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**Abstract:** This article explores some aspects of the relationship between feminism and queer in Italy today. There are significant areas where these two discursive and political paradigms have established and continue to establish productive, mutually reinforcing conversations and alliances. In other contexts, however, a sheer tension has emerged between the two, rooted in diverging views of the pivotal notion of “sexual difference.” The article sets out to investigate and compare queer and feminist approaches to difference, reflecting critically on a number of scholarly, newspaper and blog articles that inform the current queer-feminist debate in Italy. On the one hand, it asks whether queer theory and activism have been misrepresented in these contexts, and how queer studies have responded to the critiques that have been addressed to queer theory and political practice. On the other hand, it points out how queer discourses have also partly misconstrued the positions and motivations of “sexual difference” feminism, at times relying on a form of linear temporality whereby queer fluidity would replace an “outdated” feminism. The article then looks at instances where a fruitful relationship between queer and feminism is established in academia and activism, especially in the recent development of transfeminism and the national network of *Non una di meno*.

**Keywords:** Queer Theory and Activism, Feminism of Difference, Lesbian Feminism, Temporality, Non una di meno.

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# A View on Queer and Feminism in Italy: Conflicts and Alliances

ALBERICA BAZZONI

“Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.”<sup>1</sup>

“The lines we draw are invitations to cross over.”<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In this article, I explore some aspects of the relationship between feminism and queer in Italy. There are significant areas where these two discursive and political paradigms have established and continue to establish productive, mutually reinforcing conversations and alliances. In other contexts, however, a sheer tension has emerged between the two, rooted in diverging views of the pivotal notion of “sexual difference”. Arguably, the notion of difference is an unavoidable point of discussion that cannot be eluded nor settled through theory but can only be worked through, provisionally and repeatedly, in practice. However, the debate between queer and feminism in Italy has been partly characterized by mutual over-simplifications and misinterpretations, especially, but not only, in blogs and mainstream newspapers, leading to painful fractures. This article sets out to investigate the rhetoric that is used in this confrontation, reflecting critically on a number of scholarly, newspaper and blog articles that inform the current queer-feminist debate in Italy. On the one hand, it asks whether queer theory and activism have been misrepresented in these contexts, and how queer studies can respond and have responded to the critiques that have been addressed to queer theory and political practice. On the other hand, it points out how queer discourses have also partly misconstrued the positions and motivations of “sexual difference” feminism, at times relying on a form of linear temporality whereby an alleged feminist obsession with identity and difference would be superseded by the “modernity” of queer fluidity.

Having identified some key elements of tension between queer and feminism, the article looks at instances where a fruitful relationship between the two is established, in activism and academia. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive map of feminism and queer in Italy, which would be an impractical as well as potentially limiting task, since positions and relationships shift and evolve constantly. Similarly, it is not my ambition to engage with all dimensions involved in the relationship between feminism and queer today. Some conflicts have emerged around specific issues, such as prostitution and sex work, the position of transgender and transsexual rights and people within feminist movements, and the representation of lesbian women within LGBT movements, which operate to unsettle and recast alliances and groups. Particularly divisive is the current conflict around surrogacy (in Italian, *maternità surrogata, gestazione per altri* [GPA], but also *utero in affitto* (womb for rent) in the definition used by its opponents), which has exacerbated the sense of two opposing sides with irreconcilable sets of interests and values.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, a petition against GPA, “No all’utero in affitto!” (No womb for rent!) was launched by the women’s group *Se Non Ora Quando – Libere* (If Not Now, When – Free Women) and publicized by national newspaper *La Repubblica*, creating division within feminist as well as LGBT groups.<sup>4</sup> The controversy was further fueled in 2016 by the document “Lesbiche contro la GPA: nessun

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<sup>1</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 203.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the debate on surrogacy in Italy and a reflection on feminist positions, see Cossutta, “Maternal Relations.”

<sup>4</sup> *Se Non Ora Quando – Libere*, “No all’utero in affitto!”.

regolamento sul corpo delle donne” (Lesbians against GPA: no to any form of control over women’s bodies), signed by lesbian activists and intellectuals and also publicized by *La Repubblica*.<sup>5</sup> In 2017, ArciLesbica Nazionale sparked a debate by releasing a statement against surrogacy, “Utero in affitto. Ai Pride si eviti la propaganda e si promuova un vero confronto” (Womb for rent. Pride demonstrations should avoid propaganda and promote actual debate), addressed primarily to the LGBT community (in that case, the organizer committees of the 2017 Pride demonstrations).<sup>6</sup> Although these issues are not the central focus of this article, it is important to bear them in mind as they form the wider context to the feminist-queer debate and give an idea of its intensity and polarisation.

My interest in the relationship between queer and feminism is both theoretical and personal, as a subject who feels deeply invested in both. In my academic work, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between these two discursive and political positions in my research on the literary works by the Sicilian writer Goliarda Sapienza. A combination of queer and feminist approaches enabled me to interpret texts that seek to escape both weak and strong configurations of identity, and radically oppose any form of essentialism and determinism but also speak from a subaltern position and strive for agency and subjectivity. While queer theory provided me with a frame to read Sapienza’s representation of the performativity of identity, fluid sexuality and a deconstructive stance, feminism was essential in order to account for the position of her narrative voice and characters within patriarchal structures of power. On a more personal level, my position as a non-heterosexual, relatively cis woman places me at the intersection of heteronormative and sexist forms of oppression or exclusion (while leaving me complicit with other privileges). This twofold experience of “sexual difference” marks my double investment in feminist and queer discourses and activism as inseparable from one another, theoretically as much as in my everyday experience of the world. Finally, I participate in a double geographical, linguistic and socio-cultural context, as I was born and raised in Italy but have been living and working between Italy and the UK for many years. My relationship with queer and feminism is therefore informed by conversations going on in both Italian and Anglo-American contexts, continuously attempting to bridge the two, in theory as well as in my everyday life.

