

**On feminist militancy, collectives, and care:  
an ethnography on a contemporary Italian feminist movement**

Final Thesis for the Research Master Gender Studies

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I consider feminist militancy and organizing as a political and discursive microcosm, an opportunity to enhearten the revolutionary spirit of feminist thinking and envision new and subversive social relations. To do this, I center and deeply engage with the narratives and reflections gathered through interviewing former members of the feminist movement *Non Una Di Meno*. *Non Una Di Meno* is an Italian and transnational feminist organization that was established in 2016 in Rome and currently has multiple chapters across the nation. It was inspired by the Argentinian movement *Ni Una Menos* which was founded in 2015 as a response to overwhelming cases of femicide and gender-based violence. Activists, advocates, militants are to me some of the most fascinating and inspiring subjects as they continuously try to embody what is yet unexisting. The encounters with these feminist activists have shed light on the critical status of today's political militancy and organising in Italy, its challenges and pitfalls, and the need for stronger and more intimate interpersonal connections and practices of care and solidarity that would reflect in practice the type of social relations integral to the society that they are fighting to contrive. Moreover, they provided insight on the mundane and personal dimensions of feminist becoming and resistance, how their identity as feminist militants have shaped and changed their lives and their perceptions of the world, as well as their expectations for the envisioning and adaptation of the feminist principles and objectives in daily life. To expand on the activists' understandings and reflections, this project will engage with pertinent scholarly contributions which will primarily focus on the becoming of the feminist political subject, the connections between militancy and relationality, and worldmaking through care and community building. This entwining between personal reflection and theory is meant to capture the material and ethereal composition of feminist living and thinking, as well as contribute to envisioning new and radical ways of relating and strengthening coalitions in feminist spaces and beyond.

Keywords: Feminist Subjectivity, Feminist Militancy, Relationality, Coalition Building, Care, Labor

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## **Preface:**

### **Retracing my steps**

I cannot pinpoint how it all started, when I knew that this was going to be the final project of this two-year long journey. There is always a need to start at the beginning, to understand where certain pulls and yearnings come from as a way to remember what it felt like the first time it all clicked and a new path opened. Needing, wanting, and feeling a sense of purpose--this could be the roadmap to feminism, and ultimately what is at the heart of this endeavor. This section will try to do just that, trace back to the beginning, and provide a roadmap to how this project came to be and what it took to get here through a stream of consciousness. It could be perceived as obvious and somewhat banal to write about feminism and feminist activism for a Gender Studies Masters thesis. The irony isn't lost on me. Hasn't this been done enough? Didn't these blank pages deserve more, like analyses on racial injustice and systemic oppression, or the capitalist exploitation of marginalized and migrant populations in western countries, or the legacies of colonial domination and the designation of otherness/inhumanity placed on former colonized subjects, or the slow violence on indigenous populations characteristic of the environmental crisis, or the constricting and oppressive cisgender and heteronormative model dictating gender assignments and perpetuating queer and transgender discrimination, or even the infantilization, demonization, and the pathologization of disabled bodies in ableist societies. These are all comprehensive topics in feminist theory and highly pressing matters of concern in today's world.

Why didn't I try to contribute to these important discussions? The time is now, the world is finally looking at feminist theory and its critical insights to disrupt and put an end to all this suffering and wretchedness, and social justice movements are gaining more and more (visible) momentum after what seemed as a protracted dormant phase in which much of the world's ugliness and anguish was swept under the beautiful rug of normalcy. There is a rush, an immediacy, a trepidation for change, of righting wrongs, of doing away with, of calling out, of holding accountable. What could be the motivation behind not jumping right in? What could be the advantage in stopping, pulling up a chair, and having a chat with people about their life as feminist activists? What does this have to do with theory or even social justice? Is this another anthropological attempt at summing up an experience and painting a pretty picture to catalog

away like the myriad of ethnographies clogging up academic archives? Well, call me doctor, or seer, or witch, because I have found out there is something going on that could potentially halt and even drain this powerful wave of insurrection, and I cannot just sit back and watch that happen without calling this one out. As a wave is made out of countless drops of water and the frictional energy of the wind and tides, social change is made out of abounding bodies and spirits constantly and vigorously pushing and punching through the seemingly imperceptible and overwhelming stratosphere of injustice. However, unlike the uncanny and insurmountable power of nature's elements who are unbounded by Man's discourse, frameworks, and institutions, people's bodies and vitality are belted in and are ultimately exhaustible.

Even when motivated by the strongest and ceaseless of desires, such as the desire for liberation and a different and more dignified existence, one's being will feel the impact of continuously going against the structures that hold together their prison. The structures that hold together, forbid the coming apart of a system built on historical and ongoing exploitation and violence and stomp the rupturing growth of new life that could dismantle and take its place. Every being, every performance, every arm raised in protest will be considered a threat and will be met with backlash attempting to lacerate the spirit and recapture the wayward with the ties of uniformity. This lash to the back of resistance inhabits social institutions, such as governmental apparatuses, schools and universities, religious establishments, capitalist ventures and enterprises, global trade, warfare, and development efforts, and ultimately any place and structure that consolidates the livelihood of the heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, and western systemic disposition and composition. This livelihood is kept viable by practices of discipline and compliance, discourse, and the entangled nature of these two measures. Renowned philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault spoke at length about the power of discourse in maintaining the social order. In his inaugural lecture *Orders of Discourse* at the College de France in 1970, Foucault described discourse as being dangerous as it is involved in relations of power (1971). But what is discourse? The pervasiveness and obscurity of this term makes it hard to grasp, as it is with any term that tries to understand, deconstruct, and detangle the thoroughly arranged mess that constitutes the system we live in. In order to start this untying and rearranging, we must reach out to our closest resources. In my case, I reached out to my bilingualism. Being bilingual in a romance language, namely Italian, helped me to see the word *discourse* (*discours* in its original French translation, *discorso* in Italian) as being both a 'what' and a 'way' that 'is' and that 'does' knowledge and worlding through language. Discourse is described by Foucault as being a

historically contingent social construct embedded in relations of power which produces knowledge, meaning, and the objects of which it speaks.

Thus, discourse is not just an articulation of what is, but it *is* what is, and due to its systematic nature it has material effects on who we are, how we relate to one another and ‘others’, how we perceive nature and ourselves, how everything is organized, and what is valued and rejected. Because of its relation with power structures, discourse comes with constraints and exclusions, meaning that language in any given society won’t be boundless but it will have limitations on what can be talked about, who can talk about what, what and who is valued, what is highly discouraged, and who must be restrained. Finally, what makes this system of discourse so powerful, is its pervasiveness, meaning that because it produces and re/produces everything, there is nothing outside of it and all becomes a function of it. Thus in sum, for the purposes of knowledge and attitude production, *what* gets produced, *who* produces it, and *how* it gets produced, cannot escape the domain of discourse/language and the social system embedded in relations of power. Having said this, it’s not hard to imagine that the knowledge that gets passed down as legitimate is not legitimate because of some natural or godly reason, but because it is part of a power-*full* system of historically and socially inscribed values and sets of hierarchies.

Why is discourse an important starting point for the introduction to this project? Simply put, one cannot talk about resistance without recognizing what is being resisted. If discourse dominates knowledge production, which breathes life into what we understand is existing and upholds enduring power relations, it cannot be considered outside of the realm of study of resistance. Even though resistance and activism are oppositional to the social order, they are still very much in the seemingly never ending process of unlearning, undoing, unbeing, unreproducing discourse. This brings us back to the bodies and spirits that make up the wave of revolution. These are the subjects that embody and energize the insurrectional wave described previously, and are going to be the protagonists of this project. Activists, advocates, militants are to me some of the most fascinating and inspiring subjects as they continuously try to embody what is yet unexisting. On a daily basis, they oppose what is expected by them by unlearning and learning new ways of being and becoming, by refusing to perpetuate hegemonic hierarchies and binaries, by calling out and holding others and themselves accountable, and by promoting a fairer, kinder, and more supportive approach towards social relations. All these attempts are part of the struggle to not only go against and spread awareness on what is corrosive and corruptive in this world, but to also bring forth new ways of living, thinking, relating, and being that are oppositional to discourse and social order. Simply put, they are practicing

and summoning a new and better world. However, going against the system comes with a price and its traps.

When I first started working on resistance and feminist movements, I was fascinated by and interested in understanding the daily life and work of feminist activists and how they were able to balance their activism with their personal life. To do this, I wrote a paper “Splitting Bubbles” in one of my Master’s classes in which I elaborated on an interview I conducted with a member of the transnational feminist movement Non Una di Meno. What came out of our conversation was much more than I had expected. Before going into the interview, I was expecting a story surrounding the challenges of fully committing to a social cause and at the same time having to hold down a job that wasn’t necessarily in line with my interviewee’s political beliefs. I took for granted that the sociopolitical and professional context in which the story took place was the starting point, that my interviewee’s work was the main cause of tension and the angle I wanted to approach for this project. My interviewee made me realize that there was a lot more going on than that. Her reflections on the work she put in for the feminist movement NUDM gave a more nuanced picture that involved a great deal of sacrifice, long hours, emotional commitment and strain, and most importantly it generated a sense of what me and my interviewee defined as “splitness” that at times required her to put aside her personal and professional life to give way to the pursuit of social change. Needless to say, this interview opened up an entirely different discussion, one that surrounded and centered on the politics, ethics, and relational practices of the movement. More specifically, instead of focusing on how the “outside world” was weakening and undermining the movement, I decided to focus on how the movement was getting in its own way by absorbing, adopting, and reproducing the master’s tools and discourse. My motive behind this choice of analysis was to hopefully shed light on the blind spots that could potentially halt the movement’s mission or worse, end its relevance and existence.

The reason I bring this former project to the reader’s attention, is because this thesis is very much in line with the focus and objective previously mentioned, and brings this analysis a few steps further. Bringing back Foucault’s concept of discourse as a historically contingent social construct embedded in relations of power which produces knowledge, meaning, and the objects of which it speaks of, I am curious about the reach and influence of this construct in defining and confining the worlding put in practice by feminist movements, specifically focusing on how feminist ideas of the political subject, of care and coalition building, and of change and



worlding might still have traces of hegemonic and oppressive tendencies. I believe that this work is important for the maintenance of the subversive and radical spirit of social change and to further rid its imagination from discriminatory, elitist, capitalist, and exploitative tendencies. As 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet' Audre Lorde wrote in her renowned essay, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house", and I believe this to be the most relevant and fundamental lesson for transfeminist, queer, and antiracist social movements today (2018). As the wave of insurrection is picking up again in full force, it has to resist the temptation of leaning into old and inequitable habits and forgetting to practice what they preach. Because power and discourse are not imbedded in a top-down scenario, in which the power and the reproduction of discourse is only in the hands of a privileged few and exercised on the disadvantaged, but rather are involved in a system of relations and networks, even social movements with the best intentions are not exempt from reproducing inequalities and repressive power dynamics. Thus, if the objective is to dismantle a system that exploits and reinforces ideas of naturalized hierarchies and dichotomies, it is absolutely imperative for revolutionaries to not get lost in the momentum but to remain critical about their attempts and how they put into practice the ideals that they would like to see as part of the world to come.

