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Impossible Subjects

Reconstructing Memories of a Working-class Italian Mother who Sometimes Used Heroin in the 80s

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Abstract: In the Italian cultural imagination, HIV/AIDS has often been framed within biomedical discourse or shaped by Anglo-American models of activism. Women's stories have remained marginal, reinforcing a gendered silence in both cultural memory and national discourse. This article presents *La paura ferisce come un coltello arrugginito* (2023) by Giulia Scomazzon as a key intervention in this neglected archive. The novel recounts an intergenerational story: a daughter retracing the unresolved trauma of her mother's death from AIDS in 1995. Through this intimate perspective, Scomazzon highlights the fragile negotiation of belonging for women affected by the epidemic and questions who is allowed to be remembered. The maternal figure – stigmatised as HIV-positive, briefly a heroin user, and excluded from dominant public iconography – embodies the tension between private grief and public recognition. The article argues that the marginalisation of women's HIV narratives in Italy reflects a broader neoliberal shift that privatises suffering and detaches the epidemic from structural inequalities. By foregrounding an affective counter-archive, Scomazzon challenges these frameworks and calls for new, intersectional ways of narrating HIV/AIDS that include non-male and anti-heroic experiences.

Keywords: Postmemory, HIV/AIDS, contemporary Italian narrative, Giulia Scomazzon, affective counter-archive.

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Introduction

We came to *La paura ferisce come un coltello arrugginito* through different yet interconnected trajectories of research, memory, and queer positionality. The author, Giulia Scomazzon, a lesbian writer born in 1987, narrates an attempt to reconstruct her mother's story through the public/private fracture of the HIV/AIDS crisis. One of us, a lesbian and non-binary person born in 1990, investigates the historical and political genealogies of their generation through an engagement with HIV history in Italy. The other, born in 1998, is a queer researcher engaged in affective work on archives and postmemory as practices of dis/identification. For us, reading the novel does not constitute a detached object of study, rather, it becomes a site of collective situated inquiry that simultaneously engages us as queers and as historical subjects belonging to a generation that still lacks public narration and representation. This absence is tied to a condition of existential precarity (Saraceno, 2015; Coin, 2017) that continues to keep both our lives and our historical genealogies at the margins of public discourse.

From this situated starting point, the article unfolds in two movements. First, we read Giulia Scomazzon's *La paura ferisce come un coltello arrugginito* (*Fear Hurts Like a Rusty Knife*) against the broader public, memorial, and cultural landscape within which the history of HIV in Italy continues to struggle for visibility and narrative space. Second, we develop a dialogic reading through close analyses of selected passages presented in both the original Italian and in translation. In the conclusion, we formulate a series of questions intended to open new intergenerational and intersectional perspectives for the study of HIV/AIDS and its cultural representations in Italy as this article presents a first attempt in the scholarly engagement with the book.

Within a historical and cultural context marked by the absence of a sustained public discourse on HIV – an absence explicitly evoked by Scomazzon herself – two recent interventions function as important beacons for our inquiry. The first is the exhibition *VIVONO*, held at the Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci from October 2025 to May 2026, which attempts, for the first time since the 1990s, to bring together artistic practice with media, archival, and historical narratives of HIV in Italy. The exhibition constitutes a post-memorial form of public reflection that directly engages both past and present activist communities. The second is Vanessa Roghi's autobiographical work (2018), which similarly traces a process of reconstruction through the experience of growing up as the daughter of a drug user. Both interventions share with Scomazzon an attempt to shift HIV narratives

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toward a more intersectional framework shaped by drug use, women's experiences, and provincial geographies. Scomazzon's work, in fact, does not simply recover the story of a forgotten subject; it reconfigures what counts as an HIV narrative by foregrounding figures historically excluded from both activist memory and national cultural representation.

Methodology

This article is structured as a dialogue between its two authors and emerges from a feminist understanding of collaboration as a methodological and political practice. More specifically, our approach is grounded in the Italian feminist tradition of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising), a form of radical collective narration that aims at disarticulating social and symbolic hierarchies through embodied experience and relational forms of knowledge production.

