourses on stage increases the fluidity of gender as a category. In this sense poetic performances are revealed as a loci where perceptions of established gender roles and the connected moral order might be negotiated or destabilized.

Keywords: Gender; Performance; Womanhood; Verbal Art; Italy; Discourse.

In contemporary social sciences, gender is often understood as performed, interactionally accomplished, rather than a natural feature of one’s persona. In other words, gender is done on a daily basis. What happens though when the performance is an actual verbal art performance on stage, and gender comes to be, therefore, consciously represented? What happens when its construction becomes the actual goal of a show? In this article we address these questions by looking at the enactment of women characters in Tuscan verbal duel performances, called Contrasti. We delineate how discourses of womanhood are articulated in the context of these performances. We argue that the needs of the performers for artful presentation of their characters foreground the contested and contestable nature of discourses of gender. Performance

1 Acknowledgements: For their helpful comments on this article, we thank Jillian Cavanaugh, Robert Garot and Jack Glazier. Our thanks also to the artists who graciously allowed the videotaping of their performances.

2 Contrasto can be translated in English as “contrast,” plural Contrasti. Following Luisa Del Giudice’s definition, the Contrasti are “poetic ‘contests,’ traditionally improvised, between two specific and stated adversaries... Contrasti are also dramatic and heated debates” (Del Giudice 1995: 75-76).
thus creates a reflexive space, where the naturalness of each image of womanhood ends up being disputed, its ideological nature revealed.

The Tuscan *Contrasto* verbal duel is a type of improvisational sung poetry in which artists, called *Poeti* (poets) are assigned one of two opposing characters and engage in a contentious dialogue. The poets may impersonate any person or object, of any gender; thus male poets often play female characters. Each poet attacks the opposing character and proposes an understanding of the facts and behaviors of everyday life that places the self in a positive light and the other in a negative light. Praise for themselves is mixed with insults hurled toward the adversary. They do so on the basis of socially shared understandings of appropriate and inappropriate thoughts and behaviors. We focus in particular on *Contrasti* in which two female characters, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, are represented. Here, each image of womanhood presented is intertwined with an appraisal, or judgment, done by the performers. Through these appraisals, the performers try to legitimize the choices and behaviors of their character (affirming its superiority) in the view of the audience, at the same time “putting down” the adversary. Thus, they do not merely present different ways of *doing* being a woman; they engage in attempts to prove the correctness of their own understandings and the incorrectness of their adversary’s. Since performers do not necessarily subscribe to the gender discourses that they represent -- on the contrary, they may shift among them throughout the performance -- a performer can contradict one set of expectations about womanhood by appealing to different sets of norms.

This article examines how performers invoke and manipulate multiple discourses of womanhood, each carrying different expectations of behavior, connected to different definitions of morality. Each view of gender and womanhood is portrayed as “natural.” At the same time, the reflexivity of the performance, with its portrayal of ideologically bound images of gender that offer critical mirrors to one another, increases the fluidity of gender as a category. As the dueling poets act to uphold or contest images of gender roles, they offer continuous commentary on possible forms of gendered relationships. Thus in performance gender relationships are invoked, contested and transformed.

The actors’ *doing* of gender is metacommunicative insofar as the poets openly state their goal of representing women and index culturally available discourses of womanhood. We use the term “discourse” to refer to running dialogues inside the Tuscan society. As Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet write: “When we speak of a *discourse*, we refer to a particular history of talk about a particular idea or set of

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3 Impersonation, in this case, does not mean cross-dressing. The poets never try to look like or sound like the other gender. On the contrary, their voice and posture remains the same when impersonating any character, be it an animal, an abstract concept like “science,” a priest, or a daughter-in-law. In the past, the *Contrasto* was done equally by men and women, but in recent years the number of women artists has been progressively diminishing. However, the genre is not seen as a male one and women are not discouraged from it. The reason for their scarcity must be found elsewhere, but further study is needed on this topic.

4 The data on which this analysis is based were gathered during several seasons of ethnographic fieldwork in Italy, between 1994 and 2001 by Valentina Pagliai. The performances of *Contrasti* were videotaped and later transcribed. Several interviews were conducted with the artists and some of their fans. The results were then analyzed following a discourse analysis and ethnography of speaking framework.
ideas. Thus when we talk about a discourse of gender, we refer to the working of a particular set of ideas about gender in some segment or segments of society” (2003: 42; italics in the original). We understand these gender discourses to be shared bodies of common sense notions about womanhood. They are based on cultural types and stereotypes, which are not necessarily perceived as “true” by the audience, or by the artists. However, they are part of culturally shared discourses regarding gender roles and behaviors.5

The Contrasti complicate people’s understandings of gender, by showing how individuals as agents can use and manipulate discourses of womanhood for particular goals, such as the affirmation of poetic authority, augmentation of power, defense of action, justification of behavior, and the proposition of positive images of the self. Next, we give a more detailed description of the genre and its contexts. We will include a brief description of the “mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law” duels. Then, we will analyze a series of discourses presented in actual Contrasti, which we indicate through the labels of “woman as breadwinner,” “woman as caretaker of the family,” “woman as sexually alluring, desired or desiring,” “woman as oppressed reproducer/producer,” “woman as wise elder” and “woman as young and progressive.”

1. The Contrasto as a genre.

The Contrasto is a standardized form of sung Italian performance poetry present in central Italy, in various forms, since the Middle Ages. Two artists engage in an improvised verbal duel, trading insults according to a topic chosen by the audience. The characters in the Contrasto can be people, animals, objects, or ideas. There are no restrictions on the subject matter. The Contrasto is usually performed during public festivals (see List #1). Most of them are organized by the local sections of the national parties of the left, by local clubs or, more rarely, by church parishes.6 These festivals usually take place during the warmer months, often in an open area, such as a plaza or large field. Here, one finds restaurants, vendors, game booths, and a stage area. In front of the stage there is space for concerts, dancing, traditional performances, and political meetings. Sometimes there is a wooden dance floor. All or most of these structures can be temporary, built specifically for the festivals. For the audience, the duels are not only an occasion for entertainment, but also an opportunity to listen to and form political opinions on current issues which may be relevant to the general Tuscan population (see Pagliai 2002 for further discussion of the Contrasto as political genre).