The insight I gathered in 'Splitting Bubbles' has made me aware and has motivated me in pursuing a project whose mission is to identify and elaborate on the potential limitations and shortcomings of feminist militancy today, as well as explore possible antidotes and change of perspective that could not only strengthen the constitution of the movement and its application of feminist principles but also expand and enrich its vision and imaginary. To do this, I decided to follow a similar path as my previous project and conduct more interviews with feminist activists of Non Una Di Meno. However, this time around, I was determined to focus even more on their reflections and feelings about their identities and lives as feminist activists, as well as their relationship to and thoughts about the movement and its practices. What came out of this was much more than I could have ever predicted. Thanks to their openness, critical perceptions, and their visionary outlooks on the world, I was introduced to a whole new way of thinking about feminist identity, coalitions, care, and the need for change in how we relate, help, and support one another. Our encounters have provided a space in which we were able to deeply analyze their experience and the intimate dimensions of their militancy. We were able to identify the steps that brought them to feminism, how recognizing themselves as feminists changed their sense of self

and the way they related to others, how feminist theory became their primary optic through which they interpret their experience and the world around them, how being a part of and working with a feminist movement shifted their focus from the self to the collective and made the disruption and liberation from the dominant system their mission in life. Moreover, we were able to unpack their dissatisfaction about the movement's methods and practices, as well as their preoccupations for the movement's undoing if it didn't work on its shortcomings. They enlightened me on the movement's internal struggles and divisions amongst its members, which to them are going to be responsible for the weakening of the mission and the corruption of the principles and vision. Simply put, they introduced to me a whole different dimension of feminist activism, one that did not shy away from self-reflection and criticism, one that embraced the personal and recognized the importance of the material and everyday when envisioning and practicing a new way of living, one that acknowledged and felt the strenuous work that comes with activism, and one that recognized the importance of caring, sensible, and *all-embracing* approaches to social justice and the revolution of sociality.

Thus, this is where I start. A co-produced project committed to the insurrectional wave and to its much needed take over. In order to maintain its power, there is a need to take the time to analyze, reflect, and acknowledge its potential mismanagements and misuses. Feminist becoming, living, thinking, relating, and practice are going to be both the focal point and the framework from which this project will intervene. As feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed says, "A significant step for a feminist movement is to recognize what has not ended. And this step is a very hard step. It is a slow and painstaking step. We might think we have made that step only to realize we have to make it again." (Ahmed 5, 2017). And this is what is going to be done, steps to keep going, but also steps to retrace, correct, turn, and change direction to preserve the revolutionary spirit. The point of feminism is to never be through with working through, fighting for, and imagining a different world. This takes the courage to pause and reflect on the work that has or has not been done, and ultimately find ways to realign with our intentions. This is the direction and the pace I will honor throughout this project.

## Introduction

*While we talked about change, we put it into action.*

Verde, co-creator, 0:25:13

*For me, the word 'compagna' has a very beautiful meaning. It means that with you I am doing politics, politics from below. It's different from friendship, it's more than any other sentimental bond. [...] It is a completely different type of love, once you encounter it, you can't shake it off easily.*

Rosa, co-creator, 0:56:00

*The important thing about feminism is that it is a posture that allows you to unhinge a whole series of ideas that deny violence in interpersonal relationships, which wind through all structures: systemic violence. The act of subversion is that of a different daily life that is not only linked to the relationship with the institutions. There is an interest in changing the mentality starting from the small things, the important ones.*

Viola, co-creator, 1:13:00

*On feminist militancy, collectives, and care* is concerned with the mundane and intimate dimensions of feminist identity, resistance and coalition building that constitute the livelihood of feminist activism. This research centers on the narratives and reflections of members of the transnational, intersectional, and transfeminist movement *Non Una Di Meno*. Before I dive into the heart of the matter, I want to provide a brief introduction of *Non Una Di Meno* by piecing together its beginnings, values, and mission, as well as familiarize the reader with my choice in

picking this movement as my starting point for this project. Non Una Di Meno is an Italian and transnational feminist organization that was established in 2016 in Rome and currently has multiple chapters across the nation. It was inspired by the Argentinian movement Ni Una Menos which was founded in 2015 as a response to overwhelming cases of femicide and gender-based violence. They translated the original name of the movement to Non Una Di Meno, as a way to situate the movement and at the same time pay homage to their transnational allies, and opened numerous chapters across the country. The following excerpt comes from Non Una Di Meno's 'Feminist Plan' and it narrates its memorable beginnings as today's most known and active feminist movement in Italy: "Populous and diverse, we united to form a tide of over 250.000 that demonstrated in Rome on 26 November 2016, as our female and male allies in many other countries did simultaneously. We took back the streets, aspiring to subvert the discourse associated with the current patriarchal, neoliberal order. Following a communal assembly in Rome on 27 November 2016, the last year has seen hundreds of Non Una Di Meno gatherings take place in scores of cities, sparking a widespread process of convergence among women, feminists, transfeminists and LGBT\*QIA+1 activists." (Non Una Di Meno 2016).

Non Una Di Meno's principles and objectives lie in dismantling heteropatriarchal, cisgender, capitalist, colonialist, and racist systems and institutions of violence that oppress marginalized communities and maintain hegemonic hierarchies, as well as envisioning a more just and solidary world through resistance, coalition building, and spreading awareness. Intersectionality and transfeminism are two of the focal points from which NUDM's politics emerge and expand, and through which the concept of gender and systemic violence is understood. NUDM understands the concept of intersectionality as it arose from anti-racist and feminist struggles in the United States, denoting the way in which individuals are simultaneously arranged in society and in power hierarchies (Non Una Di Meno 2016). Intersectionality here is grasped by feminist scholar and author Kimberlee Crenshaw's understanding of the concept, which is recognized as a lens through which one can understand the flows of power and how power intersects in a framework that tries to erase and essentialize human experience and oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Following this interpretation, NUDM believes it is crucial to analyze the ways in which patriarchal gender-based violence combines with other forms of domination, such as those based on geographical origin, culture, social background, age, abilities or disabilities.

In their thirty paged Feminist Plan developed in their first year of existence, NUDM starts by identifying its mission by acknowledging the systemic nature of violence: “This Feminist Plan to combat male violence against women and, more broadly, gender-based violence, will deal one by one with the various contexts in which gender-based violence takes place, so as to cover the issues as clearly as possible. When we assert that violence is systemic, we mean that it appears in many different forms and across all aspects of our lives, recurrently intertwining.” (Non Una Di Meno 2016). The concept of transfeminism developed later as the movement grew bigger and became more receptive to queer and trans theory and experience, to the point it became part of the movement’s identity. Non Una Di Meno understands transfeminism as “both a resistance movement and a theory that gender, arbitrarily assigned at birth, is a social construct used as a means of controlling and restricting human bodies to conform to the heterosexual, patriarchal social order. [...] Driven by the lives and experiences of transgender people, feminists and queer people, as well as by the complex, multifaceted possible positions vis-à-vis gender and sexuality, transfeminism sees the connection between the patriarchal order and the oppressive capitalist system, which harm all individuals who are not heterosexual white males.” (Non Una Di Meno 2016).

My reasons for choosing Non Una Di Meno as the feminist movement from which to gather the narratives and reflections on feminist living and militancy for this project comes from a personal attachment to my cultural background and an interest in exploring what has been unknown to me for most of my life, namely feminist history and politics, as well as re-interpreting the sociopolitical fabric of my country of origin through newly-acquired feminist lens. I was born from an Italian mother and an American father, which made me both an Italian and a U.S. citizen. Before my parents’ separated when I was six, the three of us would travel and live both in Lake Como and Orange County with their respective families throughout the year, however, after their separation, my mother and I permanently moved to Como. My father was not involved in raising me and did not contribute financially, which meant my mother became the sole provider of our household. Unfortunately, this would gradually become unsustainable and we would end up living a very precarious life. Work was scarce, especially for a mother with no advanced degree and connections during a global economic crisis, and the cost of living increasingly rose to the point it was impossible to survive autonomously. We would be forced to ask for help constantly and have to depend on other people regularly, which made our

relationships with other family members and significant others very complicated and tense. This meant having very fragile and temporary financial security which would force us to move fifteen times in ten years, growing serious amounts of debt, not being able to afford to pay bills and sometimes even groceries. This would cause my mother having to work multiple jobs at once and having to scarp for money in any way she could as I tried to get through school and make some money on the side by babysitting or teaching. Ultimately, we were constantly in survival mode and money (and lack thereof) became a main factor in our lives, relationship/s, and future plans. All this to say, from a young age, this way of life, and other traumatic experiences along the way involving emotional and physical abuse, neglect, sexual assault, and bullying, made me much more susceptible to injustice, particularly systemic gender and financial oppression, which would unpurposefully train me to become a very vigilant observer and cultural critic, as well as a future empathizer of other forms of oppression. Having felt like an outcast most of my life, I developed an intuition and a propensity to read between the lines and a curiosity towards understanding what was going on around me.

In the backdrop, was a very anti-leftist, conservative, misogynist, and discriminatory culture incarnated by Berlusconi's party and politics. This was a time in which sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia was very much overt and shamelessly rampant in the media, political discourse, and in the everyday. Misogyny and rape culture was deep seated in the fabric of society and was lazily concealed with right-wing nuclear-family discourse, boys will be boys rhetoric, and victim blaming as more and more women, queer, and trans folk were getting killed daily with no media coverage. Even in the school halls, on the streets, at the bars and clubs harassment and assault was quite common, normalized, and would go unpunished as it was seen as almost endearing and as having comedic value. Consent, accountability, and reparations were completely foreign concepts at the time and would take years to even be considered worthy of discussion. Millionaire/Billionaire, white, hetero, misogynist, and conservative men such as Berlusconi and Briatore were idolized and worshiped alongside adored and overpaid soccer players. Sexist and trans/homophobic jokes and racist/orientalist caricatures were exemplified in prime time programs like satiric news-show *Striscia la Notizia* which capitalized on their seminude showgirls Veline and traditionalist discourse, game show *Ciao Darwin* with its essentialisms and orientalist depictions, blackface, and young almost-naked girls, and yearly boorish christmas movies known as "Cinepanettoni" in which rich older men would cheat on

their spouses and take advantage of barely of age oversexualized girls. Reality tv and dating shows was all the rage, and programs such as *Grande Fratello* (the Italian adaptation of the international show Big Brother), *Uomini e Donne*, *Isola dei Famosi*, and *La Pupa e il Secchione* were part of the public conversation and the general longing for escapism. As people's lives were becoming more and more precarious during the recession, everyone was increasingly distancing themselves from politics, surrendering to what seemed an almost unsolvable predicament, holding onto whatever glimpse of *leggerezza* (lightness, carelessness) and normalcy they could find, and turning the most vulnerable (such as migrants, southerners, women, and queer folk) into scapegoats.