### *Fearing Queer, Dismissing Feminism*

In recent years, a number of feminist thinkers, journalists and activists have expressed the view that “gender theory”, to which they link the concept of “queer”, is a neo-liberal and patriarchal project that endangers women. In this respect, Lorenzo Bernini points out that, although they have an entirely different background and set of interests, the views expressed by these authors come close to the Vatican’s representation of “la teoria gender” (gender theory) as a normative project aimed at the forceful denial and obliteration of sexual difference.<sup>7</sup> For example, in her article “Gender e differenza sessuale. Un dibattito in corso,” published in the Catholic journal *Aggiornamenti sociali*, Susy Zanardo starts by affirming that the “teorie del gender” (gender theories) are, today, “largamente maggioritarie” (largely prevailing).<sup>8</sup> The notion of queer, “non-identità” (non-identity) and “non-luogo politico” (political non-place) is, according to Zanardo, the ultimate formulation of gender theory: “*Queer* diventa la posizione estrema di chi non ha posizione, né sesso, né genere, né corpo riconoscibile, né identità come durata e legame: [...] È il trionfo della vulnerabilità e della tentazione all’onnipotenza, dove essere tutto ed essere niente diventano lo

<sup>5</sup> “Lesbiche contro la GPA.” Among the signatories are Teresa de Lauretis and Silvia Federici.

<sup>6</sup> ArciLesbica Nazionale, May 24, 2017, “Utero in affitto.”

<sup>7</sup> See Bernini, “La ‘teoria del gender’.” Bernini has been very active in contrasting the myths surrounding “la teoria gender” in Italy and is currently one of the most influential voices in the context of Italian queer theory. See Bernini, *Apocalissi queer* and *Le teorie queer*.

<sup>8</sup> Zanardo, “Gender e differenza sessuale,” 379.

stesso” (*Queer* becomes the extreme position of a subject who has no position, sex, gender, no recognizable body, no lasting and relational identity. [...] It is the triumph of vulnerability and of the temptation of omnipotence, where being everything and being nothing are the same).<sup>9</sup> While Zanardo acknowledges that gender theories may have a positive impact in that they contribute to unmask prejudices and stereotypes, they are seen as “un orizzonte normativo” (a normative perspective) that would destroy the undeniable facticity of sexed bodies and leave the subject without any sense of self, limits, duration and therefore devoid of political agency.<sup>10</sup> The position expressed by Zanardo resonates with Luisa Muraro’s depiction of gender theory as aimed at the deconstruction and destruction of all differences. In her article, “La differenza sessuale c’è. È dentro di noi,” published in the women’s magazine *La ventisettesima ora*, Muraro links gender theory to an Anglo-American imperialist influence, affirming that it would pursue “un travestitismo generalizzato senza ricerca soggettiva di sé, disegnato dalle mode e funzionale ai rapporti di potere. Insomma: l’insignificanza della differenza e l’indifferenza verso i soggetti in carne e ossa” (A generalized transvestism without a subjective search for the self, determined by fashion and serving the interests of power relationships. In short, the insignificance of difference and the indifference towards flesh and blood subjects).<sup>11</sup> One of the most striking examples of a radically negative representation of queer is offered by journalist Marina Terragni in her defensive and extremely aggressive article “La queer-politics, nuova faccia del patriarcato,” published on her popular blog *MaschileFemminile*.

Il mainstream queer-politics è questo: l’individuo-a può tutto, anzi *deve* potere tutto, il corpo e il sesso con cui nasci sono solo accessori irrilevanti, il e la cis- sono solo gente che non ha ancora capito e preferibilmente deve tacere, il femminismo è di tutti, ma soprattutto dei maschi che se lo sono finalmente preso e ne hanno fatto un dispositivo a proprio uso e consumo, la riproduzione è produzione, pornografia e sex-work sono empowering. Shakerate tutto e ne uscirà una misoginia furiosa, la faccia orribile e metamorfica e invidiosa di un trans-patriarcato in punto di morte. Riconoscelo, sotto queste sembianze accattivanti per la loro apparenza di libertà. Questo mainstream è maschile. È un congegno pensato e agito da uomini, con la collaborazione attiva di molte donne. Negare l’esistenza del corpo conviene soprattutto ai maschi. [...] Il corpo under attack da parte della queer-politics è il corpo femminile. Per lungo tempo le lotte delle donne si sono affiancate alle lotte per i diritti di quelle che venivano chiamate “minoranze sessuali”. Molte di noi – io personalmente, tantissimo – si sono spese perché la vita di questi e fratelli e di queste sorelle fosse buona e giusta. Questo tempo, a quanto pare, è finito. Questa alleanza si è rotta.<sup>12</sup>

Zanardo, Muraro and Terragni speak from very different positions and their views cannot be conflated. However, there are remarkable similarities in their perceptions and accounts of queer (or gender theory, its cognate term). The main elements emerging from these representations of queer are, first, the notion that queer is a normative project and, second, that queer, by erasing sexual differences, is complicit in reproducing the oppression of women. Underlying these views is a palpable sense of fear, a sense of facing a powerful and chameleonic enemy, which – crucially

<sup>9</sup> Zanardo, 384.

<sup>10</sup> Zanardo, 385.

<sup>11</sup> Muraro, “La differenza sessuale c’è.”

