

*The becoming-sisters of NonUnadiMeno.
Or the role of affects in the local articulation
of a translational feminist movement*

*El devenir-hermanas de NonUnadiMeno. O el rol de los afectos
en la articulación de un movimiento feminista transnacional*

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Resumen

A partir de una investigación etnográfica en Italia, este artículo analiza las formas en que los múltiples usos de la noción de sororidad desempeñan un papel estratégico en la articulación de formas de activismo político dentro del movimiento (trans)feminista contemporáneo de *NonUnadiMeno* (Ni Una Menos). Empíricamente, amplía el enfoque predominante de los estudios sobre las problemáticas implicaciones políticas de la noción como universal unificador a una exploración de las dimensiones complejas, multidimensionales y a menudo conflictivas de su uso en las prácticas cotidianas del movimiento. Más concretamente, se analiza cómo la noción de hermanas/sororidad opera tanto como significante a nivel macro así como en la escala micropolítica de la asamblea semanal. El uso de un enfoque etnográfico contribuye a iluminar el papel, actualmente poco explorado, que la noción de sororidad sigue desempeñando como significante que da forma a los compromisos políticos cotidianos de las militantes. Teóricamente, el artículo contribuye al estudio de cómo las metáforas y el lenguaje operan en la ‘creación del mundo’ de estas activistas transnacionales, en la promoción de su subjetivación colectiva y en la articulación de formas novedosas de cuidado afectivo dentro de la vida social y política del propio movimiento.

Palabras clave: *NonUnadiMeno, sororidad, (trans)feminismo, subjetivación, afectos, devenir-hermanas, etnografía.*

Abstract

Drawing from ethnographic research in Italy, this article discusses the ways in which multiple uses of sisterhood play a strategic role in articulating forms of political activism within the contemporary (trans)feminist movement of *NonUnadiMeno* (No One Less). Empirically, it enlarges scholarship’s prevailing focus on the problematic political implications of *sisterhood* as a unifying universal to an exploration of the complex, multi-layered and often conflicting dimensions of its usage in the movement’s daily practices. More specifically, it discusses how the notion of sisters/sisterhood operates both as a signifier on a macro level and on the micropolitical scale of the weekly assembly. The use of an ethnographic focus contributes to mitigating the currently underexplored role that sisterhood still plays as a signifier that shapes militants’ everyday political commitments. Theoretically, the article contributes to the study of how metaphors and language operate in ‘creating the world’ of these transnational activists, in promoting their collective subjectivation and in articulating novel forms of affective care inside the social and political life of the movement itself.

Keywords: *NonUnadiMeno, sisterhood, (trans)feminism, subjectivation, affects, becoming-sisters, ethnography.*

Starting horizon

Scholarship on contemporary transnational movements has largely focused on how the restructuring of industrial production since the early eighties, the globalization of finance-capital and the liberalization of markets have led to a significant impoverishment of marginalised groups¹. In this scenario, elite-driven economic globalisation² and shifts of economic and political power from local communities and national institutions to large transnational corporations³ have conditioned the emergence of transnational antagonistic movements that have been able to display a complex set of discourses and practices locally and globally and have involved different social actors in the struggles against contemporary capital and for global justice⁴. The new cycle of transnational protests has seen feminist movements as one of the main collective actors primarily because these transformations have accelerated the escalation of violence against women and their collective impoverishment on a global scale as argued by Cavallero and Gago⁵. Since the turn of the century, many scholars have considered the multiple forms in which violence operates in women's everyday lives⁶ and have revealed the ways in which the interplay between gender violence, economic violence and racial violence shapes their lives. At the same time, they have addressed the political responses that transnational feminist movements have been able to articulate locally against such violence and the role that feminist activists have played in promoting new forms of political engagement among large segments of the population everywhere⁷.

¹ An in-depth analysis of the effects of globalization can be found in: Fitzgerald, D. & Waldinger, R., "Transnationalism in question", *American Journal of Sociology*, n° 109(5), 2004, pp. 1177–1195; and della Porta, D. & Tarrow, S., "Transnational Protest and Global Activism", *Social Movements. A Reader*, 2008, pp. 339-348.

² Ashcroft, B., Griffith, G. & Tiffin, H., *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, New York, Routledge, 2000.

³ Bandy, J. & Smith, J., *Coalitions Across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005; Khagram, S., Riker, J. & Sikkink, K., *Transnational Social Movements, Networks and Norms*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

⁴ Keohane, R., *Power and Governance in a Partially Globalized World*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

⁵ Gago, V. & Cavallero, L., *Vive, libere e senza debiti. Una lettura femminista del debito*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2020.

⁶ True, J., *The political economy of violence against women*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; and Alcoff, L.M., "Discourses of Sexual Violence in a Global Framework", *Philosophical Topics*, 37(2), 2009, pp. 123-139.