The dialogic form allows us, on the one hand, to use the novel as a stimulus for historical and literary analysis of HIV representation within Italian cultural discourse and, on the other, as a support for constructing historical and affective representations in which we can recognize ourselves. By 'affective,' we do not simply mean personal or subjective responses, but the emotional, relational, and embodied impulses that attach to us in the form of grief, love, shame, recognition, belonging – that conventional historical analysis often does not account for (cf. Cvetkovich, pp.7, 243; Cifor & Wood, 2017). The dialogue presented here therefore adds an emotional and experiential layer to historical reconstruction: it does not replace documentation but supplements it with forms of interpretation attentive to relationships, silences, and unresolved mourning. Interpretation thus does not fill absence but remains accountable to it.

This methodological approach is deeply indebted to feminist and queer traditions that conceive collaborative writing and dialogue as anti-dogmatic practices of subjectivation and political theory-making emerging from the margins of normative discourse — the space historically inhabited by lesbians, queer subjects, drug users, and all those whose lives resist normative regulation and social intelligibility. We draw in particular on *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), which frames feminist dialogue as a tool for theorizing from contradiction and marginality; on Adrienne Rich's (1972) 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' and Audre Lorde's (1977) 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action', both of which articulate the necessity of constructing languages capable

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of narrating lives historically excluded from representation. More recently, our approach resonates with the collaborative methodologies proposed by Lykke et al. (2024), as well as with interventions within Italian queer and feminist scholarship that challenge the authority of singular narratives and understands collaboration as a moving and ever-evolving practice of knowledge (Anatrone & Heim, 2021). Particularly significant in this regard are the collective contributions included in the reader of the exhibition *VIVONO*, which experiments with a polyphonic and non-authoritative approach to HIV memory in Italy (2026).

What has been denied: HIV in the Italian context

AIDS officially entered Italian public discourse in 1983, following the identification of the first recorded cases in Rome and the rapid circulation of media narratives imported from the United States. For almost three decades, HIV/AIDS had remained addressed primarily through biomedical discourse (Agnoletto, 2000), journalism (Ferracini, 1985), seropositive literary testimony (Tondelli, 1989), rather than through sustained historical inquiry. Only recently, a more articulated body of historical scholarship began to emerge investigating the epidemic through the lenses of public health, media discourse, political activism, welfare restructuring, and collective memory, paying particular attention to the forms of solidarity and caregiving that developed within affected communities.

In this framework, studies on women's political participation (Balestracci et al., 2022; Roghi, 2022), media and political representation (Rovinello, 2021), and queer and community-based mutual aid (Sbaffi, 2025) have offered especially innovative contributions. What remains largely unaddressed, however, is a historical reconstruction of the participation of people who use drugs in the political and public discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS, prevention, care, and institutional abandonment. While the Anglo-American history of HIV/AIDS within gay communities progressively generated archives, memoirs, and spaces for the affective elaboration of trauma, loss, death, and stigma (Schulman, 2021), the experiences of heroin users were more often mediated through institutions of rehabilitation, policing, or criminalisation. In Italy during the 1980s and 1990s, public discourse on drugs was shaped by the broader 'heroin emergency', which framed addiction simultaneously as a medical, moral, and security problem. The expansion of heroin consumption coincided with transformations in the Italian welfare state, growing urban marginalisation linked to the labour crisis, and the displacement

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of increasing sectors of the younger population toward industrial areas in search of alienating and non-professionalised employment, as well as with enduring anxieties surrounding public disorder inherited from the political conflicts of the previous decade (Cantilena, 2002; Pasetti, 2023). By the mid-1980s, heroin users had become emblematic figures within Italian media representations of urban decay and social disorder, particularly in metropolitan areas undergoing deindustrialisation and rising youth unemployment. Drug users thus became central intersectional figures within narratives of social crisis, while their own voices remained largely excluded from processes of historical narration and memorialisation.

In this article, we argue that the recent emergence of protagonism among the daughters of people who used drugs is producing not only a new narrative framework around addiction and loss, but also a broader historical reconfiguration of public memory itself. As we have already suggested, the perspective of the subsequent generation – investigating the memory of drug addiction as one of the collective forms through which intersectional political experiences were articulated – also emerges within projects and many initiatives taking space between academic[1] and public contexts. *VIVONO. Art and Affection. HIV and AIDS in Italy. 1982–1996*, for example, is the 'first institutional exhibition to reconstruct the forgotten history of Italian artists affected by the HIV-AIDS crisis. Works of art, poetry, soundscapes, and videos are interwoven with archival materials and personal memories to chart a possible path through the years 1982 to 1996 – from the first reported case of AIDS in Italy to the arrival of antiretroviral therapies' (Centro Pecci, 2025). The exhibition's approach focuses on an affective lens that looks back at the memorial and cultural rupture of the HIV/AIDS crisis 'as a generative moment–one in which unexpected alliances were born, where love became a space for political action, translated into support, affection, care, and flesh' (ibid.). The curatorial emphasis of the exhibition, focused no longer so much on the institutional stigma of the HIV/AIDS crisis and the pain of loss but on the living response of bodies to the crisis, presents itself as an attempt to rediscover, through the activism of individuals, movements and associations in Italy, the collective historical and cultural 'abundance' (Arondekar, 2023) of a forgotten period, demonstrating 'how written words, images, voices, and languages intertwine with sex, imagination, and mourning, evoking utopias that still belong to us, still resonate, still live' (ibid.).