<sup>12</sup> Terragni, “La queer-politics.” Mainstream queer-politics is this: individuals can do anything they want; in fact, they *must* be able to do anything they want; the body and the sex with which you were born are just irrelevant accessories; cis-people simply do not understand and should shut up; feminism belongs to everybody, but mostly to men, who have finally appropriated it and turned it into an instrument of their own interests; reproduction is production; pornography and sex work are empowering. Mix all this, and you will obtain a form of furious misogyny, the horrific, metamorphic and rancorous face of a trans-patriarchy on its deathbed. Recognize it, under its seductive appearance of freedom. That mainstream is male. It is a device designed and operated by men, with the active collaboration of many women. Denying the existence of the body benefits pre-eminently men. [...] The body that is under attack by queer-politics is the female body. For a long time, women’s struggles have gone together with the struggles of the so-called “sexual minorities”. Many women – including myself, with determination – have fought for the right of our brothers and sisters to a just and happy life. Apparently, that time is over. That alliance has been broken.

– is not sexual minorities themselves, but patriarchy in disguise. In other words, what these articles voice (with the exception of Zanardo, who in fact also promotes plainly homophobic and transphobic views) is the idea that queer would be a vehicle for other patriarchal and neoliberal interests. Queer is misconstrued by these authors as signalling the normative negation of all differences and all embodied experiences, and this in turn is seen as detrimental to feminist political action. An article in the feminist online magazine *Pasionaria* rightly identifies this fear as “la fobia dell’eliminazione del femminile che verrebbe appiattito ad un maschile camuffato da neutro” (the fear of the elimination of the female, which would be reduced to the male disguised as neuter).<sup>13</sup> By looking at the language employed, in these articles as well as for example in the statements by ArciLesbica Nazionale, this rhetorical attitude seems to derive from being accustomed to inhabiting a position under attack, an attack with which queer would be complicit. Reasons behind this fear can be better understood (which is of course different from validating them) in relation to the history of feminist struggle and its ongoing task to unmask the apparently neuter and universal male subject and to access a space of subjectivity and self-determination for women. While the homo/trans-exclusionary positions that they end up sustaining must be called out and contested, it is not productive to simply equate them with the homo/transphobia that is enforced by subjects who speak from a dominant, reactionary patriarchal position – representatives of the Vatican and the Lega-M5Stelle government coalition, for example.

If some feminists have elected queer as the quintessential incarnation of the evils of patriarchy and neoliberalism, on the other hand queer discourses have sometimes misrepresented or oversimplified feminist positions, constructing them as an outdated, essentialist, and metaphysical (if not mystical) view of the subject “woman”, which would be overcome by queer modernity. An article published in *Gay.it*, a – predominantly male – popular online magazine, and entitled “Il veterofemminismo ha contribuito a creare divisione tra maschile e femminile?” is exemplary of this attitude. Eleonora Luciotto writes,

se fino a dieci, ma forse anche cinque anni fa, il termine “femminista” era circondato da un’aura negativa, in molt\* forse si saranno accort\* che quello che la stessa parola comunica oggi si sta evolvendo verso qualcosa di più positivo, forse condivisibile o addirittura giusto. [...] Per i femminismi più recenti, o “post”, è molto difficile, dopo migliaia di anni di patriarcato, razzismo, fallocentrismo, capire quanto le differenze biologiche tra uomo e donna influiscano sulle diversità esistenti tra i generi. E il dubbio che la cultura patriarcale possa aver causato la maggior parte di queste differenze, con un’educazione centrata sulla differenza tra soggetto (l’uomo) e oggetto (la donna), è forte.

L’idea di identità fluida, dell’esistenza di tanti generi indipendenti dal corpo che li ospita, il bisogno di transitare liberamente da un genere all’altro nel corso della vita o di performare un genere diverso da quello attribuitoci, come l’orientamento sessuale fluido, sono solo alcuni degli aspetti che il veterofemminismo ha oggi difficoltà a fare propri, a differenza dei postfemminismi delle ultime due decadi: forse perché si tratta di bisogni più attuali, connessi alla società liquida nella quale viviamo da non molto.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Phi, “Di trans e vagine”.

<sup>14</sup> Luciotto, “Il veterofemminismo.” While until ten years ago, perhaps even five, the term “feminist” carried negative connotations, many people have probably noticed that today the same word is evolving towards something more positive, that we might agree with or even think is right. [...] After thousands of years of patriarchy, racism and phallogentrism, recent feminisms (or “post-feminisms”) find it difficult to determine to what extent biological differences between men and women influence the differences that exist between the genders, and the suspicion that patriarchal culture, centered on the distinction between subject (man) and object (woman), may in fact have caused most of those differences, is strong. The idea of a fluid identity, the existence of many genders that are independent from the body that hosts them, the need to shift freely from one gender to another in the course of a lifetime or to perform a gender other than the one assigned at birth, the idea of fluid sexuality – these are only some of the aspects that old-fashioned feminism struggles to recognize, differently from the post-feminisms of the last two decades, maybe because those needs are more recent, linked to the liquid society in which we have just started living.

In this passage, and in the rest of the article, “veterofemminismo” (old-fashioned feminism) is presented as a strategy of emancipation that may have been useful in the past, when patriarchal oppression was still at work, but that is no longer suitable for the liquid society in which we live today. In this way, it interprets “fluid identity” as a more modern strategy, centred on the freedom for individuals to perform gender independently of their body. It also implies that an understanding of gender as constructed does not belong to “veterofemminismo” and affirms that “post-feminism” would be more socially acceptable, and therefore better, than “veterofemminismo”.

A more realistic but still partially reductionist portrait of feminism of difference is provided by Busarello in Marco Pustianaz’s collective article “Qualche domanda (sul) queer in Italia”.