⁷ Tambe, A. & Thayer, M. (eds.), *Transnational feminist itineraries: situating theory and activist practice*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2021; and Blum, L. & Mickey, E., «Women organized against sexual harassment: pro-

In this article, I wish to contribute –drawing from my multi-situated field-work⁸ research– to existing scholarship on the ways in which sisterhood operates as a signifier in promoting political engagements within transnational feminism discourse and practices in Bologna. Empirically, I address a largely underexplored area of enquiry, that is, how language and metaphors operate as a constitutive dimension of the affective and symbolic praxis of the assembly and structure the life of the transnational feminist movement in this local articulation. It further shows how the multiple usage of *sisterhood* as a signifier plays a role in ‘*constructing*’ the *transnational feminist militant* and provides a fertile ground for women’s political engagement within the movement itself. Theoretically, the article contributes to the study of transnational feminism considering language as an element that structures the praxis of the movement itself⁹ and reveal how its usage fosters a sense of love that promotes collective affective care. Elsewhere, I have suggested that love operates as a psycho-social force that articulates affective entanglements and boosts social mobilization¹⁰. Here, through the analysis of empirical data, I discuss how the signifier *sister(s)* mediates in the constitution of *NonUnadiMeno* and causes the metamorphosis of ever emerging political hostility into productive conflicts that function as the affective ground for the *becoming* of the movement itself. This contribution does not delve into the *changing quality* of the notion of sisterhood¹¹; rather, I focus on the ways in which the term is worked through to promote forms of militancy that articulate different dimensions and scales: the local, the national and the transnational. More precisely, the use of the signifier creates certain affective orientations¹² within the *assembly*¹³ which facilitate the emergence and constitution of a *collective subject* that fights against patriarchal

testing sexual violence on campus, then and now», in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism*, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 245-268.

⁸ George Marcus –in his seminal work “Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995, pp 95-117– defines multi-situated fieldwork as ‘an operationalisation of the feminist slogan of the political as personal... In conducting multi-sited research, one finds oneself with all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments. These conflicts are resolved, perhaps ambivalently, not by taking refuge in being an anthropologist, but in a kind of ethnographer-activist who renegotiates his identities in different places as he learns more about his environment, renegotiating identities in different places as he learns more’ (*Ibid.*, p. 113).

⁹ Eyerman, R. & Jameson, A., *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

¹⁰ Fusco, V., “¿Amor como ideología o fuerza psicosocial?: Hacia una «lectura negriana» de una pasión política”, *Bajo palabra. Revista de filosofía*, 31, 2022, pp. 155-172.

¹¹ Roldan, C., «Sororidad», en *Atlas político de emociones*, Madrid, Trotta, 2024, pp. 94-105.

¹² Mühlhoff, R., «Affective Disposition», in Slaby, J. & von Scheve, C. (eds.), *Affective Societies. Key Concepts*, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 119-129.

¹³ Slaby, J., «Affective Arrangement», in Slaby, J. & von Scheve, C. (eds.), *Affective Societies*, op. cit., pp. 109-118.

domination and seeks to contribute to the emancipation of cis and trans women as a subaltern group.

The multiple uses of the term *sister* open up novel spaces of subjectivation¹⁴ that appeal simultaneously to a shared dimension of *being a woman* and evoke multiple feminist struggles that take place in different geographical and political locations.

The article is structured as follows. First, I outline my methodology, followed by a description of the research context; I delineate briefly the history and evolution of *NonUnadiMeno* ('No one Less') from its emergence as a political force in Argentina to its appearance in the Italian political landscape. In the subsequent session, I present the many folds of the concept of sisterhood and its usage through a close analysis of feminist scholarship. Then, through a couple of vignettes, I foreground the ways in which *sorella/sorellanza* operate to consolidate an affective constellation that fosters bonds between women participating in the political life of *NonUnadiMeno* Bologna. Finally, I analyse how the activists' discourse –centred on the notion of sisterly love as the political passion that dominates the weekly meetings and that best describes their alliance– conceal a constitutive dimension of the assembly which, in its phenomenological expression, reveals itself to be a field of interaction rife with conflicts kept at bay by the *affective labour*¹⁵ displayed by the *sisters* in their political interactions.

Methodology

My research methods consisted of participant observation and in-depth, open-ended interviews with women that take part in the weekly meeting (assembly) and define themselves as activists. As an Italian ciswoman and feminist academic who has been politically active in the 'autonomous' movement¹⁶ in the nineties, I am aware that my positionality has thoroughly shaped this research process¹⁷. Still, theoretical discussions on militant approaches to social movements' research and

¹⁴ Deleuze, G., *Foucault*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988; and Deleuze, G., *La subjetivación. Curso sobre Foucault. Tomo III*, Buenos Aires, Cactus, 2015.

¹⁵ Cantillon S. & Lynch, K., "Affective Equality: Love Matters", *Hypatia*, 32 (1), 2017, pp. 169-186.

¹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article to offer an in depth-analysis of *Autonomia* as an organization born in 1973 and politically active till the end of the decade. However, it is essential to note here that as a political 'laboratory' and part of the grassroots new-left movements of the 70's, its tactics and strategy are still influential in the Italian landscape of extra-parliamentary forces nowadays. For further enquiry into its history, its relationship with the Italian feminist movement and their mutual theoretical debts see: Fusco, V., "Feminismo y «Autonomía». O de las fecundas consecuencias políticas de una tradición hereje", *Azafea: revista de filosofía*, N° 25, 2023, pp. 343-364.

¹⁷ Guber, R., *La etnografía. Método, campo y reflexividad*, Ciudad de México, Siglo XXI Editores, 2022, pp. 45-50.

feminist practices have highlighted how political commitments between researcher and her research subjects –paired with ‘strong reflexivity’¹⁸– resolve some of the shortcomings of a more ‘objectivist approach’¹⁹. Participant observation mainly revolved around four different spaces: a weekly assembly, occasional meetings with other political collectives, biannual national assemblies and a number of informal settings such as walks, workshops and parties. As far as interviews are concerned, I have interviewed 10 activists that attend the weekly assembly. Generally, the activists have completed higher education and a significant number of them are students and postdoctoral researchers. Overall, participants’ age spanned between 21 and 63 years, but most of those I interviewed were in their late 20’s–early 30’s; their narratives largely reflect the experience of being involved in the (trans)feminist global movement from 2015 onwards. The vast majority of the women attending the weekly meeting are hetero-cis women who identify as (trans)feminists. Despite the constant reference to intersectionality as the movement’s frame of reference, it is largely racially homogeneous with the majority of members attending the weekly assembly, being white. Interviews generally took place in bars, lasting between one and three hours. I transcribed them verbatim, pseudonymized them and analysed them thematically. I have discussed my findings with the research participants in informal group events.