1 In February 2026, the first oral history school dedicated to the history of drug addiction was held in Milan, organised by The Italian Oral History Association (AISO) and the ISEC Foundation entitled 'Voices, Policies and Narratives of Drug Addiction in Italy'.

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To accompany the exhibition, a reader has also been produced: a collection of ten commissioned essays offering historical and art-critical perspectives alongside personal accounts, together with an anthology of poems and letters by several of the artists featured in the exhibition. Bringing these marginalized individuals back into the spotlight serves not only to give them visibility through a non-judgemental lens, but also to lay the groundwork for potential political alliances. This exhibition aims to rewrite an HIV/AIDS narrative in which the fragmentation of individual 'identities' – singled out by state policy as primary targets of the virus – is amplified and complicated, with the intention of healing these divisions through an affective, post-identity response. Read from this intersectional and interdisciplinary perspective, HIV history reveals forms of solidarity and entanglement that dominant accounts have often neglected.

Soon after the first cases of AIDS were identified in Italy in 1983, gay men, lesbians, trans activists, sex workers, and drug users organised informal networks of mutual aid, information-sharing, and community care in response to the absence of effective public intervention (Balestracci, Guidoni & Landoni, 2022). In 1987, Arcigay, the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes, and other volunteer groups contributed to the creation of LILA (Lega Italiana per la Lotta contro l'AIDS), one of the first patient-led organisations in Italy demanding direct participation in decisions regarding prevention and healthcare. Alongside media campaigns and educational initiatives, these groups criticised the moralistic and heteronormative assumptions underlying institutional prevention policies. Starting from 1990, though, the relationship between activist organisations and public institutions began to change significantly, as local administrations and healthcare authorities progressively expanded their intervention in prevention and care policies. Italy's 1990 HIV Law 135 protected positive individuals with consent-based testing and anti-discrimination provisions, while Law 162/1990's drug-war approach doubled prison populations, with 33% HIV-positive (Bertolino, 2025, p.27). These measures institutionalised the crisis and fragmented coalitions without addressing underlying fears, economic precarity, or social exclusion. Amid unresolved care challenges for people with HIV/AIDS – who faced increasing social and economic marginalisation – the Catholic Church emerged as a key provider of welfare in Italy's crumbling First Republic, operating hospices and support services that substituted for failing public institutions (DeGrazia, 2022). While these Church-run initiatives offered material aid and dignity, they also depoliticised the structural roots of addiction, poverty, and epidemic vulnerability, creating the contested historical terrain where queer memory research meets Giulia Scomazzon's autofictional narrative.

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To tell a story neither invented nor lived: Giulia Scomazzon's book (2023)

> World AIDS Day reminds me every year that my mother has been forgotten [...] thousands of mothers and fathers who have left behind forgetful orphans in Southern Europe. (Scomazzon, 2023, p.57)[2]

Giulia Scomazzon's novel presents itself as a memoir about her search for the figure of her mother, Roberta, who discovered she had contracted AIDS while she was pregnant between 1986 and 1987 – probably due to syringe sharing during a period of heroin use at the beginning of the 1980s. Roberta died eight years after her daughter's birth, in 1995. Roberta was a working-class mother raised in a provincial context in northern Italy (Bassano del Grappa, Veneto), and she was in a relationship with Giulia's father, Andrea, who also used heroin and spent intermittent periods in prison during Giulia's early years. The child is in fact raised by her grandmother, Assunta. The excavation of memory around this forgotten figure begins when Giulia the narrator is thirty-three and, prompted by her psychoanalyst Lucia, sets out to look for her mother. Throughout the novel, the narrative is fuelled by close oral testimonies, public archival materials, research into people who died in the same provincial area in the same years and were erased in the same way by the suffocating bourgeois family fabric, and it expands to confront a public, state, and historical forgetting that the narrator revisits through various media (a Facebook group that brings together children orphaned by AIDS, a Netflix documentary on a 'community' of recovery for people with substance use, and contemporary news events).