Most importantly for this project, there seemed to be no counter-politics that truly challenged and called out the unrestrained corruption, chauvinism, discrimination, and violence. The Left was increasingly losing its identity and edge, becoming more and more conservative and less interested in social justice. Young people were never seen as political subjects and were discouraged to think outside of finding a *posto fisso* (permanent work position), which by now had become a myth and a mission to pursue in foreign lands. The most disenfranchised were not involved in politics, both formal politics or activism, as they were constantly struggling to survive. Many people were aware of being exploited and being led by incompetents, however there was such a reticence and aversion towards politics and theory in the cultural conscience at the time, that it was seen as dillydallying or straight up frivolous getting oneself involved in them. Teenagers and young adults were discouraged to pursue any path that involved intellectual training such as social work, literature, communication, political science, cultural theory, art, or philosophy as it was seen as a bad investment and a one-way ticket to joblessness, precarity, and exploitation. At times, even pursuing medicine was seen as a risk, as it took too many years to finish the extensive educational training and a position at a hospital was not guaranteed. More professional vocations were seen as the more secure paths as they would provide practical skills that were acknowledged as easily transferable to the job market; tradesman professions and degrees in engineering, business, and law were seen as a way out of poverty and with the most potential for upward climbing on the social ladder. Less thinking, more doing, less abstraction, more practice: this was the way. Time is money, and if time isn't used to better one's own (or one's own family) precarious standing, then it wasn't time well spent. In light of this collective mentality, critical thinking and activism were far removed from people's minds and went

unreported and unrecognized in the media. Social media was just starting, and even there, it was mostly used for personal reasons and not much for organizing and critically discussing politics. Social injustice was not recognized as being connected to financial mismanagement and maldistribution, and violence towards vulnerable communities comprising of women, immigrants, romani gypsies, disabled, and queer folk were cast aside as incidental happenings, thus not part of a system of oppression, and often went unreported.

In such an arid social, political and intellectual climate in much need of resuscitation, where was feminism? To elaborate on this question, I decided to read and refer to Italian feminist historian Lussana's historical analysis on Italian feminism from the movements of the 60s to the movements of the late 20th century in her work *Il movimento femminista in Italia* (2012). In this work, Lussana traces the development, motivations, and challenges of Italian feminism and activism through the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s, alongside the sociopolitical and economical context of the time which I found very helpful when understanding the discursal and circumstantial influences on the movements. Lussana starts out with identifying the sentiment felt in the early 2010s towards feminism: for most, feminism in Italy died after the student revolution and proletary protests of the mid to late 1960s and 1970s, and with it, the need for feminism. What is considered the "real" and "historical" feminist movement in Italy (though it is mostly concealed from History) spans about fifteen years, from 1965 in which the first feminist collective *DEMAU* (*demistificazione autoritarismo*, demystification (of) authoritarianism) was born and was documented in Milan, to 1980 after the assassination of the prominent member of the Christian Democracy party Aldo Moro in 1978 and the rise of domestic terrorism of the *Brigate Nere* and *Brigate Rosse* in which many groups across the nation changed course and modalities of intervention as they found it impossible to resolve internal inconsistencies and divisions (Lussana 2012, 13). This movement started by challenging the post-conflict society that took over after the WWII *Resistenza* against fascism and nazism and the establishment of the Italian Republic which was known as the traditionalist and consumerist "Miracolo Italiano" of the 50s. The 60s youth, especially its feminist segment, was against the conservative family structure which saw a *padre padrone* as head of the household and ultimately the State and the domesticated and repressed female figure incarnated by the wife and mother. They saw through the pristine, wholesome, and fundamental image of the family and the consumerist and progressive propagandas promoted by the media and politics of the time. They recognized the



exploitation of the proletariat, the authoritarian nature of academic institutions, the increasing precarity and impoverishment part and parcel of the post-fordism era of the working class and the young generations, the misogynist and patriarchal structures holding women and men captive in restrictive gender roles and in unhappy marriages, the laws that were keeping women from being legally and financially emancipated, as well as free to explore their sexuality, and the role of capitalism and Western powers in furthering the oppression through colonization and imperialism.

Thus, as Lussana points out, many feminist collectives initially protested and fought alongside the student movement and the workers movement in what is now remembered as the “lungo ‘68” and ‘69 (the long ‘68 and ‘69) to push for the disruption of the world in the hands of *i padroni* by forming the biggest collectives and alliances that Italy would see for a very long time. These coalitions, though intense and fundamental for the gradual change of Italian society, would not last long, as the feminist collectives would recognize the exclusionary, sexist, and male-centered character and practices of the resistance. This realization would eventually lead to the detachment of most feminist collectives from the other social movements of the time, and to the establishment of the concepts and practices that would set apart the Italian feminist movements, such as *separatismo* (separatism), *antiegualitarismo* (anti-egalitarianism), *autocoscienza* (self-consciousness, connected to the French practice focused on the exploration of the feminine subconscious and the North American practice of consciousness-raising), *autogestione* (self-management, detachment from institutions) and in some collectives *sindacalismo femminista* (feminist syndicalism) (Lussana 2012, 16-82). As a result of these practices and coalitions, feminist collectives created *librerie delle donne*, women’s libraries, and *consultori femministi*, independent feminist centers of reproductive health, to provide safe spaces for women to seek help, share experiences, and learn women’s and feminist history without being supervised or constrained by institutional forces. A part from introducing new and meaningful ways of doing feminism and resistance, the ‘historic’ feminist movement participated and was responsible for the legalization of divorce in 1970 and abortion in 1978, the introduction of laws aimed to protect women, especially mothers, in the workplace, the creation of public childcare and nursery schools, the inauguration of regional reproductive health centers, and the initiation of legislative efforts for the abolition of violence against women.

Although these milestones were only considered a starting point for most Italian feminist collectives in the '70s, fastforwarding twenty-some years later, Lussana highlights the public's urgency for feminism had severely diminished as it did not see the need for it the new millennium. More importantly, Lussana emphasizes how an erasure and a conscious misrepresentation of feminism took place in neoliberal times, making gender equity and social justice a thing of the past, something that had already been achieved, and something that feminists were not needed for anymore. Activism in general, especially over the very much ongoing and enduring injustice suffered by women and other marginalized communities, was seen as somewhat of an exaggerated stance that did not represent the experience of the 'majority' of the population. Lussana identifies the end of the 70s as a marker for the shift in relationship between society and State, which unfortunately saw politics leave public consciousness and become more and more a concern of the formal political system. Once again, capital was central to public living and consciousness in the 80s and 90s as what is now known as the *Secondo Miracolo Italiano* (Second Italian Miracle) took place and represented an exponential growth of the market, a significant boost to the Italian economy but also an escalation of the public debt. Moreover, during the Secondo Miracolo Italiano, there was a widening of the divide between a heavily industrialized and progressive North and an agricultural and backward South, as well as the gradual disappearance of the middle class as the estrangement between the wealthy and ruling class and the poor grew substantially (Lussana 2012, 200).

Alongside these disparities and the public's alienation from politics, as Lussana illustrates, there was a concerning rise in organized crime which will not only interact with politics and the economy, but also become an active part of the State; from the early 90's, the State and the mafia will be at the center of nationwide judicial investigations into political corruption such as *Tangentopoli* and *Mani Pulite* and the brutal assassinations of the two anti-mafia judges and renowned magistrate prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992 (Lussana 2012, 200). Especially *Mani Pulite* and its aftermath of disarray in the political system, will allow for a new way of politics which will give rise to Berlusconi's politico-media model that will dominate the political scene from the mid nineties all the way to the early 2010's. As mentioned previously, Lussana argues how social and cultural models will also see a drastic change from the *lotta di classe* (class struggle), the protagonism of the trade unions, and the overwhelming presence of big activist and feminist collectives of the 60's and 70's to the 80's

and 90's values entrenched in careerism, individualism, and liberalism. The "I" will win over the "We", the individual will trump over the collective, making politics and the economy no longer central to social change but instrumental for the betterment of one's own social standing.

In this climate, grassroots politics, including feminism, seemed to take a step back. As Lussana observed, feminism had ceased to be in the public eye since the 80's, as the movement turned inward and made cultural and societal critique its main mission. At this point, now more than ever feminist thought is countercurrent: in the era of increasing cultural and political degradation, feminism chooses knowledge (Lussana 2012, 201). Here, the development of feminist critique will take place and the advancement of feminist academic research will build upon 70's analyses on the female experience in all domains of knowledge. Research, *autoreflessione*, and relating amongst women will determine the work that will be carried out throughout the next couple decades. Anglo Saxon academic influence will play a large role in enriching the themes and investigation methods applied during this time. For instance, the interplay between Women's Studies, Critical Black Studies, Queer Studies, and Cultural and Subaltern Studies will bring about an opening of the category of gender which up until that point was very much rigidly and biologically determined, as well as complexifying historical ideas of the flows and relations of power which will eventually help bring about the concept of intersectionality.

History also plays a big role in Italian feminist thought as it takes on the Gramscian category of historical interpretation *dal basso* (from below), which puts at the center of its investigation the fights and desires of the popular class (Lussana 2012, 202). The objective is to rewrite History, which has always been the history about and written by the dominant groups, by starting from and focusing on the experiences of the subaltern represented by the most historically marginalized communities who were cast aside, exploited, and erased to make way for the advancement and protagonism of the ruling classes. Although the 80's and 90's Subaltern Studies brought with them a fatalist disenchantment which centers on the impossibility of the subaltern and their experience to ever become anything else, it will be up to the more contemporary Italian feminist thought to challenge this by making knowledge a method to re-examine the past and a political practice to change the present (203). In sum, according to Lussana, worlding is still a possibility, and it is at this time, when superficiality and public disenchantment has become the primary currency, that feminism makes itself into science (203).

Fast forward to present time, Non Una Di Meno debuted on the political scene in the mid-2010s as the current generation's major feminist movement. I came across Non Una Di Meno, specifically its chapters based in Bologna and Milan, through Italian news articles and social media about three years ago and I got more and more intrigued as I followed their posts, events, and street protests online. It was the first time that I had seen such a wide-spread, militant, organized, and *visible* feminist movement in my home country and it made me not just curious but also hopeful towards the possibility of someday going back home and joining their cause. This and my desire to be part of a revolutionary force that had the potential to uncover all of the ugliness corrupting our society and to disrupt the powers at be, led me to consider and eventually get in touch with my co-creators. However, as mentioned in the preface, what I came to realize through the interviews with my co-creators was that there was much more going on that I could have previously imagined, most importantly how Non Una Di Meno was getting in its own way and how it was repeating old and potentially damaging patterns that could threaten its viability. Because it has been such a long time coming for feminism in Italy to be part of the public and political conversation again, and especially in times like today in which western, capitalist, white supremacist, and heteropatriarchal systems are being put into question more than ever before, I believe it to be necessary to pause the momentum and take the time to reflect upon how its message and practices are potentially being co-opted, what should be given attention to, and ultimately what work still needs to be done to sharpen our tools and practice what we preach.

In this project, I want to consider feminist militancy and organizing as a political and discursive microcosm, an opportunity to enhearten the revolutionary spirit of feminist thinking and envision new and subversive social relations. To do this, I center and deeply engage with the narratives and reflections gathered through interviewing three former members of the feminist movement Non Una Di Meno, which will be referred to from now on as Verde, Viola, and Rosa to maintain their anonymity. The encounters with these feminist activists early in 2020 have shed light on the critical status of today's political militancy and organizing in Italy, its challenges and pitfalls, and the need for stronger and more intimate interpersonal connections and practices of care and solidarity that would reflect in practice the type of social relations integral to the society that they are fighting to contrive. Moreover, they provided insight on the mundane and personal dimensions of feminist becoming and resistance, how their identity as feminist militants have

shaped and changed their lives and their perceptions of the world, as well as their expectations for the envisioning and adaptation of the feminist principles and objectives in daily life.