Un'altra matrice di resistenza [alla ricezione del queer in Italia], questa volta a partire da un posizionamento sessuato, è stato certamente il femminismo della differenza, che del mimetismo strategico ha fatto uno scudo da alzare contro chiunque mettesse in discussione la centralità del femminile materno e la naturalizzazione dei due sessi-generi.<sup>15</sup>

In this passage Busarello describes feminism of difference as a unified position, strongly committed to essentialism and centred on the maternal element, and sets it against the reception of queer in Italy. In this way, feminism of difference is configured as a conservative force, which stands in the way of a more critical and deconstructive understanding of gender and sexuality, represented by the post-identitarian claims of queer. At the center of these positions is the contested notion of sexual difference, polarized into the opposite risks of essentialism and undifferentiation. I think it is significant to stress that both discourses perceive the other one as occupying a position of power, pushing a normative agenda, and fundamentally in continuity with patriarchal interests – the erasure of sexual difference on the one hand, the naturalization of gender binarism on the other. How accurate are these mutual representations? Is all feminism of difference committed to an essentialist and heteronormative view, oblivious to the constructed feature of identities and sexualities? On the other hand, is queer theory a normative project aiming at the suppression of all differences, in favor of the axiological superiority of an undifferentiated, sexually fluid and disembodied third sex?

### *Which Feminism of Difference?*

There are arguably some strands of feminism of difference that are at odds with deconstructive and inclusive stances (these are clearly the positions that Busarello rightly criticizes), for example when it seeks to ground the essence of womanhood in motherhood, or define what a woman is in normative terms, or deny the experiences and identities of transgender and transsexual people. This is clearly the case for Zanardo, who makes untenable claims such as that the root of “womanhood” lies in pregnancy, or that the only right family is the family formed by the union of a man and a woman.<sup>16</sup> It is also the case for the language used by ArciLesbica Nazionale and its president Cristina Gramolini in defining transgender women as “donne transgender con un pene” (transgender women with a penis) and transgender issues as “le avventure del pisellino” (the

<sup>15</sup> Busarello, “Qualche domanda (sul) queer,” 273. Feminism of difference, speaking from a sexed positioning, has been another element of resistance [against the reception of queer in Italy]. It has turned strategic mimicry into a defense against any attempt to question the centrality of the female maternal element and the naturalization of the two sex-gender model.

It is significant to note that Busarello, who is attentive and precise in his analyses, in a later version of the same text revises his formulation, distinguishing between different versions of feminism of difference, and between the naturalization of sex-gender and the strategic foregrounding of gender difference. See Busarello, *Queer in Italia*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> Zanardo, 387; 385.

adventures of the willy).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it is again the case for the argument used by Muraro to oppose surrogacy, based on a fundamental (essentialized, pre-cultural and a-historical) bond between the newborn and the woman who gives birth.<sup>18</sup>

However, many feminists of difference make no such claims. Conceptually and politically, the core project of feminism of difference is to bring to light the reality of difference as opposed to the illusion of the undifferentiated, unmasking the privilege and the power of the universal Man, *L'Uomo*, which is at the same time Male and Humanity. Queer often depicts feminism as obsessed with an essential difference between male and female, while its pivotal preoccupation, at least in its most politically and philosophically sensitive formulations, is sexual difference as opposed to the illusion of the One, which is the dominant one, and its silencing and oppressive effect on the Others. Feminism has always questioned its own terms, starting with the notion of “woman”. In the Italian context, for example, in *Dalla parte delle bambine / Little Girls* published as early as 1973, Elena Gianini Belotti investigates the social construction of gender, arguing against the possibility of knowing sexual difference prior to its construction.<sup>19</sup> In her founding text, “Per una teoria della differenza sessuale”, Adriana Cavarero does not place the essence of being a woman in her sexual and reproductive organs; on the contrary, she finds that the only “essence” is a condition of “separazione”, “straniamento”, “autostraniamento” (separateness, estrangement, self-estrangement) – that is, in other words, the experience of alienation of the subaltern subjects from the language and culture that produces them, a difference from the dominant subject as well as from normative representation of the subaltern; it is an experience of silence, of a constant “differire” (differing) which cannot be articulated.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Cavarero warns against the illusion of an identity of all women, and understands the subject “woman” in strictly socio-historical terms: “L’essenza che andiamo cercando è allora l’essenza storica di un soggetto reale che vuole comprendersi a partire da sé” (The essence that we are looking for is the historical essence of a concrete subject who seeks to understand itself starting from itself).<sup>21</sup>

Understood in these terms, feminism of difference is primarily concerned with the acknowledgement of a state of inequality and oppression, in which a dominant subject speaks for and constructs others. In response, feminism of difference expresses a strong desire for subjectivity, to dismantle the discursive and material forces that keep reproducing patriarchal structures, and to recuperate the erased dimension of a sexed body. In this call for subjectivity, Cavarero is close to thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Monique Wittig. As Braidotti puts it, “[t]he truth is that you cannot deconstruct a subjectivity that has never been fully granted. [...] In order to herald the death of the subject, you must first have achieved the right to speak as a subject; in order to demystify the metadiscourse, you must first have gained access to a position where you can speak.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Wittig remarks, “I do not know who is going to profit from this abandonment of the oppressed to a trend that will make them more and more powerless, having lost the faculty of being subjects even before having gained it. I would say that we can renounce only what we have.”<sup>23</sup> In their approach to deconstruction, thinkers such as Braidotti, Cavarero and Wittig take into consideration different positionalities with respect to power. They qualify theories and practices, including deconstruction itself, as endowed with different power-values, because descriptions of identities are themselves political and “not all identity politics are created equal.”<sup>24</sup> Their perspective allies with minorities’ emancipatory struggles and instrumental identity politics, while nonetheless remaining radically anti-essentialist. What feminism of difference

<sup>17</sup> ArciLesbica Nazionale, August 9, 2017, “II MIT - Movimento Identità Trans”; Gramolini, “Cis, terf, favolosa.” The article has been removed.