NonUnadiMeno Bologna at the intersection of global, national and local articulations.

Ni una Menos is a global movement that was born in Argentina on 3 June 2015 with the femicide of Chiara Páez, a 14-year-old woman murdered by her boyfriend²⁰. Since its first actions in the squares of Buenos Aires, the movement has identified gender violence as a structural dimension of patriarchy, expressed through femicides/lesbocides/transcides (murders of women, lesbians and trans women) in the

¹⁸ Harding, S., «Rethinking Standpoint Theory: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?», in Alcoff, L. & Potter, E. (eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York, Routledge, 1993, 49-82.

¹⁹ There is an extensive bibliography revolving around this epistemological debate. For a first approximation see: Juris, J., «Practicing Militant Ethnography with the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona», in Biddle, E., Graeber, D. & Shukaitis, S. (eds.), *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations//Collective Theorization*, Oakland, AK Press, 2007, pp. 164-176; Du Bois, B., «Passionate scholarship: Notes on values, knowing and method in feminist social science», in *Theories of Women’s Studies*, London, Routledge, 1983, pp. 105-116.

²⁰ Terzian, P., *The Ni Una Menos movement in 21st century Argentina: Combating more than femicide*, Honors Thesis, Dickinson College, 2017.

contemporary neoliberal era²¹. However, the murders of women and transgender people are only one manifestation of many phenomenological effects of a violence that runs deep throughout society and is expressed in the portrayal of bodies in the media, in the devaluation and gaslighting in interpersonal relationships, in micro-aggressions and abuse, in bullying and harassment, in economic and psychological violence and in territorial devastation²². The events in Argentina have unleashed a *tide*²³ of global feminist mobilisation –favoured by the extensive use of social media²⁴– with a transnational dimension, offering a materialist and intersectional perspective²⁵ that determines the political activation of several generations of women through a wide repertoire of actions²⁶. The wave hit Italy a year later, when *NonUnadiMeno Italia* organised the first national meeting in Rome –8 October– and a large march a month later to denounce the brutal murder of a 22-year-old woman –Sara Di Pietrantonio– at the hands of her ex-partner on the outskirts of the capital. The march expressed women’s collective anger at the femicide itself and at the morbid/sexist narratives displayed in national press articles dwelling on the psychosocial character of the killer:

Femicide *IS NOT* the ravings of a sick man, but the tip of an iceberg made of daily macro and micro violence, in the invisibility of homes, inside families, in workplaces, on the streets, in public spaces, in hospitals, schools, universities, on the pages of newspapers and on social networks.²⁷

Recalling the meeting, *NonUnadiMeno* describes it in the following terms: ‘A meeting full of dozens of interventions made the complexity of analysing the phe-

²¹ Gago, V., *La potencia feminista. O il desiderio di cambiare tutto*, Alessandria, Capovolte, 2022.

²² Watts, C. & Zimmerman, C., “Violence against women: global scope and magnitude”, *Lancet* 6, 359(9313), 2002, pp. 1232-1237.

²³ Palmeiro, C., “Ni Una Menos and the Politics of Translation”, *Spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures* 6, 2020, pp. 1-7.

²⁴ Pavan, E. & Mainardi, A., “Striking, marching, tweeting: studying how online networks change together with movements”, *Partecipazione & Conflitto* 11(2), 2018, pp. 394-422.

²⁵ I am talking here about a new perspective on the history of the feminist movement itself. A history that proceeds by constantly defining and re-defining its theoretical concerns and strategies of action. While there is a consensus in feminist historiography to identify equality, difference and sexuality as dominant elements of feminist analysis, in the last two decades the debate has shifted more clearly towards an emphasis on the questions of intersectionality, social reproduction, political economy, racism and gender-based violence: Gago, V., Malo, M. & Cavallero, L. (eds.), *La Internacional Feminista. Luchas en los territorios y contra el neoliberalismo*, Madrid, Traficantes de Sueños, 2020.

²⁶ Bonu, R.G., “Diving into the Tide. Contemporary Feminist Mobilizations and Protests: A Global Perspective”, *AG AboutGender* 11(21), 2022, pp. 68-112.

²⁷ Non Una di Meno, *Abbiamo un piano: Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere*, self-published pamphlet, 2017 [* *emphasis mine*].

nomenon of gender-based violence clear, and led to the articulation of different proposals'²⁸, including the decision to take to the streets the following month with a number of other feminist organizations, from D.i.Re²⁹ to Udi, from the *Io decido* network to feminist and queer Italian collectives³⁰. Thus, the complex assemblage of different political traditions that constituted the first productive platform for the emergence of the movement as a new collective subject in Italy was created³¹. The participation of women in the march was enormous when compared to the previous national events against gender-based violence: 'The first feeling I remember was surprise. We didn't know what to expect because in previous years it had become a ritual date. The impact on the streets, however, was incredible. We were everywhere', a Roman activist recalled recently³².

A few months later, surfing the tide, Bologna became the scenario of a new national assembly:

In February 2017 there was the first assembly in Bologna, which was a first national assembly of *NonUnadiMeno* without a previous march. So, it was a first national assembly where there was a split. That is, it was decided that *NonUnadiMeno* would not be separatist, so Udi and a number of other collectives and associations left. D.i.RE remains, the D.i.RE network remains. It is a network that goes from *Lucha e Siesta* to social centres, T.E.R.F anti-violence centres and sexual difference feminism. [...] I realised that this space was a space where I would be doing a different form of politics than what I was used to, [...] in a broader movement, a broader network that could hold many things [...] so many different ideas, so many different demands, *so many different ways of doing politics*³³.