The Contrasti described here were recorded in cities and towns in North Eastern Tuscany, most of them in the plain area stretching across the provinces of Florence.

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5 To allow the other participants to recognize a certain action as a “female” action, the poets take into account shared ideas about the ways in which “women” behave or are expected to behave in certain situations; for example the way in which a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are expected to behave during a confrontation with each other. At the same time, the artists mold and reify such ideas in their performances.

6 Pagliai recorded Contrasti performed at parishes’ feasts only twice, and in both cases the parishes were known for their leftist or progressive leanings. The poets are known leftists, thus conservative institutions never invite them to perform.
Prato and Pistoia. This is a highly industrialized area. Most of the older poets belong to the local urban and semi-urban working class; they spent their life working in the factories surrounding Florence and Prato. However, some of the younger poets come from an urban middle class, which may reflect the fact that the Contrasto, once a genre understood by the general population, is now increasingly considered a tradition to be preserved by the better educated few.

The Contrasti are formed by a series of chained octets. The octet can be taken as a recognizable unit, or as a turn in a poetic conversation, defined by its internal structure as well as by the melody. Each turn’s length usually varies between 30 seconds and more than one minute. Each octet is composed of eight verses of 11 syllables (hendecasyllable7). The first six have a rima alternata, “alternating rhyme” (ABABAB) the last two have a rima baciata, “coupled rhyme” (CC). The octets are chained: The ending rhyme of the first poet must be the same as the beginning rhyme of the next poet. The coupled rhyme signals to the other poet that his or her turn has arrived. There is no winner in a Contrasto, although one of the poets may receive more applause from the audience if s/he performs better. The dialectic is never resolved into an agreement; instead the poets simply continue attacking each other until they or their audience gets bored of a topic.

The performance develops through the relationship between the speakers and the listeners, or the performers and the audience as co-performers. This co-performance can be seen in several ways. Apart from selecting the theme and assigning a character to each poet, the audience can also request a particular story or a particular genre of performance. They may, for example, request a sentimental song, a Contrasto, or a song in a certain dialect. The audience also gives various kinds of feedback, including evaluations, interpretations, or “identifying responses” with respect to the characters (see also Fretz 1987: 306-307). Warmer audiences may interact more with the poets, and audience members sometimes intervene or get on the stage to try some personal number (a song, music, or some octets). Moreover the definition of the occasion, as well as the needs of the audience, shape how the poets present themselves, the language varieties they use, the degree of outrageousness in the verbal duel, and the length of the Contrasto.

In the Contrasto female and male characters are always presented as part of kinship, sexual and social relationships. Examples include Contrasti between “mother-in-law and daughter-in-law,” “wife and husband,” “wife, husband and lover” and “nun and prostitute.” “Mother-in-law vs. Daughter-in-law” (Suocera e Nuora) is a common topic of the Contrasto, pitting women in a kinship relationship against each other. We analyzed the following five Contrasti with this topic, all of them recorded during fieldwork by Pagliai.

List #1: Contrasti between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law:
A) Elidio Benelli & his protégée Liliana Tamberi. Migliana (Prato), Summer festival, 8/2/97.
B) Realdo Tonti & Altamante Logli. Papone (Pistoia), Festival of Liberation, 8/7/97.

7 Although not all the verses respect this rule, most of them are indeed hendecasyllables. The number of syllables in each verse can be modified by the way it is performed. The melody, for example, allows a multiplication or reduction of the number of syllables through pausing, division of the diphthongs, elision, or melodic prolongation of vowels.
In addition, we take into consideration similar Contrasti recorded and published by other scholars (Bencistá 1994; Pastacaldi 1992). The “mother-in-law and daughter-in-law” Contrasto is highly formalized, has high intertextuality and follows a general pattern, characteristics that allow us to consider it a clearly defined “sub-genre” of the Contrasto genre. Because of the high formalization, its basic structure is consistent across occasions, although it may be lengthened or shortened. At the same time, each performance is unique and reflects the personalities of the artists as both individuals and partners in performance.

The Contrasto between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law takes the form of an intra-family struggle to control the relative position of power of its members. The topic refers to a family and kinship structure that was common in Tuscany in the past (see Pratt 1994). This structure included patrilocality, which was particularly diffused in the Tuscan peasant extended family (Kertzer and Saller 1991). In the extended family, the daughter-in-law went to live in the household of her husband and was under the direct authority of the mother-in-law. She was at the lower end of the power hierarchy in the family, both as a producer and as a reproducer.

In today’s Tuscany, however, the Contrasto should not be read as a representation of present conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Most families are now nuclear and neolocal, and the relationships within the kinship group have gone through notable changes. Part of the ability of the Contrasto to remain close to the present issues in Italian society, however, its ability to readapt old themes to the discussion of new concerns. Thus while the traditional relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law has all but disappeared, the discourses of womanhood that the poets depict represent issues at the core of present society’s imagination of gender and gender roles. The contraposition between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law should not be read as factual, but as symbolic of the eternal dialectic between different power-discourses on social realities.

In the Contrasto the daughter-in-law, far from accepting her status of inferiority, opposes the right of the mother-in-law to order her around. The Contrasto proceeds through a series of parts. At first, the mother-in-law portrays the relationship as harmonious. She affirms that she is ready to love the daughter-in-law as long as the latter does not oppose the older woman or her wishes. The daughter-in-law may also

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9 We discussed the relationships between gender, power and kinship in the Contrasto elsewhere, see Pagliai and Bocast 2003.

10 Similarly, for example, another classic Contrasto, Peasant vs. Landowner, is being used today to contrast the upper and working classes, decades after the traditional forms of land ownership that occasioned the original theme has disappeared: The landowners may have lost their hold on power, but differences in social class and access to power still exist.
propose the possibility of a harmonious relationship with the mother-in-law, yet soon enough she suggests that the hierarchy is unjust and the mother-in-law is unfit to lead the family. In the following series of insults, the characters attack each other’s behavior as women and family members. The *Contrasto* reaches its climax when the characters threaten to leave the household and break up the marriage. It is against the background of this struggle for power in the family that the performers manipulate discourses of womanhood and gender-appropriate behavior to demonstrate the moral superiority of their character and attribute wrongful ideas and behaviors to the other character.