<sup>18</sup> Muraro, *L’anima del corpo*. See Cossutta, “Maternal Relations,” 217.

<sup>19</sup> Gianini Belotti, *Dalla parte delle bambine*. The book was soon translated into English. See Gianini Belotti, *Little Girls*.

<sup>20</sup> Cavarero, “Per una teoria della differenza sessuale,” 58; 55; 54.

<sup>21</sup> Cavarero, 34; 60.

<sup>22</sup> Braidotti, *Nuovi soggetti nomadi*, 136.

<sup>23</sup> Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Dyson, *Pride*, 54.

enables is a recognition of the fact that the position of women is not symmetrical to that of men in relation to the deconstruction of identity, and that if these different positionalities are not taken into account, “we run the risk of a leap from the Neolithic age to the post-industrial era, skipping the most important stage – the process of modernisation as our becoming subjects.”<sup>25</sup>

These thinkers exemplify a feminist tradition of thought that is not reducible to a commitment to essentialism, but that still works through sexual difference as a relevant category through which to read social reality and intervene to transform it. In this sense, they express a resistance to a tendency that is present in some queer formulations to consider sexual difference as an outdated category of discourse and analysis. In her article “Feminism’s Queer Theory”, Annamarie Jagose convincingly argues that in the Anglo-American context “queer theory’s advocacy of performativity, anti-normativity and cross-gendered identification too often takes feminism as its straight guy, representing it as committed to stable and restrictive understandings of gender – and particularly femininity – that must be overcome in the name of political resistance or transgression.”<sup>26</sup> In Biddy Martin’s words, “anti-foundationalist celebrations of queerness rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection to a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the female body.”<sup>27</sup>

The idea that feminism is stuck with essentialist identity politics that queer would make redundant is also questioned from another perspective, that of lesbian feminism. It is not by chance, I believe, that many efforts to create a continuity between queer and feminism come from the intersectional positioning of the lesbian subject, exposed as it is to heteronormative and sexist forms of power that are inseparable from one another. Likewise, it is not by chance that the earliest and most insightful formulations of intersectionality and the value of differences come from black feminism.<sup>28</sup> As Clare Farquhar points out, “the positionality of ‘lesbian’ offers a potent site from which to interrogate the social, cultural and political interlocutors of gender and sexuality.”<sup>29</sup> The argument is political as much as methodological. Where Jagose acknowledges “the difficulty, even the impossibility, of distinguishing decisively between feminist and queer critical traditions,” in “Against Proper Objects” and the chapter “The End of Sexual Difference?” in *Undoing Gender*, Butler provides a compelling argument against making “queer studies into a methodology distinct from feminism,” as if sexuality and gender could be kept fully distinct.<sup>30</sup> With a theoretical argument that resonates with Wittig’s and Braidotti’s points about women’s struggle for subjectivity, Farquhar notes how “[l]esbians have more to lose than most in relinquishing a visible ‘lesbian’ position before it has fully emerged”.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in *Living a Lesbian Life* Sarah Ahmed notes that in some queer literatures the lesbian is turned into an abject figure that would need to be superseded in order to embrace the more joyful and freer possibilities of queer, to which she objects resolutely, affirming that “[l]esbians are not a step on a path that leads in a queer direction.”<sup>32</sup> In Italy, this perspective is well represented by the work of Liana Borghi, who has been at the forefront of the development of queer in Italy, weaving together feminism, queer and lesbianism, theory and practice. Reflecting on narratives of temporality, Borghi observes how “nella temporalità globalizzata i fusi orari sono tanti, e le politiche identitarie convivono con altre forme di essenzialismo strategico” (in a globalized temporality there are many time zones and identity politics coexists with other forms of strategic essentialism).<sup>33</sup> In these formulations of feminism of difference and lesbian feminism, what is contested is the notion of a “succession

<sup>25</sup> Braidotti, 160.

<sup>26</sup> Jagose, “Feminism’s Queer Theory,” 165.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, *Femininity Played Straight*, 71-2.

<sup>28</sup> On the contribution of black lesbian feminism to the development of the concept of “intersectionality”, see Carastathis, “Intersectionality in Feminist Theory.”

<sup>29</sup> Farquhar, “Assume the Lesbian Position,” 131.

<sup>30</sup> Jagose, 172; Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 184; “Against Proper Objects.”

<sup>31</sup> Farquhar, “‘Lesbian’ in a Post-Lesbian World?”, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 223.

<sup>33</sup> Liana Borghi, *Queer in Italia*, 49.

narrative” in which feminism would be the “before” and queer the “after.”<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, temporalities overlap and span in different directions, the recognition of existing differences and the strategic use of identity coexist with ongoing processes of redefinition and undoing of the same identities.