In other words, the peculiar intersection of different political cultures, rooted in long-standing feminist networks as well as in the social centres that have been reinterpreting the autonomous tradition since the 1990s, turned *NonUnadiMeno* into

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ 'When the first movement was born, *NonUnadiMeno*, both Rome and other cities immediately joined in, associated. *NonUnadiMeno* was a women's movement like many others. We have been working for so many years in the women's movement, specifically one of the main slogans is violence against women. So how could we not associate and collaborate???? and indeed, we were protagonists at the first national demonstration. D.i.RE had already called many national demonstrations against violence, but with *NonUnadiMeno* a new impetus was given' (Fusco, V., "Interview with Emma", June 8th, 2023).

³⁰ Chironi, D., "Generations in the Feminist and LGBT Movements in Italy: The Case of *Non Una Di Meno*", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2019, pp. 1-29.

³¹ In the words of an ex-militant: 'Cultures, political cultures, were mixed together and then reinforced each other in there... bringing with them a capital of reflections' (Fusco, V., "Interview with Vera", November 28th, 2023).

³² Merli, G., "Otto volte 25 Novembre. La sfida di *Non una di Meno* contro la violenza maschile", *Il Manifesto*, November 25th, 2023, p. 23.

³³ Fusco, V., "Interview with Arianna", November 7th, 2023 [* *Emphasis mine*].

a political laboratory. *NonUnadiMeno* –both nationally and in Bologna– effectively became an umbrella for various collectives and associations that had been active at the local level since the forced retreat of antagonism from the public scene at the end of the seventies and the progressive institutionalization and canonization of the feminist movement during the next decade³⁴. Precisely because of this local background and the productive discursive dimension that this diversity generated, Bologna assembly became a point of reference for the national movement and inspired awe among its members: ‘when Bologna spoke, everyone listened’, Fabiana said recently with pride³⁵. Weighing up the conflicts and political clashes that marked the meeting, many of the interviewees agreed that the growth and expansion of the movement had provided an invaluable opportunity to define in detail the salient aspects of the national political positioning and to imagine a collective repertoire of actions that has since become the distinctive signature of *NonUnadiMeno* interventions in the urban and national political landscape. The first national assembly in February was also an important occasion because the activists, working in small commissions, produced a first provisional draft of *Abbiamo un piano: Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne la violenza di genere* (We have a plan: a Feminist plan against male violence over women and gender-violence): a manifesto written from below, from women’s experience(s), that highlights the material conditions and basic needs of women in order to build ways out of male violence. *Il Piano* outlines the movement’s discourse against precarious, intermittent and fragmented forms of contemporary work as well as its position on the exploitative nature of domestic work and unpaid social reproduction.

After reading *Il Piano*, which is the product of the dialogical mediation between local articulations that took place during the national assembly, it becomes clear that *NonUnadiMeno* seeks radical social change (the abolition of capitalist heteropatriarchy) through mass mobilisation, a deep commitment to individual and collective cultural change, the subversion of gender(s) and the collective participation of Italian women and queer/trans subjectivities in the transnational feminist *strike* on 8 March³⁶.

³⁴ della Porta, D., «The Women’s Movement, the Left and the State: Continuities and Changes in the Italian Case», in Banaszak, L.A., Beckwith, K. & Rucht, D. (eds.), *Women’s Movements Facing the Reconfigured State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 48–68.

³⁵ Vera and Tecla confirmed in their interviews the idea that Bologna, due to its peculiar milieu of political experiences, remained a point of reference for most activists throughout the years.

³⁶ The Bologna assembly has defined the 8 of March as ‘a strike against gender-imposed roles, to question a productive and social model that simultaneously discriminates and exploits differences’ (Non Una di Meno, *Abbiamo un piano...*, op. cit.). In the past 8 years the movement has transnationally produced an extensive collection of documents on the political significance of the strike. See: Non Una di Meno, “Transnational Social Strike Platform”, *Power upside down: Women’s global strike*, Spring 2018 Journal; Jacobin Italia, *Scioperi!*, N° 2, Primavera 2019, jacobinitalia.it.

In the next two sections, I will consider the ways in which *sisterhood* has emerged over time as a key concept in feminist scholarship and militancy, and then move on to analyse two episodes that will illustrate how the signifier operates in the micropolitical context of the assembly itself.

The language of *sisterhood*

Maria Lugones³⁷ pointed out how the notion of sisterhood has been central to feminist debates, although the winding history of the concept and its uses proceeds through overlaps, collapses and contradictory metamorphoses, making the myriad variations and traces present in contemporary discourses difficult to understand at first glance³⁸. Some authors have synthesised this evolution by substantially identifying three conceptual articulations: ‘unity and sameness’, ‘identity and diversity’ and ‘difference and fragmentation’³⁹. Radical Anglo/American feminism had understood *sisterhood* as a metaphorical ideal model for promoting a coalition of women to form a compact front –sustained in a common identity– in their political struggles in a male-dominated world and in a masculine social and symbolic universe⁴⁰. In other words, ‘sisterhood emerged [...] as a critical language of alliance, friendship, coalition, collectivity, and liberation based in aspirations for ideals of women’s equality and gender justice that shape a new agenda for feminist internationalism’⁴¹. This approach presupposed a common experience of all women as a social group oppressed in patriarchy –a structure that biopolitically regulates and controls their bodies– despite the fact that some activists and intellectuals questioned its ‘romantic’ language from the start⁴². From the radical perspective, it seemed that being a woman, as a differentiated

³⁷ Lugones, M. & Rosezelle, P.A., «Sisterhood and friendship as feminist models», in Weiss, P. & Friedman, M. (eds.), *Feminism and Community*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1995, pp. 135-146.