Finally, let us stress again that “impersonation” in the *Contrasto*, is not mockery. When impersonating women, male poets are not cross-dressing. They do not imitate women in their posture, gestures, or tone of voice: They speak as if a woman. They never try to look like a woman; they take the point of view of a certain female character. The parody of gender is constructed through the reciprocal insults, not through a mockery of the characters. The poets as artists and authors, create female figures, and they give them voice in the *Contrasto*. They do not need to physically impersonate womanhood. They take characters from a tradition of sung *Contrasti* and bring them to life to have them fight against each other.

**2. The presentation and destabilization of discourses of gender in performance**

During the *Contrasto*, the artists use reciprocal attacks centered around the attribution of personal behavior, or better, misbehavior. In doing so, the performers project several images of womanhood, conjuring up opposing discourses regarding gender. In the rest of this article, we will explore some of these discourses, in particular: Woman as breadwinner, producer, economically independent; woman as mother, caretaker of the family honor and well being (through domestic activities); woman as sexually alluring, desired or desiring; woman as oppressed, silenced producer and reproducer; woman as conservative wise elder or as young and progressive.

In a stage performance, there must be a symmetry between the production of each gendered action and its recognition by the other participants, both the audience and the other poet (See Garfinkel 1967: 1; see also Heritage 1984: 179). Such recognition at the same time establishes a behavior as gendered. As Heritage notes, “such symmetry is both assumed and achieved by the actors in settings of ordinary social activity. Its assumption permits actors to design their actions in relation to their circumstances so as to permit others, by methodically taking account of the circumstances, to recognize the action for what it is” (Heritage 1984: 179; emphasis in original). These assumptions are not limited to “ordinary social activity,” but can be found in highly stylized performative genres.

Given their ability to invoke and perform more than one way of acting “appropriately,” “morally” and “naturally” as a woman, the poets demonstrate their access to more than one ideology of womanhood/gender.11 Their verses presuppose an understanding of these ways as relative to the positionality of the person in society and

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11 The possibility that people may be aware of the presence of several different ideological points of view on an issue has also been discussed by Reynolds 2002; Pagliai 2002; and Kroskrity 2002.
in the family. The poets are able to use these expectations and the discourses around them to manipulate them strategically in the duel and try to impose their point of view.

2.1. **Woman as breadwinner**

When poets deploy the idea of “woman as breadwinner” they present the character as an important economic resource for the family. The character may underline that the family depends on her wage work. On this basis she may stake claims to independence or power. Here, we show an example from a *Contrasto* sung by Realdo Tonti and Altamante Logli (*Contrasto* B), performed at a Festival of Liberation in Papone, on July 8, 1997. The performance took place in the large courtyard in front of the local Casa del Popolo (House of the People), around 10:30pm. The poets stood on a small stage festooned with the red flags of the Party for the Communist Refoundation. In front of it there was a large paved space for dancing. Around the area, under a line of trees and along the side of the building, were chairs for the audience. From the bar inside the building, voices and noises of dishes being washed created a droning accompaniment to the poets’ singing. The audience was relatively small, with about 50-60 people.

Our example is taken from octet #10, sung by Realdo Tonti as daughter-in-law. Here the image of “woman as breadwinner” is valued as positive, attributed to the self and presented as lacking in the other character:

(Contrasto B, octet 10) Tonti (daughter-in-law)
2 tutto il giorno le sta a pettigelare
   all day she spends gossiping
3 e di lavare un vestito o nun è bona
   and she is not good at washing even a single garment
4 o nun è mai andata a lavorare
   and she has never gone to work
5 oggi vorebbe fà la donna bona
   today she would like to be the good woman
6 una giovane un viene a sopportare
   she cannot tolerate a young one
7 se io un lavorassi da mattina a sera
   if I didn’t work from morning to evening
8 nun mangeresti nemmeno una pera
   you wouldn’t even have a pear to eat
9 AUD? = [ha ha ha ha ha]
10 AUD = [((applause)) ((some people laughing))]

Here, the daughter-in-law accuses the mother-in-law of losing time in the idleness of gossiping, working neither inside the house (washing garments) nor outside (for a salary), to help the family economically. On the basis of such statements, the daughter-in-law doubts the attempts of the mother-in-law to pass as a “good woman,” namely somebody who, being morally better than others, can elevate herself to judge another’s behavior. The daughter-in-law compares such behavior to her own, emphasizing that she works all day, and claims a role as breadwinner inside the family. She opposes this to the economic uselessness of the lazy mother-in-law, claiming authority on the basis of her role as producer inside the family.
2.2. Woman as caretaker of the family

In the next octet, the mother-in-law (Logli), in turn, attacks this moral authority of the daughter-in-law by accusing her of having been a prostitute; an attack that presupposes a discourse of womanhood that sees women as “caretakers of the family honor.” This at the same times indexes a discourse of honor as connected to appropriate sexual behavior as part of a family. Sexual restraint is depicted as a positive quality that is lacking in the opponent.12

(Contrasto B, octet 11) Logli/Mother-in-law
12 e t’hanno vista anche su i mmarciapi[edi ]
and they have seen you even on the sidewalk (prostituting)
13b AUD = [laughing])]
13 se c’era sempre la legge Merlini
if there was still the Merlini law13
14 e t’eri sempre a spasso pe’ asini
you would be still cruising the brothels
15 AUD? = [he he he he he he
16 AUD = [((applause)) ((some people laughing))

The negative judgment of the daughter-in-law’s behavior indexes, through its inversion, what the positive behavior would be -- namely, sexual restraint. By accusing the daughter-in-law of being a prostitute the mother-in-law references another discourse of what constitutes appropriate female behavior, namely refraining from sexual promiscuity.14 The value placed on sexual restraint is connected to a discourse of gender that assigns responsibility for the family’s honor to the wife. It is interesting to note that this responsibility confers on her the power to disrupt the family, ruining its status and the status of individual members as respected community members.