### *Which Queer?*

If, as we have seen, some strands of feminism of difference align with conservative essentialism, some formulations of queer run the opposite risk of a euphoric undifferentiation, lending themselves to feminist critique. Queer theory has entered Italy through various channels, and, as happened in the US before, it has also reached a wider audience in a “popular” form. This version of queer asserts a sort of omnipotence of queer subjects with respect to their gender identities, and the overcoming of all differences through the valorisation of individuality. Because of this irrelevance of the subject’s starting position in the world, social groups are replaced with the absolute dominance of the individual, which so closely resembles the disembodied and non-relational notion of the liberal subject. Structural inequalities and privilege become invisible, diluted by a view that centres only on the person’s free choice and free will. Even when it is more consciously political, as a theoretical move aimed at the destabilisation of all identities, queer can be pushed to losing its grip on existing social differences and power differentials. For example, Lo Iacono sees one potential development of queer as a post-subject form of politics:

Queer [...] destituisce il processo di identificazione. Queer potrebbe essere un modo per pensare alla politica *dopo* il soggetto. In Italia ciò potrebbe significare la creazione di un movimento politico non caratterizzato sulla sessualità, ma sulla libertà di autodeterminarsi in quanto individuo, sulla valorizzazione dell’unicità personale.<sup>35</sup>

The risk of making structural inequalities invisible is particularly real when it comes to gender difference. There is an observable tendency in queer theories to overlook the fact that the male/female binary is not only coercive as a binary, but also as a hierarchical relation. While the hetero/non-hetero hierarchy is very clear in the queer discourse on heteronormativity and homonormativity, the male/female hierarchy is much less in focus, and sometimes is entirely forgotten. An example of this tendency is a seminar on Italian queer that took place in the UK in 2013.<sup>36</sup> The workshop involved all male speakers, all discussing gay men’s experiences of sexuality and space. While the contributions were doubtlessly valuable in themselves, there was a complete lack of understanding and acknowledgment of the partiality of the positions represented, and of the fact that the experiences and cultural manifestations there analysed were specific to gay men and could not be mapped onto lesbians’ positions and experiences. As Restituta Castiello explains, “[s]e non rende conto della propria parzialità la conoscenza è irresponsabile perché avoca a sé la pre-condizione di provenire da corpi non visibili. [...] Nessun posizionamento è mai completamente sottratto alle dinamiche di potere” (If knowledge does not account for its own partiality it is irresponsible, in that it assumes the pre-condition of coming from bodies that are not visible. [...] No position is ever completely exempt from the dynamics of power).<sup>37</sup> In that context, what had been reproduced was the usual mechanism of male universalism, but this was hidden behind the all-encompassing, post-identitarian notion of queer. What was lost in the

<sup>34</sup> Jagose, 160.

<sup>35</sup> Lo Iacono, “Qualche domanda (sul) queer,” 274-5. Queer [...] dismisses the process of identification. Queer could be a way of thinking about politics *after* the subject. In Italy, this could mean the creation of a political movement that is based on sexuality, but on the freedom of self-determination as an individual, on the valorisation of personal uniqueness.

<sup>36</sup> “Queering Rome Workshop,” University of Warwick, June 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Castiello, “Il piacere di confondere i confini” 34.

process was the specificity of the gaze represented, that of gay men, and the possibility of naming that specificity. In this respect, it is useful to recall Teresa De Lauretis' initial use of the term "queer". "Queer" was used originally as a term which served two rather distinct purposes: on the one hand, it was meant to oppose homonormativity and the reification of identities; on the other, it was meant to challenge sexism and the effacement of difference within the "Gay and Lesbian" label.<sup>38</sup> As Marco Pustianaz explains, "[l]o scopo era riportare al centro del dibattito la questione teorica e politica delle differenze, che è questione cruciale sia per il movimento femminista che per il movimento omosessuale" (The aim was to give new centrality to the theoretical and political issue of differences, which is crucial to both the feminist and homosexual movements).<sup>39</sup>

However, since the early 2000s, when queer gained popularity in Italy, activists and scholars who have engaged with it have manifested doubt and discomfort about the risks and limits of a euphorically post-identity framing of queer. In the collection of essays *Queer in Italia*, edited by Pustianaz, which offers the most diverse and richest view of Italian queer thought to date, many authors lament the wide circulation of a misinformed, fashionable version of queer, referring to "banalizzazione" (trivialization) and "derive acritiche e post-moderno/qualunquiste del queer" (uncritical and post-modern/apolitical drifts of queer),<sup>40</sup> "deriva pseudo-queer estetizzante" (pseudo-queer aestheticizing drift),<sup>41</sup> "performance marginale e pittoresca" (marginal and picturesque performance),<sup>42</sup> "piega festaiola, marketizzata, antipolitica [...], una sorta di comodo e qualunquista 'non mi va di definirmi, non mi piacciono le etichette'" (party-loving, marketized, antipolitical trend [...], a sort of convenient and apolitical "I don't want to define myself, I don't like labels"),<sup>43</sup> "una moda, accademica e non solo" (an academic – and not only academic – fashionable trend).<sup>44</sup> The risks and limits of an uncritically post-identitarian, disembodied interpretation of queer are addressed clearly by Alessia Acquistapace, for example:

Cancellare le differenze di genere con un colpo di spugna, o meglio illudersi di averlo fatto senza fare i conti con la loro storia, con la loro materialità (per quanto storicamente e culturalmente costruita) e con la formidabile resistenza che questa materialità oppone ai colpi di spugna discorsivi, non porta ad altro che a favorire il neutro-maschile, etero o gay che sia.<sup>45</sup>

Italian queer, both as a theory and in its interaction with social movements, has in fact largely incorporated the instances and analytical categories of feminism, and it appears to be most productive when used as a destabilizing and mobilizing vector rather than as a post-identity category. As Ross and Scarparo note, feminism and queer in Italy share a "dentro/fuori" (inside/outside) position with respect to academia and institutions.<sup>46</sup> They are often (and increasingly more often) practiced by the same subjects, in the same spaces, groups and movements. They are solidly linked to a left-wing tradition of activism and thought, which intersects with struggles centred on gender, sexuality, class, race and legal status, and so on.