³⁸ For a recent overview of its emergence and different uses see: Abrisketa, O.G. & Abrisketa, M.G., “‘It’s Okay, Sister, Your Wolf-Pack Is Here’: Sisterhood as Public Feminism in Spain”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45/4, 2020, pp. 931-953.

³⁹ Dean, J., “Who’s Afraid of Third Wave Feminism?”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11(3), 2009, pp. 334-352; and Hemmings, C., “Telling feminist stories”. *Feminist Theory*, 6(2), 2005, pp. 115-139.

⁴⁰ Morgan, R. (ed.), *Sisterhood is Powerful. An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, New York, Vintage Book, 1970; Morgan, R. (Ed.), *Sisterhood is global. The International Women’s Movement Anthology*, New York, Feminist Press, 1996; and, more recently, Morgan, R. (ed.), *Sisterhood is forever: The Women’s Anthology for a New Millennium*, New York, Washington Square Press, 2003.

⁴¹ Mitra, D., “Sisterhood is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now”, *The South Quarterly* 122:3, 2023, pp. 431-452.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

ontology of the human, was the only condition for being a *sister* in the context of collective political activation. In fact, in Lugones' terms, 'white feminists have not rethought or reconstructed the concept of sisterhood. They adopted it 'as is' and extended it metaphorically to the relation among all women, not just biological sisters'⁴³. To a closer examination, the very notion was embedded in the colonial Anglo-American imaginary that used familiar metaphors to enforce racial domination and gender policing⁴⁴. The radical feminist movement was forced to rethink the notion of sisterhood in the light of the voice of 'the others of the Other' which accused *sister* to be a very problematic concept for a number of reasons. First of all, because it has made invisible hierarchical structures that dominated the social landscape in which women were inserted and, secondly, because it had originated as an imaginary practice in a precise cultural setting that did not offered a universal equality model in other geo/cultural locations⁴⁵. Moreover, it tented to portray women as a homogeneous group making heterosexuality invisible⁴⁶, thus denying different sexual orientations a central role in defining women's desires and subjective political positions in the movement itself. In bell hooks' words:

The vision of sisterhood evoked by women's liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression. Needless to say, it was primarily white bourgeois women, both liberal and radical in outlook, who professed belief in the notion of common oppression. The idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform that disguised and mystified the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality⁴⁷.

Along these lines, black feminism and women of colour –since Truth's discourse in 1843– have emphasised that if sexual difference is a social issue then women are in materially different positions in relation to the social power that capitalism and patriarchy distribute on the basis of skin colour and property. This new focus on the specificity of some groups of women, whose bodies are marked by multiple differences, creates a deep fault line in the compactness of this ideal union between all. The voice of the others in feminism imposes a shift from 'who is the sister?' to 'how can we be sisters?'. That is, from the recognition

⁴³ Lugones, M. & Rosezelle, P.A., "Sisterhood and friendship as feminist models", op. cit., pp. 136.

⁴⁴ Mitra, D., "Sisterhood is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now", op. cit.

⁴⁵ Nzegwu, N., «O Africa: Gender Imperialism in Academia», in Oyewumi, O. (ed.), *African Women and feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, Trenton, African World Press, 1997, pp. 99-157.

⁴⁶ Rich, A., "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Journal of Women's History* 15 (3), 2003, pp. 11-48.

⁴⁷ hooks, B., "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women", *Feminist Review*, 23, 1986, pp. 125-138, *loc. cit.* p. 127.

of ontology as the core of a political project of emancipation to the practices that the movement must articulate in order for a new collective power to emerge. It is important to highlight how Woman as a unitary subject has functioned as the backdrop to white women's theorising and as the site from which sisterhood as a political metaphor has emerged. Likewise, black feminist critique, decolonial theory and intersectionality have allowed for the emergence of new political commitments and provided a fertile background for transnational struggles to cut across different contexts. Indeed, sisterhood could no longer be conceived as a recognition of the given, of women as Other in their generality, but could only emerge through a process of *collective political subjectivation*⁴⁸ in which women could come together when the divisions created by racism, sexism and class affiliation are politically confronted in order to move from power to mutual care⁴⁹ and to establish forms of solidarity across social differences and geographies⁵⁰. In the historical debate on sisterhood, the assertion of unity and the theoretical recognition of race and class mediations in women's experiences proved to be mutually exclusive. The dispute generated a progressive corrosion of sisterhood as a signifier capable of evoking the power of unity, and as an ideal impossible to achieve precisely because of our multiple subjective positions. Nonetheless, empirical research shows how both declinations constitute the cosmological dimension of the cognitive praxis of the *NonUnadiMeno* movement: both are pre-existing materials that are creatively assembled in the assembly's discursive practices and as devices for orienting the constitution of its political identity⁵¹. I suggest that the use of kinship metaphors is due to the persistence of certain discursive positions that dominated Italian feminism in the nineties and to the renewed strength of radical feminist in contemporary feminist discussions due to the dramatic emergence of violence against women as a distinctive trait of contemporary capital. Let us recall how the theory of sexual difference in Italy made the mother/daughter relationship one of the constitutive elements of its reflection. It is also essential to highlight the hegemonic position that sexual difference feminism has achieved in Italy through its own canonisation and institutionalisation, saturating the collective imaginary and marginalising the theoretical contribution of other feminist approaches that were strongly influenced by the workerist tradition and its symbols, clearly more hostile to kinship metaphors. Empirical

⁴⁸ Foucault, M., *History of Sexuality II: the Use of Pleasure*, New York, Vintage Books, 1990.