The attack raises the question of who dictates the rules of morally appropriate social behavior. Logli’s reference to sexual promiscuity is highly charged with meaning, given a generally liberal attitude toward sexual behavior in Tuscany today. It immediately indexes present debates between “conservative” and “liberal” understandings of sexuality. In this octet the mother-in-law allies herself with conservative discourses. At the same time, the evocation of those debates may deepen for the audience the sense of the relativity of gendered behavior itself, by reminding them of the existence of different points of view.15 Logli depicts his personage as a

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12 While various studies on the concept of honor have been done, especially in the Mediterranean area, it is important to underline that no single notion of honor could be taken as dominant for Tuscans. Multiple notions of honor are present and can be invoked in Tuscan conversations, depending on the context.

13 Here the poet makes an historical mistake. He should have said: “if there was not the Merlini law…” In fact it was the Merlini law that abolished the brothels after the end of the fascist regime.

14 In octet #16 and #18, the daughter-in-law will in turn accuse the mother-in-law of having had liaisons with many men.

15 It would be extremely interesting to compare the answers of more and less conservative or politically oriented audiences. However, this is not possible at this time. As we mentioned earlier, poets
conservative, even traditionalist older woman. She is a person who supports “traditional” female roles.

In terms of the development of the verbal duel itself, Logli’s switch to a new discourse of womanhood achieved a further goal for his performance. He switched to a position that he perceived to be more easily defensible at that point of the interaction. In general, a poet who is upholding a certain portrait may simply leave it behind when his or her opponent is effectively attacking it. Tonti has carried an effective attack in octet #10, resulting in laughter and applause from the audience, but left himself open to attack by not specifying the daughter-in-law’s occupation. Logli picked up on that opening by suggesting that the daughter-in-law earns her money through prostitution. Logli had several options: He could have negated the daughter-in-law’s claims as the breadwinner of the family, or he could have asserted that a woman should not be earning money outside the home. In both cases, he would have continued engaging the woman-as-breadwinner image; instead he switched discourse entirely.

An important consequence of the presence of multiple discourses is that, even as a certain idea of womanhood carries certain expectations of behavior, a person can contradict such expectations by appealing to other sets of rules from other discourses of womanhood. As we just saw in this Contrasto, when the mother-in-law is attacked for not being a breadwinner, she answers by invoking a completely different set of images, namely the woman as “caretaker of the family’s honor.” None of these sets is necessarily dominant. “Doing gender” becomes a complex activity in which not doing gender appropriately according to one discourse of gender may still be doing it appropriately according to another. Or rather, in the verbal duel, doing gender appropriately according to one discourse may still be not doing it according to another. So the daughter-in-law may be behaving according to gender expectations by being the “breadwinner” but, if the mother-in-law can show that such economic contribution is based on prostitution, then the daughter-in-law is found guilty according to a different set of norms for gender behavior. Doing gender is not an all or nothing affair but a fluid quality of interaction.

In the following octet #12 Tonti/daughter-in-law changes her attack to the behavior of the mother-in-law by accusing her of not having been a good mother or wife. Thus the duel still revolves around the image of “woman as caretaker of the family” but the focus shifts from “family honor” to “family well-being:”

(Contrasto B, octet 12) Tonti/Daughter-in-law
17 non ha mai accudito ai tuoi bambini
you never took care of your children
18 e la famiglia tu l’ha rovinata

are never invited to entertain conservative audiences, due to their leftist leanings. Nor can we assume that feasts organized by churches are not progressive, since in Tuscany today many progressive Catholic groups are present especially among the young people. In fact, the one example of Contrasto between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law at a parish’s feast (see List #1, Contrasto D) took place in a leftist parish and the whole performance was quite politically oriented. Even for what regards the differences between the answers of more or less politically oriented audiences we do not have enough Contrasti to make generalizations, and from what we have we do not see a clear relationship: the least political occasion recorded was the Summer festival in Migliana (see List #1, Contrasto A), but here the poet Liliana Tamberi produced one of the most feminist and progressive arguments as a daughter-in-law.
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and you ruined your family
19 povero tuo marito lavoratore onesto
   poor husband of yours! An honest worker
20 da patimenti l’ha fatto morì presto
   with grief you made him die early
21 AUD? = ha ha ha ha
22 AUD = ((applause))

The daughter-in-law accuses the mother-in-law of “failing” both as a mother (by not taking care of her children -- verse 17) and as a wife (leading her husband to a premature death -- verse 20), and thereby ruining her family (verse 18). Thus the daughter-in-law claims that the mother-in-law has failed to follow a set of prescribed rules for “good” woman-in-the-family behavior. The depicted behavior is seen as a positive one that the other does not follow. As such, not only does she indirectly index those rules, she also shows that one (the mother-in-law in this case) can break them, and possibly be called to account for it.

Both here and in the previously discussed image of woman as breadwinner, appropriate behavior is equated with “taking care of the family.” Yet “caring” has a diverse meaning. In the first case, we find caring defined as financial support. In the second case, Tonti presents activities referring to a discourse of woman as caring mother and wife;¹⁶ this discourse has often and unthinkingly been accepted as natural even by social scientists (see Moore 1988). These two images do not necessarily overlap. They can be seen as contradictory or not, depending on the particular gender ideology that forms the basis for understanding: Can a good mother be also a working woman or not? The answer to this question is political.

Garfinkel wrote that people perceive themselves as being surrounded by natural males and females and “persons who stand in moral contrast to them, i.e. incompetent, criminal, sick and sinful” (1967: 122). Each character in the Contrasto sees the other person as “sinful” and “incompetent,” thus mirroring our own unreflective beliefs, but at the same time representing them for the public and pointing at the positional bias of this behavior and its ideological undertones. One’s perceptions of another’s morality are thereby shown to be contingent. The comforts of everyday assumptions about gender are shown for what they are: Self-righteous, contingent, non-absolute, idiosyncratic.