Il queer italiano che conosco io dai primi anni Novanta [...] è sempre stato politicamente impegnato. [...] quello che io chiamo queer si è innestato bene sulla nostra storia italiana di

<sup>38</sup> de Lauretis, "Queer Theory".

<sup>39</sup> Pustianaz, "Studi queer," 441.

<sup>40</sup> Acquistapace, *Queer in Italia*, 15; 16.

<sup>41</sup> Busarello, *Queer in Italia*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Guazzo, *Queer in Italia*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Polizzi, *Queer in Italia*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Bavaro, *Queer in Italia*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Acquistapace, 16. Easily dismissing gender differences, or rather believing to have left them behind them without working through their history, materiality (although historically and culturally constructed) and the formidable resistance of that materiality against discursive interventions, does nothing but favor the male neuter, whether hetero or gay.

<sup>46</sup> See Ross, Scarparo, "Introduction", 162.

dissenso, disubbidienza e resistenza, sia di sinistra che anarchica. Per me il queer, come il lesbismo, nutre il progetto di un mondo diverso e mi aiuta a cercare e negoziare quello che c'è, o non c'è.<sup>47</sup>

Such an understanding of queer does not place it contrast with feminism; on the contrary, it is configured as “discorso trasversale ai generi e alle soggettività sessuate” (discourse that crosses genders and sexed subjectivities) that incorporates “l'originaria incidenza liberatoria del femminismo” (the original liberating force of feminism).<sup>48</sup> A queer approach of this kind works to enable fluctuating and flexible positions, and favors alliances through a “proliferazione delle differenze” (proliferation of differences).<sup>49</sup> As a critical and deconstructive stance, it continually calls into question the categories we use and their normative power, including sexual difference itself, thus preventing them from becoming reified and exclusionary. This is, to use Lorenzo Bernini's words, “un uso maturo del termine” (a mature use of the term), which criticizes and unsettles identity categories but that does not impose itself as heralding a more modern fluid identity.<sup>50</sup>

### *Queer and Feminism Making Out*

Recently, new forms of activism and theory in Italy have emerged that bring together feminist instances and the anti-identitarian pull of queer.<sup>51</sup> As far as academic research is concerned, for example, over the past few years the two main journals dealing with gender and sexuality in Italy, *About Gender* and *Gender/Sexuality/Italy*, have published significant articles that engage with both feminist and queer issues and approaches, (separately or in combination). The same is true of the activities of *Archivio Queer Italia (AQI)* (Italian Queer Archive). Bridging academic research, activism and performances, *AQI* was born in association with *CUNTemporary*, “organizzazione artistica queer-femminista” (queer-feminist artistic organization), and explores “le diverse intersezioni di queer e femminismi” (the various intersections of queer and feminisms).<sup>52</sup> The two components of the project, as declared in the description of the organization, are simply and pragmatically considered jointly. An important initiative in this sense has been the conference “Studiare il genere e la sessualità nell'università italiana. Genealogie, sfide, prospettive” (Studying gender and sexuality in Italian university. Genealogies, challenges, perspectives), which took place in June 2018 at the University of Verona. Organized by the research centre *Politesse*, the conference brought together many groups and projects that are engaged in the study and teaching of gender and sexuality in Italy, including a wide spectrum of subjects and positions – ranging from the radical feminism of difference of *Diotima* to the queer research centre *CIRQUE*, among many others.<sup>53</sup>

A perspective that is gaining momentum in bringing together feminist and queer instances is that of “transfeminism”.<sup>54</sup> Centred on the rejection of any essentialist view of womanhood and the exclusion of trans women from it, the intersectional dimension of identity, oppression and political struggle, the importance of embodied experiences and a sex positive attitude,

<sup>47</sup> Borghi, 49. The Italian queer I have known since the early '90s [...] has always been politically engaged. [...] What I call queer has integrated well into our Italian history of both left-wing and anarchic dissent, disobedience and resistance. In my view, queer, like lesbianism, fosters the project of a different world and helps me to search for and negotiate what exists and what does not exist.

<sup>48</sup> Di Stefano, *Queer in Italia*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Coco, *Queer in Italia*, 68.

<sup>50</sup> Bernini, “Qualche domanda (sul) queer”, 276.

<sup>51</sup> For an overview of contemporary feminisms in Italy, see Bonomi Romagnoli, *Irriverenti e libere*.

<sup>52</sup> *Archivio Queer Italia*.

<sup>53</sup> “Studiare il genere e la sessualità”. Full program and list of participants are available online.

<sup>54</sup> On transfeminism in Italy, see for example Baldo, “Translating affect, redeeming life.” A recent example of an Italian contribution to transfeminism in between theory and activism is the collective volume *Smagliature digitali*, ed., Cossutta, Greco, Mainardi, Voli.

“transfeminism” started circulating as a term in the early 2000s thanks to activist Emy Koyama’s *Transfeminist Manifesto* and is now adopted by several activist groups in Italy, such as *Laboratorio Smaschieramenti*, *Sommovimento NazioAnale* (NatioAnal Movement), *Cagne sciolte* (Bitches Unleashed), *Consultoria Transfemminista queer* (Queer Transfeminist Clinic), and *Ambrosia* – among others.<sup>55</sup> Looking at activism and the arts, an interesting initiative that “marries” queer and lesbian feminism is the festival *Lesbiche fuorisalone*, taking place in Milan and sponsored by the city’s municipality.<sup>56</sup> Established in 2011, since 2013 the festival has brought together “Lesbian” and “Queer” in its title, *Lesbian and Queer Visions*. Without having to decide between the two terms, and at the same time without reducing them to one another (and actually hinting at their pleasurable combination through the image of a zebra and a unicorn making out), the festival devotes several events to the exploration of issues of gender and sexuality from different perspectives.<sup>57</sup>



Fig. 1: Lesbiche fuorisalone 2017: Lesbian and queer visions.