In order to deepen my understanding of the reflections made and the topics brought up during the interviews, I decided to pair my co-creators' knowledge with a theoretical analysis. This endeavor was done independently and the theory I chose to include was not discussed during the interviews as it was a process I undertook after the interviews took place. Having said this, a couple of concepts and honorary mentions to feminist theorists were made by some of my co-creators, which was a delightful coincidence that unfortunately I was not able to discuss with them in a separate encounter. The theory I chose to incorporate in this project centers on feminist activism and movements and engages with themes such as the becoming of the feminist political subject and feminist living, the importance of community building both in social justice movements and outside, the influence of the dominant oppressive system on militancy and coalition building, and the radical power of care as a model of social formation. Moreover, it is all theory that comes from literature I personally bonded with in the last few years and has inspired much of my perspective on social change and organizing.

To expand upon the feminist political subject and my co-creators' experiences in becoming feminist activists, as well as possible limiting perceptions and expectations on who a feminist should be, I referred to Sarah Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives* (2019), and Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014). In order to interpret my co-creators' experience and criticism of the type of militancy carried out by Non Una Di Meno, I refer to Giovanna Parmigiani's *Feminism, violence and representation in modern Italy "We are witnesses, not victims"* (2019), Cinzia Aruzza, Nancy Fraser, and Tithi Bhattacharya *Feminism for the 99%* (2019), and Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery's *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (2017). Finally, to explore the revolutionary power of care and the necessity also expressed by my co-creators for it to be incorporated in the sociality of activist movements, I refer to Mia Birdsong's *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Friendship, Family, and Community* (2020), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), and The Care Collective's *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (2020).

What follows then are three chapters that will center on three fundamental themes I discerned from my co-creators' experience and observations about feminist militancy and

feminist movements, which will each be explored at length in their own respective chapters by weaving together interview highlights, theory, and analysis: feminist subjectivity, militancy and organizing in feminist movements, and worlding through care and community building. All themes will each have their own separate chapter to provide a more in depth analysis. In chapter one, *Feminist (Re)born, Feminist (Re)vision, Feminist (Re)definition*, feminist subjectivity will be discussed by reflecting on how one comes to be a feminist political subject, what expectations are put on this category in feminist spaces, and what could be the potential setbacks and discrepancies felt by the subjects in question in daily life. In chapter two, *Joy(less) Militancy: the Achilles heel of feminist activism*, militancy and organizing in feminist movements such as Non Una Di Meno, will be discussed by focusing on what forms of militancy have been espoused, what type of work is involved in activism, how prejudice, privilege, and discrimination enter a feminist space, and how a different approach to militancy can restore and strengthen organizing. Finally, in chapter three, *Comrades for (a better) life: putting the care in militancy*, care and community building will be discussed by exploring what is the world that feminists want to live in, what role relationality (both outside and inside activist movements) plays in supporting these visions, and how concepts such as interdependency, care and mutualism would help materialize a better social formation.

## Research Methods and Chapter structure

As mentioned previously, for this thesis, I conducted three interviews with three members of Non Una Di Meno. I decided to read Hesse-Biber's chapter "Feminist Approaches to In-Depth Interviewing" (2014) to prepare for the interviews. In this chapter, Hesse-Biber focuses on interviewing as she claims it is a "valuable research method that feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of the respondents" (Hesse-Biber 2014, 114). Specifically, she turns to the *in-depth interview* that she describes as being "issue-oriented" and as being one of the best tools for feminist researchers to access hidden narratives and voices of the most marginalized in society (118). This particular method of interviewing is the most efficient when trying to explore a specific topic and gain profound insights from the informants. What can be gained then is the individual's "subjective understanding" of their lived experience, or of a particular set of circumstances, events, and issues (118). I decided that this method of interviewing was a good fit for this project also because I was only going to be able to do a one-off interview with each informant and I needed to make sure to provide my co-creators the proper framework to share their narratives and reflections surrounding the chosen topics in the most in-depth way as possible.

As to the format I was going to follow, I decided to conduct *unstructured interviews*. Hesse-Bieber describes this type of interview as being one in which the researcher has a research agenda in mind, they maintain a *minimum of control* over how the respondent answers the question, but at the same time does not have a specific set of questions to ask and leaves some room for the respondent to go into the direction they want to take the discussion (119). I found this format to be particularly fitting to my research agenda and it provided the perfect framework for my co-creators and me to discuss and elaborate on their insights and reflections about their lives and work as feminist activists. I started out all the interviews with a few bullet points on the main conversation topics, but I did not have a pre-fabricated set of questions I was planning to ask, as I wanted the interviews to feel as natural as possible and let my co-creators feel free to elaborate on what they felt like sharing. The questions that I asked during the interviews (and that will be present in the following chapters) were inspired by my co-creators observations and anecdotes in real time, which required me to be attuned to my co-creators and listen carefully to their stories.

The three people who took this project to new and unimaginable heights are three individuals who have made feminist living and worlding their mission in life. Thanks to them, not only I was provided with much needed insight on the internal workings of feminist life and militancy, but I was able to brainstorm with them what it means to be feminists, what are core principles that must always be part of our practice, what kind of world we would want to be part of, and how we can reflect this in how we relate with others and in how we support each other's fights. To respect their request for anonymity, I have given them the following names: Verde (Green), Viola (Purple), and Rosa (Pink). The reason for this choice was that I didn't want to give them someone else's name, and I preferred instead to focus on the energy I felt they emanated. I felt that the easiest way to convey their unique personalities and spirit to the reader was by using these colors. Verde is a feminist in her early thirties living in the outskirts of Milan, is a former member of the Milan chapter of Non Una Di Meno, and is the co-founder of the community-organization and solidarity network Rimake. Viola is a queer feminist in her mid thirties living in Milan, a member of the Milan chapter of Non Una Di Meno, and a member of a local queer activist collective. Rosa is a transfeminist in her early thirties living in Bologna, a former member of the Bologna chapter of Non Una Di Meno, an operator for the women's shelter *Casa Delle Donne*, and a member of the lesbian feminist group Lesbische Bologna.

Verde was my first interview and what I can only describe as a force of nature. She has been militant for over ten years and has pursued an academic career in Gender Studies. Grounded, introspective, dynamic, and incredibly creative--she blew my mind right away with her thoughts on our current political climate, her commitment to feminist ethics and practices, and her world-changing ideas. She was able to provide me with the most insight on what it's like living as a feminist activist and dedicating your entire life and spirit to changing the world from the ground up. She was also the most blunt about the shortcomings of NUDM, especially when it came to pin-pointing the movement's internal exclusionary practices and limited efforts in acknowledging more walks of life, as well as its tendency to focus more on the movement's visibility in the mainstream than on providing actual aid to the most vulnerable. Verde helped me center this project on the importance of building caring and reliable coalitions and relations in order to achieve a social reconstruction founded on interdependence, mutualism and solidarity.

Viola was my second interview and, at first, the hardest one to bond with. However, when reassured and encouraged, she opened up and shared very intimate reflections on her living as a



feminist. Viola came off as reflexive, enigmatic, and very profound, and made an excellent conversationalist. She shared about her past ten years as an activist finding her way to feminism. As she was the only currently active member of Non Una Di Meno amongst my co-creators, she was able to provide me with very relevant insight about the inner workings of the movement, their activities, philosophies, and the intensive work that was being put in by most of its members to spread NUDM's message and show support to national and international causes in the media and on the streets. She shared her frustrations about the organizational frenzy and the amount of intellectual and emotional labor that is required to keep the movement going and stay updated with all the current debates while also managing a personal and professional life that do not necessarily blend in seamlessly with her beliefs and lifestyle. She shared the sense of disorientation and the emotional fatigue that comes with awareness and being constantly on high alert, how it can lead to overwhelming amounts of stress and to depressive states. Overall, Viola helped me truly understand the work and the strength one needs to constantly put in when living a feminist life and brainstorm practices that could be helpful to employ in feminist spaces to make sure to support each other.

Last but certainly not least, I interviewed Rosa, who I had interviewed once before for my Splitting Bubbles paper. Our conversation inspired me to focus on feminist activism for my thesis. Rosa is a lovely, charming, kind, and thoughtful person and I was very excited to interview her again. Things had changed since I interviewed her last, and the biggest change of all was her decision to interrupt her militancy in Non Una Di Meno as a "political act of self-care". She shared with me her grievances that led her to leave NUDM, how her feminist subjectivity and values have changed throughout the many years of activism, and the importance of care and of always being critical about one's practice and coalitions. Moreover, she really helped me to understand the meaning of *compagna/o/u* (comrade) and camaraderie, and the unique and special bond that forms between comrades while fighting together. Our conversation was very meaningful and provided me with the final elements I needed to explore for this project.

The three interviews provided me with more than seven hours of data that I eventually transcribed and translated into English. This painstaking work turned out to be essential for narrowing down the themes I was going to focus on for the project. Moreover, it allowed me to take my time and reflect on what was discussed and my position as a researcher. In thinking

about this at length, I was reminded of discussions about partial perspective, situated knowledge, and self-reflexivity. All these elements provide a feminist optic and ethical approach to research and knowledge to which I intend to subscribe to for this project and beyond. Partial perspective and situated knowledge are concepts that are thoroughly explored by Donna Haraway in her influential essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988). In this essay, Haraway opposes and unpacks the Western cultural narrative and fundamental concept of ‘objectivity’ permeating knowledge production. In this framework, knowledge is understood as untouched by human bias and motive, and as produced by abstract and untraceable hands instead of actual authors participating in the reproduction of discourse--what has been referred to as “the god trick”. Knowledge then is culturally upheld as objective, essential, and all-encompassing as it is separated by the subject and human experience. Haraway opposes this way of understanding knowledge production and shifts the focus to the relation between the object (knowledge, research) and the subject (author, researcher, institutions) which will in turn bring about the need for what she defines as *situated knowledges*. Haraway describes the term "situated knowledges" as a way of understanding that all knowledge comes from positional perspectives, which opposes the idea of knowledge as made up of a universal and objective perspective, and as abstract and untraceable. From this perspective, our positionality inherently determines what it is possible to know about an object of interest as our experience, beliefs, and motivations will undoubtedly contribute to the interpretations and narratives produced about said object. To this, Haraway explains: “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective Vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. *It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.*” (Haraway 1988, 583).

According to Farahani, Haraway’s feminist objectivity and situated knowledges have become important concepts and methods for many researchers trying to disavow the dominant approach to knowledge production. Haraway’s understanding of the interrelations between epistemology, ontology, ethics, politics, and the impossibility of clear-cut disconnections between the subject and the object, has encouraged researchers to undertake self-reflexive examinations of their own positions, as well as reflect simultaneously on the politics of

knowledge production and the politics of representation (Farahani 2010, 115). Although the turn to self-reflexivity has had mostly positive effects on the research that has been produced according to this practice, it has also however led to as what has been pejoratively referred to as ‘navel-gazing’ rather than to taking a critical position on the researchers’ own role and the power(dis)associated with it (115). On this point, I agree with Farahani when she argues “while I consider discussions of self-reflexivity relevant and important, I also believe that discussions of inter-subjective reflexivity that do not address the intersecting power relations and the ways in which they impact on the choice of subjects, methods and methodology, the (lack of) access to research material and participants, and the interpretations and research outcomes, fail to be fruitful and are, rather, counter-productive” (115). Farahani’s observation on the dangers of self-reflexivity when applied without acknowledging the embedded and intersecting power relations constitutive of research, as well as the personal history of the researcher, has helped me to simultaneously pay attention to the construction of my own experience, inquiries, and interpretations, and how these interpretations have come about (115).