In the realm of contemporary Italian literature, the themes of drug use linked to AIDS remain largely marginal, were it not for the contributions of authors such as Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Patrizia Vicinelli, Dario Bellezza and others, who have been rediscovered through recent studies, including a critical anthology on HIV/AIDS fiction in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s (Starita, 2026). Some of the more contemporary narratives are situated within what Marianne Hirsch termed 'the generation of postmemory' (2012) – referring to the experience of the second generations of the Second World War and the Holocaust – identifying in postmemory 'the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences

2 All translations from Italian are ours.

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were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch, 2012, p.5).

In this sense, a possible hypotext to Scomazzon's book is represented by Vanessa Roghi's memoir about heroin use, *Piccola Città. Una storia comune di Eroina* (Roghi, 2018), in which she recounts, beginning with the decade preceding that discussed in this article – the 1970s – a family history of heroin use, primarily linked to the memory of her father, against the backdrop of a provincial setting, showing many similarities not only in terms of the narrative situation but also in the way time is used within the narrative: just as in Scomazzon's work, the narrative time in *Piccola città* is fragmented and twisted in on itself, traversing the epoch-making transition of the HIV/AIDS crisis – in which society's view of heroin changed irrevocably (Roghi, 2018, p.157) – and continually returning to it. In both books there is 'the intertwining of the sense of self and the historiographical exercise' of a book which, within a significant period of public history, dwells on the use of heroin defined as a 'private' matter (Di Figlia, 2019, p.129): in Roghi's book, according to Di Figlia, ego-histoire and public historiography converge at a methodological level.

This comparison is necessary to discuss the form of *La paura ferisce come un coltello arrugginito*: Scomazzon's book defines itself as a 'memoir' narrated by Giulia, a character in her thirties, a lesbian, in precarious employment, the daughter of Roberta and Andrea, two loving parents who used heroin in the 1980s. The memoir genre, however, in our view, is hybridised with a range of other literary genres (autofiction, essay) in a self-theorising attempt to seek, within public history, recognition and a sense of belonging for a trauma passed off as private, silenced by bourgeois and provincial family narratives, which the narrator continually attempts to reconstruct from a (self-)induced oblivion regarding her mother's life, illness and death. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (2012) is particularly fruitful when considered alongside Scomazzon's book because, in the search for memory surrounding Roberta, the narrator Giulia engages with her mother's trauma via 'symptoms', via 'specific memories' experienced in an embodied manner, as 'the stuff of dreams and nighttime fears' (Hirsch 2012, p.4). Around this void in private memory and public history for individuals such as Roberta, Scomazzon's book presents an affective counter-archive.

La paura ferisce come un coltello arrugginito utilizes a hybrid narrative form to investigate around an absence: the memorial void left by the female and feminised (Hogan, 2001; Watkins-Hayes, 2019) experience of the HIV epidemic. Aware of the impossibility of repairing this political, affective, historical fracture, the author attempts to frame and read her mother's subjectivity in the familiar, local and national neglect. Rather than reconstructing a coherent

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biography of Roberta or extracting a sociological case history, Scomazzon attends to hesitation, contradiction, and narrative displacement: moments when the text circles an event it cannot fully narrate, memory appears only indirectly and shame interrupts testimony. These glimpses constitute the primary material of our reading. The author investigates a historiographical void surrounding female, working-class, and provincial experiences of heroin use and AIDS in early 1990s Italy. The analysis explores the stigma and moral 'guilt' attached not only to the death of a young mother from AIDS, but also to the bourgeois rejection of the heroin-using subject as an even more disposable and forgettable body – one denied the possibility of claiming visibility or 'pride' in ways more readily available to queer subjects.