⁴⁹ hooks, b., "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women", op. cit.

⁵⁰ Mohanty Talpade, C., *Feminism without borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* London, Duke University Press, 2003.

⁵¹ Eyerman, R. & Jameson, A., *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, op. cit.

data findings, presented here through two vignettes⁵², capture and convey the contradictory and antagonistic uses of the signifier *sister* as essential dimensions that structure the affective labour of *NonUnadiMeno* and the collective becoming of the movement itself.

Vignette 1 – Sorella io ti credo! (Sister, I believe you!)

At Vanilla, a coffee shop in Via del Pratello, Bologna

The first time I heard about the *Sorella io ti credo!* campaign was when I was having a coffee with Tecla, a fellow active member of the assembly. It was very hot in the Vanilla café, a nice place near my home, so it was empty but the table area was occupied by several groups of screaming youth and I felt a bit uncomfortable. Tecla didn't seem to mind and went on and on about the history of the movement, of which she claimed to be no expert, but was undoubtedly a great enthusiast. This conversation led to a series of references to the many campaigns she had been involved in and their significance. A significance that had that had much to do with the ability to appeal to women's togetherness and to promote the unity that early feminism identified as the basis for collective emancipation.

The slogan 'Sorella io ti credo!' is probably a way of making women feel that they are not alone, women who suffer violence, women who find themselves in difficult situations but don't know where to turn. It's a way of breaking the distance [...] Obviously, we don't know each other, but here [...] we are allies. It's important that you know that, I mean, you don't have to be a blood sister to be an ally [...] because what we know unites us. [...] it has to be clear that we want to overcome personal distance, right? On the other hand, who are you? Beyond the question of whether you know me, what happens when you are confronted with violent situations? I can do something, I can understand. [...] That's important [...]. It's also important to know that if you have a problem like that, that there are other comrades who will stay and make noise for you until the matter is resolved [...] Actions are often taken to induce silence, not to dissent, to stay on the sidelines. Stay in your place, don't make any noise, no way!⁵³.

This particular use of the term *sister* discursively constructs and reveals a common condition of women that favours their political unity. A common condition

⁵² Langer, P., "The Research Vignette: Reflexive Writing as Interpretative Representation of Qualitative Inquiry—A Methodological Proposition", *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(9), 2016, pp. 735-744; and also Bloom-Christen, A., & Grunow, H., "What's (in) a Vignette? History, Functions, and Development of an Elusive Ethnographic Sub-genre", *Ethnos*, 2022, pp. 1-19. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2022.2052927>

⁵³ Fusco, V., "Interview with Tecla", June 14th, 2022.

that is mobilised simultaneously in feminist theory and in the discourse of this protagonist as an expression of the same framework of experience. Woman turns into an oppressed class, the target of the very patriarchal violence that north American feminist radicals had originally identified as a key element of gender relations⁵⁴. It is precisely this emphasis on this shared experience as Woman that allows women in different local and national contexts to connect with each other and enable multi-situated forms of political activation. *Sorella io ti credo!* echoes the rallying cry of #niunamenos Argentina, expressing unconditional support for all women who suffer or have suffered violence as a discursive gesture that acknowledges a ‘truth’ that is politically situated beyond facts and against legal masculinist practices that implicitly deny the virulence and pervasiveness of male violence⁵⁵. Although this political stance is not without contradictions, as some of the militants admit⁵⁶, unconditional support is rooted in the certainty of an existential truth that unites women against femicides, lesbocides and transci-des as the epitome of a type of social violence which strikes bodies marked by difference. In this way, transnational events against gender-based violence are conceived and organised, challenging and crossing over borders between states, but also blurring the specificity of each experience to forge a unified social body targeted by gender violence. Similarly, in the #metoo campaign –launched on Twitter by the actress Alyssa Milano two years later– the idea of a shared experience *should* make it possible to denounce sexual harassment as a diffuse and structuring social practice that affects women all over the world. *Should* because the theoretical and political passage between the ‘I’ and the ‘We’ requires precisely to reason against the grain of patriarchal ideology that represents violence as the expression of individual deviant actions related to the psychological make-up of a male subject and avoids confronting its structural nature. In other words, the transformation of the ‘I’ into a ‘we’ requires a collective awareness that gender violence is a problem for all of us and sister(s)/sisterhood provides precisely that linguistic/symbolic plateau from which we can articulate a common strug-

⁵⁴ Whelehan, I., *Modern Feminist Thought. From the Second-Wave to Post-Feminism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

⁵⁵ MacKinnon, C., *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995.

⁵⁶ ‘Sorella io ti credo! ... there is a tension if we don’t know what happened, what is happening!’ These are G. words during the assembly of November, 7th, the day the campaign against gender violence was launched. During the meeting, the militants were discussing how to behave when dealing with women who were contacting *Non una di Meno* to denounce episodes of sexual violence. On the same keynote, Donatella expresses her discomfort when rape cases are reported and militants doubt the veracity of women’s testimony as fabricated: ‘I invite you to reconsider your embrace of macro-narratives!’ referencing the rumour of a supposed abundance of false legal claims and unreliable sources.

gle and transform our personal experiences into a collective one⁵⁷, or to use a radical ditto, the personal into the political. It is precisely this recognition of a collective experiential ground for political actions that lies the strength of the movement and the possibility of shouting out ‘no way’ when occupying a new-born (trans)feminist urban landscape⁵⁸. In other words, sisterhood as a cognitive and affective disposition promotes emancipatory practices in the present as well as a fierce collective opposition to the patriarchal imperative of ‘not dissenting’ and ‘staying in one’s place’⁵⁹. During the national meeting held in Florence in 2023, I identified a fanzine titled ‘*Sorella io ti credo*’ which articles –revolving around the analysis of gender violence–, reinforce the rhetorical and contextual uses I have highlighted above. The signifier *sister* thus functions as an antidote to the overemphasis that feminists have placed on singularity and, consequently, on the fragmented nature of women’s experiences which has effectively undermined the possibility of strategic alliances between them.