2.3. Woman as sexually alluring, desired or desiring

So far, in this Contrasto (Contrasto B), the daughter-in-law constructed herself as a “good woman” by depicting herself as a breadwinner; she depicted the mother-in-law as “bad” by representing her as lacking the ability to care for the family both economically and interpersonally. In the next series of octets, Logli/mother-in-law accuses the daughter-in-law of being a “frivolous” woman, overly preoccupied with her physical appearance. Logli depicts such behavior as “immoral,” indexing again a conservative discourse of gender dictating that a woman should play down her physical appearance

¹⁶ This image is also different from the one of “woman as caretaker of the family honor,” where caring was equated to maintaining the family “face” vis-à-vis the larger community.
and avoid showing her bodily attributes. This new attack starts in octet #13. Here the mother-in-law calls attention to the fact that the daughter-in-law changes hair-color often (verse 23):

\[(Contrasto \, B, \, \text{octet} \, 13) \, \text{Logli/Daughter-in-law}\]

23 \, \text{una vorta l’è mora} \, \text{una vorta l’è bionda} \text{.} \text{ }
\text{one time she is brunette and one time she is blonde} \\
24 \, \text{cosa ne fa di hella vagab[onda? ]} \\
\text{what can you do with such a bum?} \\
24b \, \text{AUD = } \text{[((laughing))]} \\
25 \, \text{AUD? = ( ) meglio} \\
\text{better} \\
26 \, \text{AUD = ([(laughing)])} \text{ ((sparse applause))}

The mother-in-law associates changing hair color with laziness, implying the question: Has she nothing better to do than spend time at the hairdresser? (Verse 24). The underlying discourse is that putting on make-up and changing hair color are activities restricted to immoral women. The fact that the daughter-in-law engages in such activities thus throws her morality into question. Moreover, the mother-in-law takes the opportunity to accuse the daughter-in-law of being lazy and therefore, an unproductive member of the household. The mother-in-law returns to this line of attack in the 19th octet, where she again underlines the connection between the daughter-in-law’s outward appearance (make-up, movements of the body) and inner “lack of morality:”

\[(Contrasto \, B, \, \text{octet} \, 19) \, \text{Logli/Mother-in-law}\]

67 \, \text{la mattina ti trucca e la va via} \\
\text{in the morning she makes up and she leaves} \\
68 \, \text{si tinge il labbro [e la si fà il capello]} \\
\text{she paints her lip and makes her hair} \\
68b \, \text{AUD = } \text{[((laughing))]} \\
69 \, \text{[la fa la gongolante pe’lla via]} \\
\text{she smiles too much along the road} \\
69b \, \text{AUD = } \text{[((laughing))]} \\
70 \, \text{sempre alla barba di mmi figlio grullarello} \\
\text{always fooling my little idiot of a son}

The mother-in-law accuses the daughter-in-law of exposing herself too much by putting on make-up (verse 67) and lipstick (verse 68). She then accuses her of exposing herself provocatively to the eyes of other males by smiling too much in the street (verse 69) thus endangering the honor of her son. The mother-in-law concludes by insulting her own son, implying that he is a fool to let his wife behave so “immorally” (verse 70). She insinuates that the daughter-in-law uses “sweet talk” and a seductive appearance to manipulate her husband. The critique suggests that the son is not controlling his wife (and that he should and could if he wanted).

This discourse presents a woman who can and does lead men (her husband and others) into doing what she wants through her sexual appeal. It is interesting to note that women’s ability to “lure” a mate is often presented by the mass-media (both in Italy and the United States) as a positive and acceptable way for a woman to exercise agency.
This representation is connected to a view of women as “parading” in the sexual encounter, where men are seen as doing the “choosing.”\textsuperscript{17} However, in \textit{Contrasto} performances this discourse can be contradicted by another one: Women can be represented as sexually dominant and looking for more sexual satisfaction. This discourse can be seen in the following octet, taken from a \textit{Contrasto} between Altamante Logli as daughter-in-law and Gianni Ciolli as mother-in-law (\textit{Contrasto C}). The performance took place during the Festival of Unity in Florence, in the summer of 1998. Here the stage where the poets performed was part of a Cafè and surrounded by tables with people having dinner or conversing, more or less involved in listening to the performance. The Festival, the largest in Tuscany, includes several concerts and performances, discos, restaurants, expositions and shops and thousands of people visit it every night. As a consequence, there was a large audience for the poets, albeit a relatively distracted one, including many passers-by. For Ciolli this was one of the first public performances and he was a bit nervous, thus the public allowed him to choose his character.

At the point on the \textit{Contrasto} where the following octet was uttered, Ciolli/mother-in-law\textsuperscript{18} had just accused the daughter-in-law of making her son unhappy and wished that he had rather remained a bachelor. In retort, Logli/daughter-in-law doubts her husband’s prowess as a lover:

\begin{verbatim}
(Contrasto C, octet 11) Logli/Daughter-in-law
5 lo sai io con lui non mi consolo
   you know that with him I cannot take solace
6 n’altra parte mi levo l’appetito
   somewhere else I have to calm my appetite
7 per riscaldare ghiaccia la fiamma
   to warm up the flame he freezes it
8 perché l’è peggio che della su’ mamma
   because he is worse than his mom.
9 AUD: ((laughing and applause))
\end{verbatim}

The daughter-in-law asserts her right, as a woman and wife, to sexual satisfaction. She insinuates that her husband’s lack of prowess (verse 5) gives her the right to search elsewhere for sexual satisfaction (verse 6). Here the woman is not passively waiting to be chosen, but searching for and choosing a mate. We find a similar image projected for the self by the gang girls in Norma Mendoza-Denton’s 1996 study. Mendoza-Denton shows how, for Latina gang members in California, the image of “woman as sexually dominant” is a positive image of power. One of these women, Babygirl, says “I never look down. It’s all about power. You never fucking smile...And

\textsuperscript{17} One can find this image of womanhood anywhere from fashion magazines and commercials to the discussions in biological anthropology as to the reasons why, differently from other animal species, in the human species it is the woman, rather than the male, to parade for the other sex (for a critique of this ideological view see Zihlman 1981).