Dialogue I: Impossible subjects

Giu Sbaffi: HIV forged new filiation epistemologies through family ruptures, enabling alternative kinship and mutual aid. Women's experiences – fragmented and archivally invisible – created affective genealogies of care (Hogan, 2001). The narrator Giulia's ghostly maternal relationship interrogates the mother-archive connection, positioning herself within maternal loss and Italy's HIV/AIDS memorial void. In Scomazzon's novel, Roberta's archive is submerged and blurred, the author struggles to reconstruct it. By 'archive' we refer to at least two levels of meaning: on one hand, there is the abstract repository of personal and family memory, which Giulia, the narrator, seeks to delve into, to uncover memories of her mother and her illness; 'time and emotions disquiet and obfuscate' (Borghi, 2015, p.19) the oral accounts of family members and friends and the material traces Giulia finds in her childhood home (letters, photographs, drawings etc.). On the other hand, there is the public archive (hospital records, local news reports, etc.) in which Giulia searches for information about her mother, sometimes failing to find her (Scomazzon, 2023, p.71), but instead discovering cases very similar to hers, from a generation that used heroin in the 1980s, silenced and forgotten by respectively the bourgeois family and the state due to its provincial location.

Graziana Marziliano: The book stages a double movement towards Roberta's archive: at her therapist's urging, Scomazzon undertakes a search for truth to locate a subject in whom to mirror herself and make sense of her suffering. An important narrative device in this process is the family photographs that appear in the novel: indeed, the photo of Roberta's face features on the book's cover. Two of the photographs described mark a narrative turning point in

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the novel: the first is a photograph of Roberta in her twenties at a factory demonstration, 'waving a red flag with a sullen expression' (Scomazzon, 2023, p.102); the other is a photo of her mother during an advanced stage of her illness, with sunken cheeks and wearing a wig (p. 108). These two images of her mother are juxtaposed by the narrator as a progressive shift from class anger to resignation (p.102). Reflecting on the photographs of her mother, Giulia, the narrator, engages in what Marianne Hirsch calls a 'very private kind of self-portrait', revealing, unexpectedly, the most intimate and hidden aspects of herself. The photograph of her mother provokes 'a moment of self-recognition which, in the process of viewing, becomes a process of self-discovery, a discovery of a self-in-relation' (Hirsch, 1997, p.2). At the same time, the narrator asserts a distancing will that both recognizes resemblance to her mother– and rejects identification with that inherited likeness (Scomazzon, 2023, p.142).

> Somewhere I memorised the image (the feeling and the metaphor) of my mother's clenched teeth and this image has become a repeated gesture that reveals my difficulty in being in the world (Scomazzon, 2023, p.67).

In the narrative attempt to delve into bodily memory in search of recollections of her forgotten mother, Scomazzon appears to make use of the structures of postmemory, understood as: 'of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove' (Hirsch, 2012, p.6). This structure of postmemory looks for a missing genealogy, an absent link, when Giulia forcibly forgot the eight years Roberta and she shared. Then after many years she tries to reconstruct it, but in the end this ghostly subject continues to come closer and pull away continuously. The reconstruction will never reach the subject, it has its failures: there are projections of hopes onto her mother's subject that Giulia seeks through her archive to find the truth about her own self, a meaning (Di Cori, 2014). 'At thirty-four the future seems blunt and ungraspable' (Scomazzon, 2023, p.64): the narrator parallels her mother's fears with her own–precarity, alienation and thwarted ageing – highlighting generational discontinuity and existential uncertainty.

> What I can and must do is try to see her for who she really was: a heroin user, a factory worker, an AIDS sufferer, a loving mother. No one, apart from me, can or wants to make the effort to hold Roberta's two halves together, and perhaps that is why – because she is split in two – her image has faded too quickly to become a memory capable of filling the void of my grief, of my father's and my uncle's grief. (Scomazzon, 2023, p.102)

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Giu Sbaffi: Roberta can be described as an 'impossible subject of history' (Loraux, 1988): meaning subjects that fail to be fully reconstructed or represented. On the one hand, there is the erased historical figure of the heroin user who dies of AIDS, who never has the chance to grow up and remains frozen in time, in a time and a life that predate the narrator's consciousness and gets lost in public history. On the other hand, this figure is superimposed upon that of the working-class mother. From this viewpoint, Roberta is located within a strongly reactionary political discourse that wanted to destroy the youth protagonism of the 1960s – 70s, which had experimented with filiation, inheritance, familism (Melandri, 1977); and to erase the possibility of generating alternatives to heteropatriarchal society and transmitting them to subsequent generations – by dying at a young age and being politically neglected and repressed.