Vignette 2 – Struggles between sisters and affective care

Between a street demonstration and Telegram

Sometimes, I am overwhelmed by the number of messages activists exchange when they need to coordinate. I am glad that on several occasions other participants have said the same thing and talked about the need to rethink the ways in which chats and social channels are used. Therefore, I tend not to pay much attention, knowing that whatever comes up will be reported back at the weekly meeting. However, today I was struck by the tone of some of the participants in *Chat Operativa*:

A girl prevented me from speaking and making an intervention by blocking my way, she stood in front of me and shouted and told me to leave, I told her no, that I had the right to express my opinion. She insulted me and told me to shut up that I had not gone

⁵⁷ Philosophy and anthropology have interrogated the role of language as a structuring element of social relations in its constitutive dimension of *world-making*. A ‘constitutive and generative’ dimension as the creator of ‘new purposes, new levels of behaviour, new meanings’ (Taylor, C., *The language animal. The full shape of the human linguistic capacity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 4) and its affective, enactive and embodied role in constituting social reality as a coherent and intelligible unity for social actors (Cf. Guber, R., *La etnografia*, op. cit., p. 43). In other words, the signifier catalyses an embodied dimension of *sorellanza* and helps promoting those political engagements and articulations of struggles bell hooks advocated in her *Sisterhood*.

⁵⁸ Bonu Rosenkranz, G., Castelli, F. & Olcuire, S., *Bruci la città. Generi, transfemminismi e spazio urbano*. Firenze, Edifir Edizioni, 2023.

⁵⁹ Fusco, V., “Interview with Tecla”, op. cit.

to Palestine and that I was ignorant and knew nothing. Yesterday there was only hatred in the square.⁶⁰

In the message, Chiara refers to a conflict that some of us witnessed during a demonstration called by activists of a pro-Palestinian organisation and many allies. There had been an escalation of shouts and expressions of indignation in the square when the newcomer shouted ‘ Hamas murderers’ and was subsequently denied access to the microphone. Given her increasingly outraged reactions, she was forcibly removed while continuing to shout at the top of her voice ‘you are all murderers’. These events created a particular emotional short-circuit between the activists, which was clearly manifested in the same digital conversation and in the assembly on the following Tuesday. On the one hand, the recognition of what they had collectively shared and the memory of the recent trip to Florence for a national meeting had allowed a bond of intimacy to be established. On the other hand, her presence as a newcomer had promoted a caring disposition and openness of the rest of the group towards her. In fact, in several meetings prior to the incident, activists had stressed the need to welcome newcomers through face to face support in order to ease their transition into the collective space and to make them feel comfortable⁶¹. A sister-as-woman then but also an activist, a ‘sister in our struggles’ (*sorella nella lotta*) that has been taking part in the social and political life of the assembly itself. The collective awareness of Chiara’s participation created an allied front and a boundary between ‘us’ and those to whom affinity is only acknowledged in a strictly ideological and disembodied dimension. Nevertheless, Chiara’s political position did not coincide with that of the rest of the militants, as the messages of the previous days and various conversations in Telegram clearly showed. For *NonUnadiMeno Bologna*, the Hamas attacks had to be understood in the context of the evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not as an isolated nuclear event to be analysed in a historical void. This position made Chiara’s defence problematic and certainly made it impossible to take up the call to speak up for her right to speak, which she considered a democratic right that had to be guaranteed to everyone. A multi-layered conflict arose in the normative and symbolic space of the assembly. To start with, the defence of a *sorella nella lotta* clashed with

⁶⁰ *Operational Telegram Chat*, October 12th, 2023.

⁶¹ This aspect was one of the central points of an ‘*Asamblea Metodo*’ that took place in May 2023 in the *Mala Educación*, an occupied allied space. Twelve activists who attended the meeting identified *personal support/accompaniment* as one of the fundamental strategies for broadening participation and countering the idea that the assembly could be a hostile space. Activists reported that the awareness of the hostility and discomfort that sympathizers might experience emerged from conversations with women who no longer came to meetings or stemmed from activists’ own memories.