\textsuperscript{18} It is interesting to note that just like there may be no relationship between the sex of the performer and the character performed, so there may be no relationship between the age of the performer and their character. In this case, Ciolli, in his early twenties, impersonates the older mother-in-law while Logli, then seventy-seven years old, speaks for the daughter-in-law.
if you’re at a party, and you see a dude that you like, don’t ever smile. Just walk up to
him and kiss him.” (1996: 56)

In both the Contrasto and Babygirl’s speech, women are represented as both
powerful and sexually dominant. Mendoza-Denton comments that Babygirl gives “a
power-based interpretation of her own makeup practices” (1996: 56). She compares
this attitude to the hegemonic understanding of makeup as a means to reveal an inner,
fundamental, non-racial/ethnic femininity.19 Mendoza-Denton’s words apply to our
distinction between “woman as sexually alluring” and “woman as sexually dominant.”
In the Contrasto, more than one possible sexual behavior is associated with
womanhood. These behaviors index distinguishable ways of being woman-in-relation-
to sex and power.

Finally, a comparison between the “woman as desiring,” and the “woman as
caretaker of the family honor” furnishes a further example of the manipulability of
discourses of gender behavior. By claiming that she is justified in being unfaithful to
her husband, the daughter-in-law shifts the responsibility for upholding the family
honor to the husband himself. It is not her performance as a wife but the husband’s
sexual performance, that bears the weight for the maintenance of the “face” of the
family vis-a-vis the larger community. Previously we had noticed that such
responsibility for the maintenance of the family honor indirectly attributed agency and
power to the wife. In an interesting twist, the daughter-in-law absolves herself from
blame by negating such agency. At the same time, she retains a claim to power in her
sexual choices.

Here, a connection between discourses of womanhood and definitions of
morality becomes more evident. In the Contrasto, the women represented on stage are
continuously called to account for their “moral” behavior as “normal” women, by
having their statements continually questioned by the other poet. The key to the doing
gender concept is that members of a society are continuously held accountable for their
gender displays (Candace West and Don Zimmerman 1991: 14). “Gender display”
(Goffman 1976) refers to the actions one takes to perpetuate a certain gender
argues that one’s way of presenting the self is always socially accountable vis-a-vis
“normal” behavior, which is in turn seen as “moral” and “natural.” In Garfinkel words,
“For members not only are matters so about familiar scenes, but they’re so because it is
morally right or wrong that they are so” (Garfinkel 1967: 35). So to be a “normal”
woman means to be a moral woman, accountable for infringement of the
real/moral/natural behavior. However, performance has the capacity to dialogically
deconstruct the link between gendered, natural and moral orders.

2.4. Woman as oppressed reproducer/producer

A different discourse of womanhood can be seen enacted in a Contrasto between the
poets Liliana Tamberi/daughter-in-law and Elidio Benelli/mother-in-law (Contrasto A).
This was sung as part of a performance in Migliana, a small town in the province of

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19 She notes that one cannot assume that all women “orient to the same hegemonic ideals of
beauty that are supplied through the various media for public consumption” (1996: 59).
Prato (August 2, 1997). The setting was a local Summer feast organized by the city council. Five poets were present at this performance,\(^\text{20}\) and they took turns contrasting with each other.

The performance was held in the large, paved area behind the local circolo ricreativo, “recreational club.” This area was usually used as an open-air restaurant. A basic wooden stage had been assembled next to the building, and behind the stage a long table had been prepared where the poets and their friends -- including the anthropologist Pagliai -- dined before the performance. The area in front of the stage was covered with orderly rows of plastic chairs, where most of the audience sat. There was a large audience (about three hundred persons) and people had to sit on the floor as well. The place was pleasantly surrounded by plants and trees.

Since the setting was rather isolated behind a building, there were no passersby and the audience, composed of women and men of various ages and including many children, remained attentive throughout the performance. They also suggested a very high number of themes (the children in particular suggested many of them). In part because of this and in part because of the relatively high number of poets present, the Contrasti were shortened to include only 8 to 16 octets each.

Liliana Tamberi was in one of her first performances as a poet and thus she was allowed to chose her character. She presented the daughter-in-law as being oppressed inside the family. Here we present excerpts from octets 2 and 4:

\[
\begin{align*}
(\text{Contrasto A, octet 2}) & \text{ Tamberi/Daughter-in-law} \\
15 & \text{su questa cosa no non l’avra vinta} \\
& \text{on this thing you will not win} \\
16 & \text{se sperì di vedemmi presto incinta} \\
& \text{if you hope to see me pregnant soon} \\
17 & \text{AUD = ((applause))}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(\text{Contrasto A, octet 4}) & \text{ Tamberi/Daughter in law} \\
26 & \text{e ci s’ha in questa casa un gran da ffare} \\
& \text{in this house we have much to do} \\
27 & \text{ci mancherebbe pure della prole} \\
& \text{that’s all I need! Children!} \\
28 & \text{non basta già il pulire e il cucinare} \\
& \text{like if the cleaning and cooking was not enough}
\end{align*}
\]

In octet #1 the mother-in-law had opened the Contrasto by underlining the daughter-in-law’s need to produce offspring for the family. In other words, “woman-as-mother” was presented as “perpetuator” of the family lineage. The mother-in-law presented this role in a positive light. However, Tamberi/daughter-in-law responded by presenting an image of herself as “woman as silenced producer,” stressing her role in the family as unpaid servant.

In these excerpts we can see that the daughter-in-law refuses the suggestion of motherhood given by the mother-in-law. In verse 15, she suggests that the mother-in-law’s offers of love may be an indirect way to obtain things. She then doubts that a child is in her best interest (verse 27), and then she considers that having to clean and

\(^{20}\) Elidio Benelli, Altamante Logli, Davide Riondino, Liliana Tamberi and Realdo Tonti.
cook already gives her enough troubles (verses 26 and 28). The daughter-in-law refuses to be a mother because she is already the “producer” in the family and she is not about to put additional weight on her shoulders. The discourse of woman-as-oppressed invoked here is almost an inversion of the discourse of “woman as caretaker of the family.” This is a discourse that at the same time doubts and challenges the naturalness of the desire for motherhood. The daughter-in-law presents motherhood as undesirable in a context of unequal distribution of familial power and duties.