Thus, throughout the entirety of my research process, I have made the conscious effort to continuously check myself, where my interpretations and focuses stem from, how both my co-creators and I are producing and shaping the research, as well as our rapport. Relation and rapport between my co-creators and myself are other elements that I found to be integral to the making of this project. As Thwaites argues, “Rapport comes into every research situation, but in the intimate interview it is most clearly involved and important to the outcome of the discussion and the ultimate data collected/created” (Thwaites 2017, 2). The way we got along in a more intimate matter, how we were able to both contribute to the conversation, and how we were receptive to each other’s feedback not only made the interviews a pleasant experience but most importantly it contributed to fostering a sense of commonality from which more in-depth and meaningful contributions and insights were encouraged to be shared. Our rapport was significantly strengthened by our shared commitment to feminist liberation and our will to support each other in our endeavors. Thanks to the rapport we were able to establish, even within the space of a one-off interview, we were able to connect and ‘make theory’ together.

Because of this, I realized that my project was not just my own or of my own making, but it was a shared effort and a collaboration that turned my research interests into theory and a political endeavor. For this reason, I would like to consider this project as what is defined by

Gatenby and Humphries as “feminist participatory action research” (2000). Gatenby and Humphries understanding of ‘feminist participatory action research’ comes from the hybridization of feminist research/theory and participatory action research (PAR) (Gatenby 2000, 89). They describe both modes of research in this way: “Both participatory action research (PAR) and feminist research have been developed by researchers aiming for involvement, activism and social critique for the purpose of liberatory change.” (89). Drawing from both feminist research and PAR indicates the will to develop a method which is collaborative, liberatory and ethical. Thus, following Gatenby’s and Humphries’ interpretation, viewing a research project as feminist participatory action research is understanding it as a form of praxis aimed at social change starting from feminist concerns and using a PAR approach which involves a commitment to liberationist movements, a commitment to honoring the lived experience and knowledge of the people involved, often people from oppressed groups, and a commitment to “genuine collaboration” in the research process (89).

In the case of “On feminist militancy, collectives, and care”, the purpose of the project is to hearten and support militants active in movements by taking the time to unpack the ways in which certain thoughts and practices of political subjectivity, coalition building, and militancy are potentially undermining the work and limiting the imaginary of a collectively desired future. This is a project that is committed to social change and wants to see liberationist movements grow and withstand the trials ahead, and it’s because of this reason that my co-creators decided to support me with my research. Their experience of militancy has allowed them to witness firsthand and extensively as well as critically reflect on NUDM’s practices, message, and vision. Being committed to a life as a feminist activist has made liberation their purpose in life, thus it has become crucial for them to see feminist movements succeed, thrive, and provide meaningful support for all involved. They acknowledge the necessity of having strong collectives pushing the cause ahead not just because of the social impact they potentially could make but also because of the example of sociality made up of compassion, equity, vulnerability, inclusivity, interdependence, and mutuality they could provide as a way to envision a better future for all. Having adopted a critical feminist optic, having been introduced to feminist theory, critical race theory, and queer theory, and having embraced feminist militant practices in their daily lives, has reinforced in them the desire and the urgency to unpack and find alternative ways of doing militancy that endorse the principles and praxes of the cause to the fullest and that could ensure a

movements livelihood for years to come, especially in a precarious and unstable social and political time such as this one. These are the motivations that brought us together and have provided a platform in which to explore our reflections, concerns, desires, and in their case, their experience with living and breathing a feminist life. This is what this project is going to be about and these are the objectives that have brought us together to make this a useful contribution for our fellow feminists.

What follows then are three chapters that will follow a similar structure. Each chapter will have an interview collage, a literature review, and an analysis section. The chapters will begin with an interview collage in which poignant quotes from the interviews will be shared, followed then by a section in which I will review the theoretical framework and concepts that I found relevant for this project, and finally conclude with my own observations and analysis. In the interview collage, my objective is to differentiate and, most importantly, give credit to my co-creators as much as possible without obscuring their voices and insights with mine and my sources, as well as letting my reader get a glimpse of the work that was done during these interviews, read (through) the lines, and get a sense of the process and the piecing-together that constituted the act of making this text. I decided to call this section “interview collage” to provide the reader with a glimpse of the conversations that constructed the backbone of this project and give them a visual display of the assembling process, which personally brought to mind cut-outs of newspaper articles scattered and then reorganized to provide a vision board from which to start. In the literature review, the aim is to introduce the reader to the theory that I chose to support my interpretation and analysis of my co-creators’ accounts and observations. With this literature, I was able to further my understanding of themes and concepts that either were brought up during the interviews or that I thought could relate to my co-creators’ experiences. Moreover, the literature I chose brings forth a more global analysis which helped me broaden the scope of my research from a localized and specific experience to a more conceptual and comprehensive study of militancy, activist movements, and care. The literature review will consist of a brief overview of the themes followed by three distinct sections in which I introduce the authors and discuss the theory. Finally, in the analysis section, my intention is to present my own analysis and interpretation for this research by bringing into conversation both the interview collage and the literature review. To this end, I bring forth the common ground between my co-creators’ experience and considerations and the concepts and theories of the

authors, as well as present my interpretations and assessments. The structure I chose reflects these objectives by breaking down the analysis into three arguments that I found most significant when trying to capture and unpack the themes of feminist subjectivity, militancy and organizing in feminist movements, and working through care and community building.

## Chapter One:

### **Feminist (Re)born, Feminist (Re)vision, Feminist (Re)definition**

How did you become a feminist and why? This is the theme that opened up all three of my interviews and that ultimately became the catalyst for an in-depth exploration of the construction and ramifications of the feminist political subject. Understanding what sparked this desire to not only get involved in revolutionary politics but to incarnate and practice a way of life that is fiercely oppositional, collective, and militant has the potential to unlock the processes of continuous becoming that are constituent to living a feminist life and that move forward the work of liberation and worlding. Moreover, it shines a light on the obstacles and trials that are part of breaking from the hegemonic discourse and norms, becoming aware of the entangled, ongoing, and oppressive histories that one is enmeshed in and has been complicit in perpetuating, unlearning discriminatory and exclusionary propensities and behaviors, and disrupting one's idea of identity and relationality, specifically the dominant perception of it that promotes individuality and independence, by embracing one that reaches out and embraces collectivity and interdependence. Verde, Viola, and Rosa have all gone through the joys and the growing pains of becoming a feminist and have shared with me in depth the intimate dimensions of their journey towards feminist militancy. To honor this, I decided in this chapter to engage with and expand upon their reflections and experiences with coming into their own feminist identity and the developments that followed, theories about feminist subjectivity, centering on the descriptions and motives of what I interpreted as representations of feminist figures, or feminist figurations, such as Ahmed's "feminist killjoy", Gay's "bad feminist", and Hartman's "wayward" in order to explore representations of the feminist subject within feminist theory and their potential limitations when upheld as standards of "feminist perfection", alongside my personal interpretations that will tie the interviews and the theories together in order to delve deeper into the creative and painstaking process that is coming into one's own radical subjectivity and how dominant and oppressive configurations of the self can continuously get in the way.

## Section I: Interview Collage

Trying to start a discussion on feminist subjectivity and becoming has proven to be a much harder task than anticipated. When, where, and how does one become a feminist? When does this process start, or does it even have an ascribable beginning and traceable journey? Can it be considered as a course that has somehow quietly resided within and was encouraged to manifest itself once one was amongst like-hearted passengers? Must certain injustices and aggressions be felt on one's skin to inspire alliances and revolt? What comes next, is a collage of some of the insights Viola, Verde, and Rosa shared about themselves and their journey into becoming feminists, what got them on this path, what keeps them on it, and how they feel they measure up to this role and lifestyle.

### *On Feminism:*

*What is feminism to you?* This question I posed was interpreted by Verde, Viola, and Rosa as a question that aimed at either/both/all a personalized definition of feminism, what feminism brought or added to their lives, personal accounts that attempted to describe the change experienced. The answers came in disjointed statements throughout the length of the interview, in a quick statement, or in an immediate yet protracted reflection.

Verde: 00:16:17 "Feminist issues, they have become my reason for living "

00:18:12 "Feminism (for me) has meant this: being able to meet people who have experienced the same suffering and discover that you are not alone to have had that experience, and to find in this sharing/commonality a new starting point for a new strength "

Viola: 1:13:00 "The important thing about feminism is that it is a posture that allows you to unhinge a whole series of ideas that deny violence in interpersonal relationships, which winds through every environment...systemic violence. The act of contrast is that of a different daily life, one that is not only linked to the relationship with the institutions. There is an interest in changing the mentality starting from the small things, the important ones"



Rosa: 00:08:00 “I saw a prominent change in my consciousness when making the change from not being a feminist to being a feminist. I was probably already a feminist before, but I wasn’t calling myself one. I brought myself back into the world as a feminist. I saw a change in my language, in the rage and the personal relationship with rage because before [*considering herself a feminist*] it felt like a widespread yet unidentified nuisance. Then I learned what the patriarchy was and its influence on people’s experience, on my experience, and on the system (as the system) as a whole. You know, it’s the famous rip [*tr. strappo, here referring to a breaking free, ripping through an old state of consciousness*], the new glasses from which you can observe reality in a completely different way. The reality in front of you has not changed, however, you are now seeing it with your eyes open, before it was like you had them a bit “narrowed, squinted”. [*reflecting on what she just said*] So, in the language, in the relations, in the rage, in the possibility to think myself into a collective. Before I was much more individualistic. I am a pretty lonely type. I found the beauty of collectivity, I reaffirmed certain aspects of my loneliness but I started to do many things together with my compagne/compagnu [*tr. comrade, both using the feminine gender plural, and the non-binary term*] and I opened up my view of the world to a series of life experiences that I’d never encountered prior, that I didn’t know I was going to care about. Now I viscerally feel the issue of interconnectedness, interdependence, and solidarity in life and in the fight..this is what it means to me”

***On the journey to Feminism, to Feminist:***

*What has brought you to feminism? How has your life changed since you got into feminist activism? How would you describe your experience before and after getting into feminism?* These questions were meant to enable the co-creators to reflect on their experience as feminist activists, what brought them to become interested in feminism and identify with its politics and ethics. These were mainly interpreted as an opportunity to look back on their early days learning and engaging in feminist politics, and to provide me with personal anecdotes alongside their thoughts and feelings about their choices and changes since committing to this life.