the appreciation of those who, despite their position at the margins of the assembly, reveal to be ideologically allied on this particular issue. Chiara's positioning forced the militants to visibly pick and choose between the loyalty owed to a sister and the one owed to a normative political positionality that had never being discussed and had been adopted in a rather opaque manner⁶². Moreover, the recognition of Chiara as a *sorella nella lotta* with a divergent political position forced the display of a form of *affective labour* that facilitated *attentive listening* and help to mitigate certain phobic reactions expressed on this occasion by some of the more 'political' activists. I use 'more political' to refer to those who are more likely to be recognised as experts and to enjoy a privileged power position in collective decision-making at the weekly meeting⁶³. However, contrary to Marina's and Fabiana's intolerant approach, on this particular occasion the assembly showed a willingness to manage *the crisis* in a friendly way, so as not to reproduce violent forms of expulsion and conflict avoidance through Chiara's devaluation. 'She's crazy!'; 'She's unbearable!'; 'She's out of her mind' were some of the expressions used to vent the discomfort, but were processed in 'containment' conversations outside the meeting itself. This conflict and its management offered an important example of the real and symbolic boundaries that make possible the life of the assembly as an organism and of the *collective identity work* in the definition of *NonUnadiMeno* as a movement. If we observe the practices that unfolded with Chiara, highlighting the kindness with which the assembly tried to de-escalate a degree of hostility expressed towards her without disqualifying her feelings, thanking her for what she and the assembly had shared, there are at least two other elements to highlight. On the one hand, remembering what the assembly shared, provides for active *affective care* to take place between the activists, despite the fact that some might disagree with the political position expressed by other militants. On the other hand, the collective awareness of structural violence towards women –activated by the use of the signifier sister in its universalising dimension– functions to counter-arrest phobic impulses inside the assembly and promote recognition as a form of symbolic inclusion. Moreover,

⁶² Freeman, J., "The Tyranny of Structurelessness", *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 45 (3 & 4), 2013, pp. 231-246.

⁶³ If in the normative discourse of the militants the assembly appears as a space of equality and absolute horizontality –far removed from the masculinist and authoritarian dynamics of the antagonistic movement as a whole– in the pragmatic dimension of the weekly meetings a different pattern emerges. Positions of authority are conferred to a long history of participation that entitles some subjectivities to a greater capacity to discursively impose certain views and through the display of a certain degree of expertise in the history of the extra-parliamentary left and historical feminism. Paradoxically, those that more clearly criticise the lack of horizontality in the Italian antagonist movements, are the militants more likely to be recognised as experts and to enjoy a privilege position in collective decision making. On this particular issue I found the work of Joe Freeman particularly illuminating.

this crisis forced the emergence of an explicit collective position on both issues; firstly, it made it possible to clarify NudM political position on the Israeli/Palestinian contemporary debate; secondly, militants had to clarify how they wanted to deal with the conflicts that emerge when a sister confronts the assembly on a relevant issue challenging its cosmological vision or its cognitive praxis that is never fully discussed or revealed to newcomers. Thus, the assembly is best understood as a conflictive political space of subjectivation and it is precisely through the resolution of these conflicts that an inside and an outside are constantly redefined and negotiated. Despite the efforts of some activists to encourage a friendly understanding, Chiara stopped participating in the weekly assembly and in the various conversations in the forums. It is through constant fragile alliances, crisis and resolution that mark the collective affective work of becoming-sister that membership is established. In other words, in order for the assembly to exist, to remain alive, it needs a double outside: those structures of power against which we rise up in sisterhood but also the presence of those who do not submit to the collective thinking, the ideological standpoints or the political positions that the assembly has –or believes itself to have– when participating into contemporary debates. The uneasy relationship with Chiara strengthened the assembly itself, and from this perspective, it has played a very important role.

Conclusions

An in-depth exploration of the theoretical debate on contemporary transnationalism confirms that feminist scholarship has focus primarily on the escalation of violence against women and their collective impoverishment on a global scale. While many scholars have highlighted the multiple forms in which violence operates in women's everyday lives and have addressed the political responses that transnational feminist movements have been able to articulate locally and globally, very few have focused their attention on the ways in which language and metaphors play a key role in constructing transnational feminist communities that struggle to oppose the current state of affairs and promote forms of militancy against patriarchal neoliberal domination. In this article, I have contributed to the debate discussing the ways in which multiple uses of sisterhood play a strategic role in articulating forms of political activism within the contemporary feminist and transfeminist movement of *NonUnadiMeno Bologna*. Firstly, I have reconstructed the debate around the notion of sisterhood focusing on its problematic political implications. As a signifier, sisterhood operates to promote a sense of unity and a collective orientation in

the struggles for women's liberation; simultaneously, it obscures several dimensions (class and race) that are essential to understand the articulation of diverse power positions between women on a global, national and local scale. Despite the fact that feminist historiography has represented it as a shift from unity to multiplicity and declare the demise of the concept as well as the decline of sisterhood as a normative ideal, my research reveals how a *pragmatic logic* regulates and codifies the contemporary use of '*sorella/sorella nella lotta*' in the unfold of the collective subjectivation of *NonUnadiMeno* militants. *Sister* is still evoked to establish a transnational community of women that fights against heteropatriarchy and to promote militants' everyday political commitments to the cause of women as a subaltern group. Secondly, *sister* as a signifier operates on a micropolitical level to designate those that take part in the political life of the movement and works to create the common world of the militants while orienting their affective responses towards each other and in relation to others. Thirdly, the notion of sisterhood articulates new forms of *affective care* and guarantees the unity of differences without destroying the feminist political project through the recognition of the fragmentation of experience and without a forced withdrawal into exclusionary identity positions. In other words, *NonUnadiMeno Bologna* combines the local/concrete and the imaginary universal through a long process of negotiation in which the concept plays a key role, as do the dispositions and the structuring function that the word acquires in the sisters' daily interactions. Thus, insignificance of *sorella* reveals itself to be a conceptual and textual/discursive dislocation, an 'effect' of the 'feminist chronology' itself, which is not very sensitive to overlapping and to the multiplicity of uses in its desire to produce periodisation and linear paths. It does not seem bold to assert that within the contemporary transnational feminist and transfeminist Italian movement, the need to claim universalist dispositions with situated experiences is still present and that in the political practice of the movement this contradiction between dimensions and scales is productively resolved through a situated and paradoxical universalism that helps militants to imagine and articulate actions that transcend the narrow borders of local and national boundaries and to overcome or/and include the overwhelming presence of difference.

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