It is interesting here to notice that Liliana Tamberi is one of the few female poets still active today, and that she chooses to develop the *Contrasto* in a very innovative way by stressing the refusal to have children. This clearly shows how this traditional theme can be manipulated to address current concerns in Tuscan society, providing us insight in the current trend toward very low birth rates in Tuscany (see also Krause 2005).

### 2.5. Woman as wise elder and woman as young and progressive

In the previously analyzed octet #13 of the *Contrasto* between Logli and Tonti (*Contrasto* B), Logli/mother-in-law claimed a more “traditionalist” morality; he thereby hinted at a new direction for the *Contrasto*, namely a confrontation between “conservative” and “progressive” discourses of gender roles inside the family. It is easy for the poets to play this conflict along age lines between older and younger generations of women. In octet #14, Tonti/daughter-in-law promptly picks up the suggested development. She deflects an attack based on her lack of adherence to a certain image of womanhood by switching to another discourse, that we named “woman as young and progressive:”

(Contrasto B, octet 14) Tonti/Daughter-in-law

27 se una vorta so mmora una vorta bionda
if one time I am brunette and one time I am blonde

28 AUD? = ha ha ha ha

29 io tutt’i ggiorno vô a lavorare
all the day I go to work

30 o povera vecchia rubiconda
poor old ruddy woman

31 che l’ignoranza un ti viene a mancare
you are never at a loss for ignorance

32 ma di quello che dici non mi stupisci
but what you say doesn’t surprise me

33 perché te la gioventú nun la capisci
because you don’t understand young people

34 AUD = ((sparse applause))

The daughter-in-law presents herself as a working woman. She declares that since she earns a salary (verse 29) she can do as she pleases, such as spend money on hairdressers (verse 27). She presents her economic power as a warrant to choose her

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21 Notice that the poet is also contradicting the discourse of womanhood that posits motherhood as an always-desirable goal.
Further, she implies that her care for her own appearance is not due to a lack of character, as claimed by the mother-in-law, but rather a sign of a “modern” way of thinking, a positive trait. Having defended her own actions, the daughter-in-law states that the mother-in-law is an old woman (verse 30) who cannot understand young people like herself (verse 33). She thus invokes a fracture between generations.

This opposition between the “past times” and the “present times” is a common theme in the Contrasto. An example can be seen in the Contrasto sung by Nello Casati/daughter-in-law and Realdo Tonti/mother-in-law (Contrasto D), at the feast of S. Niccoló’s parish in Agliana, in September 1997. The performance was done on a stage set up in front of the church of S. Niccoló. The warm audience, of at least two hundred, included many young people that had helped organize the show. In addition to Casati and Tonti, two young poets were present and participated, Ettore DelBene and Gianni Ciolli. In the following example, the daughter-in-law brings up the opposition between the modern “better” times, that she represents, and the older “worse” times that she equates with the mother-in-law:

(Contrasto D, octet #5) Casati/Daughter-in-law
1 So io che t’ho modernizzato la famiglia
   I am the one who modernized your family
2 la famiglia più moderna e casa con più pulizia
   a more modern family and a cleaner house
3 e li so ballare i tango e la quadriglia
   I know how to dance the tango and the quadriglia
4 in casa nostra omando io e l’lé una meraviglia
   in our house I wield command in an excellent way
   ***
9    AUD: ((lots of applause and laughing))

Notice that the daughter-in-law metonymically connects the modern times to cleanliness (verse 2), modern music (verse 3), and her authority in the family (verse 4). She attributes the arrival of modernity to the household with her own arrival and presents herself as an agent of change. The modern is good while the past is wrong.

Conversely, in the following octet from a Contrasto between Gabriele Ara/mother-in-law and Realdo Tonti/daughter-in-law (Contrasto E), the mother-in-law uses exactly the same argument, albeit inverted in its “moral” value, to affirm her right to be listened to, catered to, and respected by the daughter-in-law. This Contrasto was performed during a Festival of Liberation in Viaccia, in September of 1998. On this particular occasion there was no stage and the poets sung near tables with people eating. The audience was small, but extremely participatory, and the performance went on well past midnight, with several people joining in, so that it became a real jam session.

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22 There is an interesting “time warp” here since the tango and quadriglia (the second is a form of square dance almost never done today) are not by any standard contemporary forms of Italian dance. Thus their evocation situates the encounter in a distant past. It must be recalled that the poets are expert rhapsodists, therefore they often use verses or ideas found in a tradition of Contrasto singing. Casati is quite an expert in this sense. He often embellishes his poetry with verses that are not completely creative but intertextually borrowed from other performances. Because of this, his octets are often full of references to older times and very old verses, belonging to a shared tradition of Contrasto singing. The use of tango and quadriglia to represent modern music also achieves a comical effect.
Here Ara/mother-in-law presents herself as an elder, whose authority is due to age. She invokes her white hair (verse 5) as a metonym for age and conflates chronological age with wisdom and intellect (verse 6). She concludes with an appeal to the audience to recognize her elderly appearance (verse 7) and validate her claim to superiority based on age. She depicts this superiority as natural (based on age) while depicting the daughter-in-law as a disrespectful young woman and thus morally incorrect. The audience becomes a stand-in for society in general, and is expected to pass judgment on the daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law mentions that the daughter-in-law is accountable for her behavior and should be arrested by the police for disrupting the natural order.

Heritage observes that the normal is the moral and that, “the ordinary members of the society treat its undoubted objective features as both ‘normal and moral.’ Social facts are treated both as factual, natural and regular and as phenomena which the member is morally required to attend to, take into account and respect” (Heritage 1984: 191). The mother-in-law talks as if she was the “ordinary member” and the daughter-in-law should see for herself the rightfulness of the mother-in-law’s discourse and the wrongfulness of her own discourse and actions. The daughter-in-law, at her turn, will talk as if the reverse was true. But to the audience both discourses are presented as factual, real, to be taken into account and respected, thus creating a contradictory effect. The contraposition of gendered discourses creates a series of contradictions. It is through them that the poets, while empowering themselves as artists, can also lead the audience to see different points of view and understand their relativity.