Dialogue II: A private/public fracture

Graziana Marziliano: There are numerous passages in the text where the tension that runs through the book, namely that between the private and the public spheres, becomes increasingly evident as the narrative progresses. Lacking firsthand memory of her mother's illness, Giulia reconstructs her blurred image through an unexamined local historical archive. For this reason, the memoir frequently turns into an essay, constantly making this mediating step to bridge the fracture between personal, public, and national history. Consequently, numerous public events – such as the infamous statement by Carlo Donat-Cattin, the Italian Health Minister from 1986 to 1989 who famously declared that 'AIDS happens to those who go looking for it' (Donat-Cattin, 1988) – enter the narrative as structural pillars of an individual and collective story that is still being built. They function as a cultural and national archive of repression and stigma – specifically surrounding AIDS and drug addiction – intertwining with the private search to anchor a memory that is simultaneously deeply personal and historically shared. Indeed, the narrator constantly tries to find similar instances of her own story and that of her mother in the public record: Giulia recognizes herself in another orphan of an HIV-positive mother, Valentino Talluto,[3] as he was born in 1984 to a single mother, a former drug user who was HIV-positive and died when he was four years old. Similarly to the

3 Known as 'the HIV spreader', Talluto is currently serving a twenty-four-year prison sentence for aggravated assault after infecting over thirty girls with HIV.

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narrator, Talluto was raised by his grandmother and, according to media reports, he only discovered the cause of his mother's death after he turned eighteen; then, compares her mother to the people who killed themselves in San Patrignano, a residential drug rehabilitation community founded in 1978, near Rimini.[4]

> Here in Italy, there is not even a commemorative plaque to remember the seventeen thousand young people who died in three years, and the others before and after them.' (Scomazzon, 2023, p.58)

This act of recognizing oneself within a collective void serves simultaneously as a construction of meaning – framing HIV as a fragmented, pulverized history – and as a barrier against the individual bewilderment of loss. As if looking into a broken mirror, the author seeks to soothe her mother's absence within the fragments of this larger societal neglect, reading local newspapers for crime news to comprehend the crisis of that era and attempting to compose an image through the words of others.

Giu Sbaffi: Within this scenario, Giulia constructs an antagonistic relationship with the authoritative figure of her grandmother. In the final phase of her grandmother's life, marked by senile dementia, the author reports the following quote: 'You're worse than a whore, you're a lesbian!' (Scomazzon, 2023, p.41). In this sense, the grandmother becomes the materialization of a public as well as a private dimension; she represents a generation that failed to comprehend or welcome the normative rejection that the mother sought through drugs, and which the daughter now enacts through her own queer positioning. The structural parallel between the grandmother's rejection of the protagonist's lesbianism and the hostility she previously directed toward the mother as a drug user, is quite striking. Historically, many lesbians navigated mixed women's groups where they could openly address drug use, illustrating how the shared experience of social rejection became a vital political instrument for women to gather, find one another, and narrate their lives, and reject the normalized constraints of femininity (Liana Borghi Collection, box 112). Scomazzon's book, in attempting to understand and heal these interconnected private fractures, exposes the vast web of other

4 In Italy, public debate about San Patrignano and 1980s drug addiction resurfaced through SanPa – Luci e tenebre di San Patrignano, a Netflix documentary series that revisited the community's history, practices, and controversies (Neri 2020).

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unresolved public fractures that exist in HIV history. Rather than filling a historical void, the text illuminates the infinite cracks running through the history of HIV/AIDS – a history characterized by an absence of 'perfect victims,' monuments, heroes, or martyrs, and one that stubbornly resists being reabsorbed into conventional memorial canons. This echoes with what Ann Cvetkovich argue in her seminal work when she argues for an 'archive of feelings' of HIV/AIDS (2003). This deeply resonates with Scomazzon's memoir, as the author continually appeals to a narrative framework where history is built not through a polished memory, but through the investigation of trauma, emotions, and stigma in marginalized lived experiences.

> To die of AIDS in the first half of the 1990s was to take on guilt.
> (Scomazzon, 2023, p.61)

> Even I wouldn't like to talk about a mother who died like a child who doesn't want to, but for some time I have had the clear feeling that this void that prevents me from finding her plays an important role: AIDS, and with AIDS all the shame and embarrassment about the illness that killed my mother in a general silence so similar to my memory voids.
> (Scomazzon, 2023, p.12)

The narrator recognizes a centrality of AIDS with respect to the memorial void we have been discussing, is there an additional layer to this sense of shame?