Possibly the most important example of a fertile combination of queer and feminism is currently the national feminist movement *Non una di meno* (Not One [Woman] Less). The movement, which takes its name from the Argentinian demonstrations *Ni una menos*,<sup>58</sup> started in 2016, when 250.000 people marched in Rome to protest against violence against women; it held its first general assembly at the end of the same year, and now there are over 50 groups all over Italy. In its political program and manifesto, *Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere* (Feminist plan against male violence against women and gender violence), the movement presents itself as inclusive of differences and committed to overcoming the normativity of gender

<sup>55</sup> Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto.” *Smaschieramenti* is a wordplay combining the notion of “unmasking” (privileges, stereotypes) and that of “political fronts”; *Consultoria Transfemminista queer* playfully turns the masculine noun “consultorio” into a feminine noun.

<sup>56</sup> *Lesbiche fuorisalone*, literally “lesbians out of the salon”, refers to the series of fringe events called “Fuorisalone” that take place every year in Milan during Design Week

<sup>57</sup> In the 2017 edition, the program included for example: the presentation of Federico Zappino’s *Il genere tra neoliberalismo e neofondamentalismo*; a debate on “Intersex. Tra pratiche di medicalizzazione e attivismo” (Intersex. Between medicalisation and activism); a workshop “Status Queer. Ranghi e privilegi: un’approssimazione transfemminista alle dinamiche di appartenenza” (Queer status. Hierarchies and privileges. A transfeminist approximation to dynamics of belonging), run by queer artist Slavina; and a debate on “Zebre, unicorni e (fottuti) arcobaleni. Riflessioni collettive sullo stato e le prospettive del movimento LGBTQI” (Zebras, unicorns and (fucking) rainbows. Collective reflections on the present and future of the LGBTQI movement).

<sup>58</sup> In English it has been translated as Not one woman less, not one more death; see, for example: Friedman, Tabbush, “#NiUnaMenos”.

binarism.<sup>59</sup> The title of the manifesto already suggests this inclusive attitude, with its twofold reference to the categories of sexual difference (male violence, women) and a broader understanding of gender (gender violence). The document opens with a reflection on language and makes a precise choice in terms of linguistic markers of gender, opting for the alternate use of both the feminine form, in order to unmask the alleged neutrality of the masculine, and the symbol @, “per segnalare l’irriducibilità e la molteplicità delle nostre differenze” (to highlight our irreducible and multiple differences).<sup>60</sup> The same inclusive approach is reflected in the movement’s logo, which plays with the matryoshka dolls to provide an image where markers of identity such as gender, race and religion are represented in a playful and de-essentialized way.



Fig. 2: Non una di meno, website cover image, 2018.

Through an inclusive and intersectional practice, *Non una di meno* has mobilized “un processo ampio di convergenza tra donne, femministe, transfemministe e queer, soggettività LGBT\*QIA+” (a broad union of feminist, transfeminist and queer women, LGBT\*QIA+ subjectivities), becoming the largest and most significant movement operating on a national scale.<sup>61</sup> While the feminism of difference advocated by Terragni or Muraro is well present and doubtlessly vocal, with all its exclusionary repercussions, it is remarkable that the largest feminist movement currently active in Italy has chosen a completely different path, one that combines the analytical tools and political practices of feminism with the need for an ongoing redefinition of categories of gender and sexuality coming from queer and trans activism.

### *Conclusion: From Difference to Differences*

These projects and movements indicate that an alliance between feminism and queer is not only desirable and possible, but also that it is already practiced. There are of course different positions and interests at stake and conflicts remain that are at times inevitable and even necessary. However, there seems to be a sterile path, one that creates a clear-cut dichotomy between essentialist identities and the dilution of all differences; that sets feminism against queer as having gender and sexuality as their respective “proper objects” of inquiry, as if they were two entirely separate things; finally, it is a path that represents feminism and queer as two successive stages on the linear time of modernity, where queer would supersede feminism.

There is conversely the possibility of a common ground for theory and for political action, in which queer can be a verb – *queering* – rather than an identity, something – a practice, a mode of thinking, an openness to the unexpected – that destabilises identities, makes them mobile and fluid, drawing attention to the social construction of desires and the fragile status of categories. The lessons of feminism continue to call into question social structures, power differentials, the gendered configuration of differences (interlaced with other axes of differentiation), including within the workings of sexual orientation. Feminism works as a knowledge and practice of difference, as a tool to address the dynamics of heterosexist power structures. Queer theory can keep learning from these lessons in “difference”, “positionality” and “situatedness”, if it does not

<sup>59</sup> Non una di meno, “Abbiamo un piano.”

<sup>60</sup> Non una di meno, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Non una di meno, 4.

want to replicate male (and dominant more generally) universalism, and risk turning gender inclusiveness into gender blindness. In a structurally unequal world, a form of indifference to difference reproduces privilege and makes it invisible. It is one thing to aspire to a future as an open possibility, quite another to mistake that future for the present. We do not live in a post-gender world, any more than we live in a post-race or post-class world. We do not need essentialism to recognize that, but we do need “difference”. At the same time, queer, in this sense, can favor a shift from difference to differences, making space for more inclusive and intersectional theories and political practices, posing and reposing the question that Butler asks Braidotti in *Undoing Gender*: “Why can’t the framework for sexual difference itself move beyond binarity into multiplicity?”<sup>62</sup> The experiments and projects currently taking place in Italy, especially in the movement *Non una di meno*, suggest the political potential of the queer-feminist alliance.

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<sup>62</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 197.

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