3. Shifting discourses without a winner

To summarize, in our analysis of the Contrasti several discourses of womanhood emerge. A poet can invoke the importance of the woman’s role in the family, and give voice to opposing views about it. S/he can bring up the fact that a woman brings a salary to the family as a breadwinner, thereby maintaining children and elders in it. This stresses the presence of women in the family as producers and in general underlines their power based on their economic independence, and on the connected dependence of the other members. S/he can argue, on the contrary, that her merit lays in the actual care of the family well-being, exercised in the everyday activities of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Or s/he can instead focus on the important role
of a woman in protecting the honor of the family, through her own honorable countenance. The poets can also choose to give voice to discourses that see the woman as oppressed inside the family, both as a producer and as a reproducer. These discourses can echo those raised by Italian feminism since the seventies, in Tuscany and elsewhere.

Other discourses that emerge in the Contrasti regard women’s sexuality and sexual behavior. Women can be presented as unavoidably alluring to men, depicted as parading for males through the way they dress, make-up, or walk. The attitude toward such seducing behavior can alternate between moral condemnation or proud embracing of such activity. On the other side, the poets may stress that women have strong sexual desires themselves. This is often articulated in terms of being “dissatisfied” by particular males (i.e. the husband) and having to search for additional partners. Again, this stance might be strategically embraced or condemned by different characters.

Finally, the poets may opt to invoke discourses that describe women as having a tendency to embrace novelty and the future, or vice-versa to behave conservatively and look toward the past as an ideal time. Here gender gets conflated with age. Ideologies that at different times stress women as a conservative or as a progressive force have a long history in the West, a history continuing in the present attempts by sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists to find the final “truth” about women’s role in language change (see Coates 1993). It is interesting to see how these social science categories emerge in the apparently distant context of verbal duels uttered in the local feasts of Tuscany.

The poets’ attitude toward each of these ideas can shift from complete agreement to complete disagreement. In a sense, what the poets show is that, in the end, what the articulation of all these discourses does, is to possibly achieve a status of heightened power for the performer that can better sustain an argument, moving the audience to laugh or applause. The Contrasti proclaim that the affirmation of each discourse is not so much about the finding of final truth, but about the establishment of power; in this case the poetic power of the artist.

With respect to these discourses of womanhood, the poets present their characters as assuming different positionalities. None of them is necessarily depicted as positive or negative, desirable or stigmatized but they may be presented as such as part of the interaction, as the poets deploy them to defend and extol the self and to put down the adversary. A character may stress resistance, acceptance, independence or dependence. She may present herself as powerful or powerless, as somebody who has agency and can change expectations and impose her point of view, or as somebody who relies upon others for self-affirmation.

In the end, the artists’ performances create a continuous upsetting of discourses about gender, which they continuously present back to the audience for appraisal. Thus, in performance, the meta-representation of social realities leads people to reflect on subjects like gender appropriate behaviors in a heightened way (Kapchan 1995). As Kapchan already noticed, performances create, critique and subvert meaning while presenting them to the audience (1995: 480). This effect is due to the fact that, as Bauman states: “It is part of the essence of performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication” (1977: 43). While gendered
behavior may be “seen but unnoticed,” (see Heritage 1984: 196) in everyday life, in the Contrasto performance it is highlighted: Noticed and pointed at, discussed and scrutinized. As a consequence, the Contrasto has the potential to reveal the fabric of social customs for audience members’ scrutiny, and invites them to reanalyze concepts previously seen as given.

As it happens generally in the Contrasto, neither character ends up as the winner. The Contrasti do not have a resolution, just like the discourses present in a society contrast each other without any of them becoming permanently hegemonic. This is fundamental: If the poets would furnish a resolution, that would make the Contrasto much less powerful in upsetting given truths and discourses since, in the end, one truth and one discourse would be reaffirmed as victorious. Instead, they negate that possibility. No alternative discourse gets legitimized by the Contrasto; truth remains contested. The Contrasto never truly ends.

Because of this absence of a winner, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflict is never resolved in the Contrasto: In a sense, the Contrasto shows the existence of the conflict. Similarly to the “disorderly discourse” named by Briggs (1996), this genre creates and enhances conflict in society, it does not move toward resolution. This is part of what makes the Contrasto, and verbal duels in general, so interesting to study. They go against the silent assumption, present in so much social science, that society is about agreement, about following norms and rules, and about reduction of dissonance. They propose a view of humans as able to enjoy some chaos in their lives.


Our analysis of Tuscan verbal art shows that several discourses of womanhood can be invoked and manipulated in performance. The choice of one over another is used by the artists to project different images of the self and to present their self as morally superior to the other. This contraposition leads to fractures in the discourses constructed by both sides. With each shift, what counts as appropriate female behavior changes. Thus the Contrasto ends up presenting models of gendered behavior and gendered points of view while simultaneously undermining them. The poets are able to articulate them reflexively in performance, and audiences are able to appreciate them, while not necessarily believing them.23

Our analysis also shows that the performers manipulate discourses of gender in order to force the other duelant to account for his or her behavior as a “moral/natural woman.” Thus alternative models of gendered behavior are compared and weighed for their relative naturalness, correctness, appropriateness and morality.

What we have seen in this article brings up a further important question, namely, could we see these duels between alternative discourses of womanhood as a form of resistance, as a way of deconstructing gender itself? We believe that the multiplicity of images proposed by the performers introduces an element of doubting, a deconstruction of perceived realities. The poets invite the audience to examine the complexity of the

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23 Different individuals in the audience may accept some of these discourses as true, but not others. However, the fact remains that these discourses about womanhood are present in Tuscan society and reflected in the verbal duels.
social self, and the complexity of social elements that make each person a unique individual. The Contrasto, in its trust to find the ultimate moral behavior which is gender appropriate, ends up deconstructing exactly the naturalness of such morality. The structure of the duel unavoidably leads to such challenge. The Contrasto can bring to the surface diverging opinions and the underlying social conflicts around the structuring of gender identities.

References