Verde: 00:14:03 “What has marked me was participating in an international activist camp every year that organized meetings between militants. It provided space for learning about the world

and to practice critical thinking. There were self-awareness groups and seminars. I gravitated to the ones that revolved around reflections about women and systemic violence. That's when I had my first contact with feminism, specifically at this "liberation party" I attended at the end of camp. That experience of pure joy, of freedom in being amongst women without being under the male gaze and heteropatriarchal structures..that changed my life, having concretely experienced the joy of a different world..and lead me to get involved in feminist movements and pursue Gender Studies for my Master's and Doctorate, in which I am currently in. After some unsatisfactory work with other feminist groups in Milan, in which I felt we weren't really getting anything done except talking about how the world worked instead of focusing on how we wanted this world to be different, I joined the Milan chapter of Non Una Di Meno. With NUDM, I got to address concerns as a woman and to work on the theme of violence in a more concrete way by identifying *together* the structural nature of violence, how it concerns everyone, and by constructing alternatives to live in a world free from violence. The first years of NUDM were characterized by a solid project with the ambition to involve all women and marginalized groups; this was kicked off on November 26/27, 2016, with the protest and national assembly in Rome. For me, NUDM was the turning point in my understanding of what feminism was, a common project in which the experience of each of us would have constituted a piece. While we talked about change, we put it into action."

Viola: 00:10:32 "I have been involved in activism for twenty years. I started in "mixed" political environments [*primarily male and female*]; the sexism I witnessed and experienced within those groups led me to realize how I needed to get out of there and start educating myself on topics surrounding feminism [*which were rejected and/or silenced within those groups*]. This negative experience had a very profound effect on me and I decided to make the radical choice to subscribe to "separatism" [*a radical feminist practice especially adopted in the late 1960's/early 1970s in Italy in which female feminists would abstain from relations with men and refuse to participate in the male sphere/politics/structures*]. This was a political choice in order to reconnect with the ideas of Italian feminism of the 1970s, which resonated the most with me at the time. This was a personal turning point for me: I grew as a person, I started to value my own opinions, I gained invaluable knowledge, I deepened my critical thinking skills, and best of all, I found confidence in myself (again). Moreover, this choice to endorse feminist theory and politics

opened up the door for reflection on subjectivity, gender, and sexuality, which not only changed my perspective on people, society, and power dynamics but also enabled exploration into my own identity. Thanks to this process, I now recognize my subjectivity as a cis, queer woman, and I have acquired a language and toolkit to talk about it”

00:15:00 “In Non Una Di Meno, I have found a movement, a container, in which to move forward and display great initiatives of assertion in public, not just participate in sporadic meetings and reflect amongst ourselves in our group. I adhered to Non Una Di Meno after its first year of existence, in 2017. At present, besides Non Una Di Meno, I am also part of a local queer collective because I have felt the need to deepen my knowledge of queer politics and subjectivity, as well as to surround myself with more people who share a similar identity as mine.”

Rosa: 00:03:10 “I began to describe myself as a feminist ten years ago when I got in touch with Casa Delle Donne [*tr: Women’s House. A women’s shelter in Bologna in which she became an advocate and a working associate. She is still operative at present*]. From there, I embarked on a journey of ‘everyday’ militancy by practicing as a social worker at the *House*, participating as an activist in the streets, and continuously educating myself on feminist politics. To this day, I am trying to simultaneously push forward, to manage, the working aspect of my feminist practice and the ‘passionately political’[militant] aspect of the latter in my daily life. In 2016, I joined Non Una Di Meno after a trip to Mexico [*in which she first came into contact with Ni Una Menos, the founder and Latin American chapter of Non Una Di Meno*], and I adhered to my local chapter in Bologna. When I first joined NUDM, I did it to fuel my activism at work. I was militant in NUDM up until March of last year [2020] because during the pandemic I realized that I was not going to be able to manage the activism at work [*at Casa delle Donne*] and the activism in the movement [*NUDM*] while safeguarding my mental and physical wellbeing. The levels of stress, activity, and anxiety reached a point that became unsustainable for me. Because of this, I decided to take a break from Non Una Di Meno as a political act and an act of care towards myself.”

***On Feminist Identity & Experience:***

*What makes a feminist in your opinion? What are unique challenges that a feminist faces?* These questions were meant to encourage my co-creators to go more in depth on their ideas on what a feminist is, how they relate with this denomination and identity, as well as encourage them to share any possible challenges they faced in living a feminist and militant life. What came out of this were valuable insights on the emotional challenges that a feminist activist can face when having to preserve and at times compromise their political self, as well as on the expectations of what a feminist should be and the struggle to measure up to those standards.

Verde:01:12:00 “An idea of a “model militant” has been created, a militant who is strong, imperturbable, who is powerful enough that nothing can tarnish her. I see this as a weakness. It’s an unspoken rule. We don’t say what our weak spots are, we only show each other our strengths, which on one hand is fair, but then when you only work on other’s vulnerabilities [*referring to marginal communities’ vulnerabilities and/or society’s vulnerabilities/shortcomings at large*] and you never show, expose, or work on yours, it’s clear that a dysfunctional dynamic will form”

01:14:00 “If the place I do activism is only a place in which I feel good or comfortable and I don’t get challenged or confronted with my own bias or weaknesses, then the idea or vision I have of actually feeling good in the world will be limited and stunted”

Viola: 00:16:45 “I feel in a state of disorientation when I leave my activist bubble. I feel the need to preserve myself by not making my activism public”

00:18:42 “Having to select or deactivate a part of yourself, the one that is otherwise dominant in your daily sphere, is of course complex”

00:19:24 “Surrounding myself with people that have similar political opinions as me is part of my political practice”

00:21:12 “Being out of this world is an issue that we collectively face as a movement. A binary is formed, outside world versus inside world. A sort of a schizophrenia of the militant”

00:23:05 “I think my feelings of isolation are caused by awareness. However, I would never give away all that I learned, it has enriched me as a person” [*referring to awareness that came with engaging with feminist theory and feminist pejorative view on the systems of oppression at play*]

00:25:00 “I can count on my comrades [*tr. from compagne*] for the reassurance I need as they share my vision of the world. We can share and discuss our feminism and that gives me the space I need to give air to my beliefs and practices”

## **Section II: Literature Review**

In the first stages of developing my interest in the topic of feminist militancy, I was consuming literature that put the feminist political subject at center stage. The literature I was reading was concerned with the personal, the mundane, the growing pains, the internal world, and the work that can be considered characteristic of a person that adopts a feminist optic and makes the decision to live by and be part of these newly found ethics and revolutionary politics. This literature recognized how feminists come to not only support and subscribe to this new way of seeing and understanding the world, but to want to embody its spirit by living through it and enacting its teachings starting from the way they present themselves, how they speak and what they speak about, how they think and what they reflect on, and the way they interact with others and the intentions that initiate those interactions. It appreciated how becoming a feminist and/or a radical comes with a cathartic reframing of one’s own environment, being and purpose. Moreover, it observed how a new language is learned that interprets and discerns the layers, interconnections, and power relations which constitute the systems we live in, and that provides a voice to the lived experiences that made up our personal narratives that up until that point might have been subdued and just living as a dull ache in the body. That language brings with it new understandings and personal realizations, a whole new set of ethics, and redirections that lead to communities that share it.

Another element that is taken into consideration by this literature is the everyday, and how it changes once someone is radicalized. The quotidian becomes more intentional and animated as one navigates encounters with systemic injustice and distractions, as well as their own reactions to the sensations and experiences that are simultaneously lived *with-in* and *with-out*. This mediation between the newly reframed internal and the newly revealed complex and at times harsh external becomes a strenuous balancing act, an unseen work that depends on the constant upkeep, growth, and amending of one’s feminist spirit. This work is shared by other activists when one becomes part of a militant group, yet not necessarily split, as more work gets

assigned as it is integral to the political and public mission of worlding and undermining the power systems that maintain the oppressive status quo, and a whole other form of relating with others is learned. I believed that in order to deeply explore these different intimate facets of feminist becoming/living through theory, namely being at work as a feminist activist, forming radical relationships with other feminists, learning to become mindful and familiar with this new language and optic, molding and stretching oneself accordingly, and mediating between an ever changing internal world and co-opting dominant systems as trying to envision and put into creation a different way of existence, I needed analyses which weaved and spun their conceptualizations onto experiential figures that could comprehensively depict/maintain the materiality of this subject. For this reason, I found Sarah Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives* (2019), and Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* (2014), great starting points for an in-depth exploration of feminist militancy. Specifically, their use of what I interpret as feminist figurations, i.e. the "feminist killjoy", the "wayward", and the "bad feminist", to provide a more expansive and intimate study of feminist being and living. In this section, I am going to introduce these three theorists and their larger work, focus on each work's feminist figuration and the relevant concepts/themes these enable to bring out when elaborating on feminist subjectivity and experience.

### **The Feminist Killjoy**

Ahmed is a British-Australian author and scholar whose work is found at the intersection of feminist, queer and race studies. In 2017, she published her book *Living a Feminist Life* which received a lot of acclaim and attention both in academia and in the general public interested in feminist living and politics. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed shows how feminist theory is generated from everyday life and the ordinary experiences of being a feminist. Building on feminist of color scholarship in particular, Ahmed offers a poetic and personal reflection on how feminists develop a "feminist self" by recognizing and affirming their estrangement from the societies, institutions, and systems they have been familiar with all their lives that they have identified as being oppressive and restrictive. She epitomizes the feminist experience with the figure of the "feminist killjoy"; this figure is described as one that goes against and resists what society expects her to align herself to. In Ahmed's words, "The feminist killjoy comes up

without you having to say anything. You can kill joy just by not being made happy by the right things. Or maybe whether you are happy or not is not the question: you have to appear happy at the right moments [...] You can kill joy because you are not properly attuned to the requirements of a social system.” (Ahmed 2017, 53-56). This figure becomes subversive, it gains feminist consciousness, as it kills other people’s joy in adhering to systems and its championed beliefs that confine, exploit, and harm. Feminist consciousness is described as “a consciousness of the violence and power concealed under the languages of civility, happiness, and love, rather than simply or only consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility.” (62).

The feminist killjoy realizes that the world she is in is not the world she thought she was in by attuning to feelings of discomfort, unhappiness, and damage stored in her body by being in contact with a world that was not made for and by her and that causes much suffering and unquestioned compliance. She embodies opposition and is driven to get in the way of others seemingly happy acquiescence to the system ; “If to be a killjoy is to be the one who gets in the way of happiness, then living a feminist life requires being willing to get in the way. When we are willing to get in the way, we are willful.” (66). Willfulness becomes a fundamental component of feminist subjectivity, which Ahmed recognizes as a subjectivity that society deems a “failed subjectivity” as it is assumed as a consequence of “immature will, a will that has yet to be disciplined or straightened out”; here, critique, opposition, speaking about injustice, power, and inequality is equated with self-interest and a strategy to get one’s own way (66-71). Conversely, Ahmed wants willfulness to be understood as a quality akin to feminism that brings about in the feminist subject “the acquisition of a voice as a refusal to be beaten”, “not being willing to be owned”, that allows her to become audible and allowing her scream to make violence visible (73). In short, the feminist killjoy is a figure that is willful, who develops a feminist consciousness by resisting happiness as endorsed by social systems, and who uses her voice to call out violence and get in the way of society’s “business as usual”.