Graziana Marziliano: It closely aligns with our discussion regarding the impossible subject: a working-class mother cannot afford complexity. Hailing from a provincial region undergoing rapid deindustrialization, Roberta is profoundly alienated by a lack of future professional and existential prospects produced by the labour crisis (Vacca, 2015). By escaping her prescribed gender mandate through drug use, she is unidentifiable within the social and reproductive parameters of motherhood: heroin use makes bodies unproductive and immediately disposable.

> Sexuality is an integral part of being human even when it deviates from the norm; drugs are not – one cannot be 'proudly' drug-dependent.
> (Scomazzon, 2023, p.59)

There is pride in being queer, but there is no equivalent pride in being a drug user; while Valeria Calvino's essay in the *VIVONO* reader advances

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a political discourse around this intersection, proposing that we look at communities of drug users as political communities that come together, conceive of themselves, and act as such (Calvino, 2025), a shared political consensus on the matter remains entirely absent. For this reason, the history of drug use in the Italian provinces constitutes a story that has yet to be told.

Giu Sbaffi: From this viewpoint, the HIV/AIDS crisis becomes a fundamental analytical lens: starting in the 1980s, the Italian state systematically disinvested in welfare infrastructures, effectively delegating the burden of care back to the family. Consequently, a family unit that rejects the sick, dying body actively contributes to the construction of a profound void – a relational void, a void of meaning, and a systemic rejection of alternative practices and possibilities of being together. This welfare disinvestment forced individuals living with HIV – bodies that had already been structurally rejected – to return home, while simultaneously forcing families to reabsorb subjects who were no longer considered 'houseable' within traditional normative structures (Giorgi, 2024, p.188). This forced return occurred with such devastating speed that it completely shattered the temporalities required for care, death, mourning, and the collective processing of grief.[5]

Conclusion

Reading *La paura ferisce come un coltello arrugginito* dialogically reveals what neither a purely historical nor a purely literary approach could disclose. Rather than filling gaps in the documentation of the Italian epidemic, the novel exposes their persistence. The narrator's struggle to reconstruct her mother's life – amid missing records, conflicting testimonies, scattered traces, and enduring shame – signals not merely archival incompleteness; it maps the locations at which remembrance repeatedly breaks down. The problem is therefore not only the loss of documents, but the recurring points at which certain lives fail to enter shared memory at all.

5 A text that addresses this dynamic, operating as both an autoethnography and a mythobiography of those years, is *Tra le rose e le viole* by Porpora Marcasciano, a historic trans activist from Bologna and president of the MIT (*Movimento Identità Trans*) (Marcasciano 2002).

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Following the text's movements, we found that what interrupts narration is not a lack of information but a problem of intelligibility. Roberta's life becomes difficult to recount not because it is unknown, but because it is overdetermined: drug use, working-class femininity, provinciality, and maternal failure are already socially interpreted through blame. The novel repeatedly circles events it cannot straightforwardly narrate, and our dialogic method treated these hesitations as evidence rather than narrative weakness. In this sense, the opacity we described is not only a literary aesthetic but a historical condition. Marginalised subjects appear in the archive only through accusation, medicalisation, and therefore any attempt to render them fully transparent risks reproducing the same interpretive framework that once erased them.

The collaborative form of our reading clarified another dimension: memory in this text does not operate primarily through testimony or documentation, but through relation. What persists across generations is not factual continuity but affective transmission – gestures, bodily sensations, recurring images, and inherited fears. The daughter does not reconstruct the mother's biography; she inhabits its emotional afterlife. For this reason, the novel does not simply narrate the epidemic; it makes perceptible how HIV/AIDS survives as a structure within kinship, shaping identity, temporality, and the experience of adulthood long after the medical emergency has passed.

Seen from this perspective, the Italian case becomes particularly revealing. Public discourse has often remembered HIV/AIDS through prevention campaigns, medical progress, and stigma reduction, yet these modes of remembrance do not necessarily produce mourning. Where commemoration is absent, families become the primary sites of memory, but families are also spaces of silence, shame, and selective forgetting. The novel shows how welfare retrenchment and moralisation displaced the management of the epidemic onto private households, producing a form of historical memory that remained domestic, fragmented, and frequently unspeakable. The absence of public memorialisation is therefore not accidental but structurally linked to which deaths were considered socially meaningful.

AI statement

In this article, AI was used solely to assist with translation and to refine the syntax of the English text.

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