Because of the grind that comes with being oppositional, becoming a feminist killjoy is going to be part of the work that feminism requires: an assignment, a self-assignment with cumulative results, better yet, homework. As Ahmed describes it, “feminism is homework because we have much to work out from not being at home in a world. In other words, homework is work on as well as at our homes. We do housework. Feminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild

the master's residence" (Ahmed 2017, 7). The metaphor of the house indicates the need for systemic change, a complete do-over of a system that doesn't serve everyone but the most privileged and our fabricary comforts. This change comes from the personal, from our homes, from our spirits, from our interpretations of the world and others, from how we view ourselves, it's a fully embodied resolution to bring about a transformation that has not yet been incarnated. Work, and even more so work that calls for such intentional and embodied effort, can take a toll and gives rise to new challenges: "to live a feminist life, is to be a feminist at work" (89). Fragility is a state of being, a phenomenon, that is considered by Ahmed "the wear and tear of living a feminist life"; feeling depleted, materially and from a stance of embodiment, comes from "not having the energy to keep going in the face of what you come up against." (163). Having to continuously go up against injustice, while being conscious of one's predicament and being willing to oppose the systems in place (even living within ourselves), renders the feminist killjoy a "leaky container", a site of damage that breaks, falls apart, and tears open what is at times painful to let go of and destroy (Ahmed 2017, 171). Survival then is the state that sees this figure trudging on as this battle against injustice becomes more and more personal, as well as an imperative commitment to the survival of others, killjoys and not.

Survival is the work that is shared with others, living a feminist life will see feminists coming together, needing assistance with working through and working out these challenges, thus the connections that are built and each other's survival must be attended to. The cost of not surviving is bigger than oneself, even bigger than a collective, it's the loss of feminism as a whole. Feminism depends on this crucial entanglement. On this, Ahmed writes "Feminism needs those of us who live lives as feminists to survive; our life becomes a feminist survival. But feminism needs to survive; our life becomes a feminist survival in this other sense. Feminism needs us; feminism needs us not only to survive but to dedicate our lives to the survival of feminism. Feminists need feminism to survive." (236). Thus, the feminist killjoys of this world and beyond embrace the commitment to survival to guarantee the existence of feminism and each other's.



## The Bad Feminist

Gay is a well known feminist writer, scholar, and cultural commentator. She is best known for her novels, short story collections, memoirs, articles for the New York Times, and, most importantly for the purposes of this research, her bestselling essay collection *Bad Feminist* (2014). Gay's work reflects her personal and philosophical optic of the world, one that builds upon and espouses queer black feminist thought, and takes an ethical, critical, and political stance towards the complexities and asymmetries of the flawed world we live in. In *Bad Feminist*, Gay presents the reader with the body of personal essays and critical work that she published over the past several years; these essays form a roadmap of Gay's evolution as a queer woman of color while simultaneously expounding on contemporary cultural events/phenomenons and the state of feminism today. In her introduction to *Bad Feminist*, Gay discloses "These essays are political and they are personal. They are, like feminism, flawed, but they come from a genuine place. I am just one woman trying to make sense of this world we live in. I'm raising my voice to show all the ways we have room to want more, to do better" (Gay 2014, 131). This statement concisely captures Gay's vision and intentions for this collection: to present the reader with a profoundly personal and politically charged outlook on the need to critically examine and creatively attend to the contradictions found in the world and in oneself. In this collection, alongside societal fallacies, feminism is also put in the hot seat as it is understood as a site in which inconsistencies and convolution can be found. Moreover, Gay puts her own feminist subjectivity up for inspection to expose the reader (and herself) to the various paradoxes and conflicts that come with being a feminist today while juxtaposing herself to traditional/mainstream principles and definitions of feminism. The figure of the "Bad Feminist" will then be used, in a playful yet poignant way, to describe this conundrum and will allow Gay to make space for new ways to interpret feminism and what it means to be feminist.

Gay uses the "bad feminist" to describe herself, a feminist who seems at odds with Feminism. She uses the word *Feminism* with a capitalized F to bring forth a crucial difference between what she calls "essential feminism" and other feminisms. Essential feminism to Gay is the type of feminism that embodies many of the stereotypes that society at large has about feminists, ones that are very much in line with the same stereotypes that were popularized during the first and second wave of feminism of the last century. Moreover, essential Feminism here

gets associated to ideas of essentialism that champion the belief that there is only one way to be feminist, one way to think in a feminist way, and one way to live by one's feminist principles; for this last point, Gay brings Butler's research on gender and her oppositional stance towards society's beliefs on gender essentialism, which defends the theory that there are essential, unchangeable, and differential qualities that make up males and females, therefore making gender a fixed category. Following this line of thinking, Gay describes essential feminism as such: "Butler's thesis could also apply to feminism. There is an essential feminism or, as I perceive this essentialism, the notion that there are right and wrong ways to be a feminist and that there are consequences for doing feminism wrong. Essential feminism suggests anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles, and a prescribed set of rules for how to be a proper feminist woman, or at least a proper white, heterosexual feminist woman—This is nowhere near an accurate description of feminism, but the movement has been warped by misperception for so long that even people who should know better have bought into this essential image of feminism." (Gay 2014, 304). As a consequence, it doesn't allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality, and by doing so, it narrows the possibilities for multiple and discordant points of view (304). The rules and qualities that Gay identifies as making up the essential feminism's Feminist, which gets put up on what she calls the "Feminist Pedestal" and revered as a mythical "Good Feminist", describe them as being "militant, perfect in their politics and person, man-hating, humorless", a Feminist who is loud and provocative, who becomes a figurehead of the movement, and who is completely at ease within the "sisterhood" in which they perfectly fit in given that they are comporting themselves in "sisterhood-approved ways" (316-317). The myth of the essential Good Feminist and all their seemingly redeemable qualities, is acknowledged by Gay as a standard that even feminists that recognize the fault of essentialist thinking can fall trap to, as feminism is made up of people, and people are familiar with society's unreachable standards to model themselves to while trying to straighten out their "flaws".

The Bad Feminist then is a rebuttal, an alternative to the Good Feminist. Gay describes the Bad Feminist (while identifying herself as one) as being one that is flawed, that feels the pressures to live up to certain ideals both from feminism and society, all the while making space for their own sometimes contrasting characteristics, and working on appreciating their ever-changing and intentional efforts to become a better person. The figure of the Bad Feminist

contrasts with the ideas of essential feminism because it represents contradictions, struggle, growth, and plurality. The Bad Feminist doesn't want to be put on a Feminist Pedestal and doesn't believe there is only one way to be a feminist; they deal with their contrasting features, and accept the messiness with being a person and a feminist in a world that makes both of those things arduous. Moreover, they accept the plurality in other people and respect others' choices, even when they are not in line with feminism, or a specific manifestation of feminism. On this, Gay elaborates "Feminism is a choice, and if a woman does not want to be a feminist, that is her right, but it is still my responsibility to fight for her rights. I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn't make certain choices for ourselves [...] We don't all have to believe in the same feminism. Feminism can be pluralistic so long as we respect the different feminisms we carry with us, so long as we give enough of a damn to try to minimize the fractures among us. Feminism will better succeed with collective effort, but feminist success can also rise out of personal conduct." (Gay 2014, 106-120). There is empathy and grace in the Bad Feminist's approach, as well as an awareness of the complexities that come from wanting to do good in the world, struggling to do so because of internalized injustice and having to let go of privilege, and having to consistently build stamina and check oneself to grow. Gay's understanding of feminism is one that starts with the people in it and recognizing their flaws; for Gay, "feminism is flawed because it is a movement powered by people and people are inherently flawed", and there should be more focus on the flawed people who act in the name of the movement rather than "holding feminism to an unreasonable standard where the movement must be everything we want and must always make the best choices" (69).

### **The Wayward**

Hartman is a scholar at Columbia University, author, and Guggenheim Fellow. Her best known works are *Lose Your Mother* and *Scenes of Subjection*. Her interests and research foci encompass African American and American literature, gender studies and queer theory, cultural history, and performance studies. Hartman's interests and signature writing style flawlessly coalesce in one of her recent books *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories Of Social Upheaval* (2019). In *Wayward Lives*, Hartman explores the revolution of black intimate life in the early decades of the twentieth century in Philadelphia and New York. This intimate revolution saw

young black women at center stage; these women would create forms of intimacy, kinship, and relationships, as well as new pathways and aspirations for a better life, through their quotidian choices and actions. A key element to *Wayward Lives*, is Hartman's choice to focus on what she calls "minor figures", the people in history that have been disregarded from history books, the anonymous that have lived "minor lives" that were not seen worthy of being remembered. This choice is very much aligned with Hartman's underlying principles: "For decades I have been obsessed with anonymous figures, and much of my intellectual labor was devoted to reconstructing the experience of the unknown and retrieving minor lives from oblivion" (Hartman 2019, 31).

Hartman's focus on minor figures then can be interpreted as a political commitment to ascertain and appreciate the narratives that have methodically been suppressed and erased. The effacing of minor figures' accounts is consistent with the systemic belief that some lives, especially the lives of the most marginalized, are insignificant and must be rendered more so by excluding them from cultural remembrance and minimizing their experience into debasing scripts. To counteract this cycle, with *Wayward Lives*, Hartman brings these narratives back to life by thoroughly researching and piecing together archival material traces of these histories and expanding on those relying on her intuition, compassion, and radical imagination. This process results in comprehensive, rich, and stirring narratives that were otherwise stripped of any life, dignity, and worth. Moreover, the young black women's narratives in *Wayward Lives* are not just reassembled and enriched, but they are most importantly credited for what they were never acknowledged for: shaping a cultural movement and giving way to revolutionary pursuits. Hartman does this by recreating their voices using their words as much as possible, inhabiting the intimate dimensions of their lives, conveying the sensory experience of the city and capturing the rich landscape of black social life of the time (Hartman 2019, xiii). Therefore, she employs the method of 'close narration' that she describes as "a style which places the voice of narrator and character in inseparable relation, so that the vision, language, and rhythms of the wayward shape and arrange the text" (xiv). This style is purposefully chosen to stay as close as possible to the protagonists' experience, the world they were immersed in (both the spaces in which they were part of and the ones they were rejected from), and to reflect and carefully speculate on the feelings and visions they had for themselves and the future. The goal here is that by providing such abounding and animated narratives/accounts, both the reader and the narrator gets the

opportunity to “understand and experience the world as these women did, to learn from what they know” (xiv).

As a way to acknowledge their rebellious and visionary spirit, Hartman associates them with the appellation of “wayward”. In this text, “wayward” is described in relation to waywardness and to the familial words that it suggests: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild (Hartman 2019, 227). Being wayward suggests the longing to wander and the opposition to stay fixed in an unwelcoming and deficient place/time. Wandering in search of new possibilities and new ways of living that oppose and break free from enclaves designed to not foster certain lives and instrumentalized to annihilate any attempt at living by the former. Waywardness is represented as a “social poesis”, a “practice of the social otherwise”, a “practice of possibility”, a “beautiful experiment in how-to-live”, that emboldens the dispossessed and leaderless to find a better place than here and explore *what might be* (227-228). This search and practice unfolds in the ordinary and quotidian; it is exercised in the acts of rebellion, the desires and dreams that are pursued, the love that is felt for what is unlovable, the unlikely paths and lifestyles that are taken as one’s own, the assertion of life and an undying care for oneself/one’s kinfolk. The young black women of this book are waywards because, as Hartman describes them, “they were radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise” (xv). These waywards asserted their claim to life to produce more life, opened and trod trails to the future/for the future, and breathed their knowledge into the spirits of their successors to pass on the longing for freedom.

### **Section III: Analysis**

After bringing together my interviewees narratives and the relevant theory I chose to expand on the feminist political subject and feminist militancy, I found myself sifting through all of it in search of meaningful connections and themes. My intention to juxtapose these two forms of knowledge, specifically their insights on feminist identity and experience pertinent to this chapter, came from an initial intuition and a closeness to the topic and the insights shared. All three of the texts I shared here are readings that I came to enjoy and cherish. I read *Living a Feminist Life*, *Bad Feminist*, and *Wayward Lives* during my graduate studies at a time when I

was struggling with my politics, my sense of self, my mental health, the convergences between the three, and the material expressions of the incongruities I navigated as a consequence of this disarray. Getting introduced to these texts that focused and valued the feminist identity and experience not only due to an ethical/political alignment with these concepts, but also due to a personal familiarity with being a feminist and an appreciation for the multiple facets and unique struggles that come with living a feminist life, became of profound inspiration for me and felt like kismet. Like with all things that are meant to come together, these texts inserted themselves at the right time, providing me with much appreciated insight and language to understand my co-creators' experiences. Even though their "data" on or sources of feminist subjectivity and living differ from mine, that is to say they come from either personal insights and/or archival knowledge while mine mainly comes from interview material, what I think all four of our works bring about is the commitment to give a tangible, sensible, and relatable representation of these by not making them an afterthought or an example but by placing them at center stage.

Of course, the language and even the definitions of feminist and feminism that come through our subjects may differ, most notably Hayward's subjects are not defined as feminists, same goes for their politics or visionary outlooks, both because this information could not be uncovered from the archives and because especially marginalized black women weren't likely to be included in early feminist circles, yet on account of Hayward's own feminist politics and the intersectional gender/sexuality/race politics and the revolutionary mindset present in their stories, they can be interpreted as such. What helped me with crafting this chapter, was by imagining Ahmed's, Gay's, and Hayward's archival subjects and symbolified conceptions as feminist figurations and putting them in conversation with my feminist activist co-creators. I soon came to see that Verde, Viola, and Rosa's reflections could easily overlap and interact in a meaningful way with the Feminist Killjoy, the Bad Feminist, and the Wayward as they all present a complex entanglement between the commitment towards radical politics and justice, and the intimate dimensions of resistance and becoming the change that is fostered. My intention in this final section is displaying a potential interaction between the feminist subject and the feminist figuration, as a way to provide to the reader a closer look of the intricacies discussed in the interview collage and literature review and tie them together, producing an expanded picture of feminist becoming, being, living, and resisting. As a way to simplify this objective, I will recapitulate the main themes from the interviews and the theory by distinguishing them into three

portions: feminist (re)born, feminist (re)vision, and feminist (re)definition. The (re) present in all three titles is meant to signify the wiggling through, the tracing and retracing motion, and the backwards and forwards oscillation which comes with feminist becoming and living as one grows, navigates, and reinvents the latter within dominant and unjust systems; as being and living in a constant movement and transformation.

### **Feminist (re)born**

How does one become a feminist? What sparks this process? In previous sections, I have identified quotes and passages from interviews and literature. I will attempt to bring these together to capture a couple features of this phenomenon. In the interviews, a passage had been identified that came to stand as a signifier for the catalyst into feminism. A trip, a collective experience, joining an activist cause or feminist organization, a critical encounter with injustice, a book or an article, a work environment and its ethics. These were seen as happenings that triggered the political rebirth of Verde, Viola, and Rosa; these happenstances aroused in my co-creators the need to deepen their understanding of the world they had been living in, to make sense of their feelings of displeasure and discord towards the established authorities and culture, and begin their journey towards a feminist identity formation. Moreover, the overwhelming feeling is one of having found a purpose, gained a radical optic that enables the discernment of the system's cracks and connections as well as the insight into creating a new reality, and learned a language from which a formerly repressed voice could express itself and call out in protest. This sensation and experience of profound change can be clearly identified in Verde, Viola and Rosa's statements shared in the interview collage on what feminism has meant and means for them today. For Verde, feminism has become her reason for living and a whole new way to live social relations and appreciate the power of the collective. For Viola, it has changed her activism and has rendered even her daily life an act of opposition towards oppressive institutions and dominant societal discourse. For Rosa, feminism has sparked a prominent change in her consciousness, in her view of the world and the patriarchal systems that corrupt it, in her language that is now capable of identifying and expressing the feminist optic, and in her relationship with rage towards injustice; her experience was cathartic, as she conveys it with her claim that she "brought herself back into the world as a feminist."

This journey was initiated and intensified for Verde, Viola, and Rosa by being exposed to feminist collectives, ethics, theories, however it can be safe to speculate that these transformative encounters were also supported by their own sense of opposition towards societal pressures and institutions. As Rosa claims, “I was probably already a feminist before, but I wasn’t calling myself one. I brought myself back into the world as a feminist”. Feminism brings back, retrieves and names a spirit that was frictional, oppositional, yet subdued and diffused. There is almost a sense of relief that is gathered once that part of oneself, that felt but couldn’t express itself, finds an entire philosophy, ethic, and collective that incarnates, identifies, and expands on feeling out of tune with what is concerning and damaging about the world. This brought to mind Ahmed’s feminist figure, the feminist killjoy. The feminist killjoy comes out when least expected, it doesn’t necessarily need to be called upon, her presence will be felt first by the feeling of not being attuned to what others consider “right”, “normal”, or “happy”. The feminist killjoy is fueled by feminist consciousness that she gains by going against the pretenses and ordinariness of a system that conceals its power and violence under the guise of normalcy and happiness. In my co-creators’ experience, as mentioned before, this feeling of uneasiness towards what they were able to perceive (not yet quite identify) as deceitful and much more complex and intricate, was then expanded, refined, enabled, and acted upon by encountering feminism in its flesh and in its theory.

From feeling, to reflection, to action, to living. This could be seen as a pattern of development of feminist subjectivity, though of course not a homogenous or linear one by any means. Although a forward-thinking vision can be/is involved as part of the political project, living life as a feminist does not have to embody a continuous progression towards ultimate *feminist-ness* (more on this later) with specific steps to take, as it does not present a dogma to adhere to or a higher selfhood to achieve; growth is present, but in the form of *growing out of* what keeps us bound and complicit to social systems that harm and exploit instead of foster and nurture life in all of its strangeness, incomprehensible, and marvelous forms. Thus, Verde, Viola, Rosa, and the feminist killjoy develop their feminist consciousness by refuting the ration that stunts the maturation of a subversive force capable of unraveling an oppressive system. This subversive force present in and integral of the feminist, which causes friction and emboldens them to ‘get in the way’, call out, and refuse compliance, brings about the birth of a living



consciousness that signals a formation of a selfhood who channels previously unnamed feelings of edginess and discordance with the social systems in which they navigate.

### **Feminist (re)vision**

Another critical component of the feminist experience, also very much tied to the feminist consciousness and selfhood identified in the previous section, is the vision that a feminist has for a different and better world. A revolutionary vision can be initiated from personal circumstances with hardship, an increasing awareness of the layers of systemic injustice, a specific cause or a moment of intense joy in which one sees the potential for change. It can start from and be intensified by daydreams, desires, and unfulfilled prospects. All of these occurrences and phenomena can very much be entangled and can come to form the canvas onto which the feminist expands on her vision. For Verde, Viola, and Rosa what sparked their radical visions was their experiences within activist collectives in which they got to share, weave, and live out what they perceive as an ideal sociality fundamental for a better world. In their case, *Non Una Di Meno* was very much the sandbox in which they learned to appreciate, as Rosa describes it, “the beauty in collectivity”, from which, as Verde recounts it, “a new starting point for a new strength” was found. Within activist collectives, the shared oppression and developing feminist consciousness, visions for revolution were developed and fostered. These visions became part of how Verde, Viola, and Rosa interacted with others, reinvisioned themselves, their roles in society, and their outlook on the world vs the world to be, as well as their daily life, what they occupied themselves with, who and what they spent most time with/on, their dreams and their plans.

These changes can be understood as attempts towards manifesting and practicing worlding. The act of practicing worlding that I associated with my co-creators’ attempts at manifesting a feminist vision of the world, very much reminded me of Hartman’s understanding of ‘waywardness’. The idea of ‘practicing an otherwise’ in one’s daily life, connecting one’s vision for the future to one’s dreams and actions in the present, bending the notions of temporality and creating new pathways and optics that were not seen as attainable before but that now opened up a whole new set of possibilities--all this I found to be extremely illuminating when thinking about the element of feminist vision present in feminist living. As discussed in the

literature review section, Hartman's Wayward is a minor figure that is capable of extraordinary things, such as cultivating a radical imagination that brings forth new possibilities which are not yet tangible in the here and now. The Wayward wonders, daydreams, and desires more than what is available to her (or has been available even before her time); she conjures a better life for herself by tending to her vision and practicing it in her quotidian. By doing so, she not only attempts to improve her situation, but is able to provide inspiration for those around her at the same time. Waywards affect each other and generate new ways of living that will open up more paths for those to come seeking to break free from the fixed scripts provided to them from societies that wish to trample on and exploit them. To visualize and experiment become the practices implemented by the Wayward to experience what might be and to rebel against a system that would rather they linger in an hostile place and time. Although, as mentioned previously, the Waywards that Hartman discusses about in *Wayward Lives* are individuals who were not identified as feminists, the figure of the Wayward itself and their praxis of worlding could be seen as an interesting example of a feminist figure and one that can be placed in relation to even a current formulation of feminist identity and living as they are a revolutionary figure trying to bring into creation new ways of living free of violence and injustice. The Wayward's and Verde, Viola, and Rosa's experience of recognizing the faults in the world they live in, the way it confines and subjugates them and the people around them, and their willingness to oppose to it and make way for better ways of living that disavow inequity and oppression, can be appreciated as a practice of feminist consciousness congruent with a feminist revision of the world.

### **Feminist (re)definition**

This final feminist (re)definition segment is informed by the personal struggles with the feminist identity, specifically shared by Viola and Verde. They both brought insights on how ideas of feminist identity are internalized and can potentially have concerning effects on a militant's wellbeing. These insights can be embodied by the following concepts, Viola's "militant schizophrenia" and by Verde's "model militant" discussed in the interview collage. Both concepts describe feelings of uneasiness and disturbance when embodying feminist militancy. Navigating these expectations and feeling these discomforts, has made them aware of the

drawbacks and/or faults that feminist consciousness and feminist ideals present, and have encouraged them to redefine their own ideas of feminist identity and how their own embodiment should look like. This final take is still a work in progress, as redefining one's ideas and identity is a lifetime process, but what is of interest to this research is the need for constant redefinition when ideals fall short.

When elaborating on her experience as a feminist activist, Viola brings up the sensation, which she describes as one that is felt collectively in the movement, of feeling “out of this world”, where a clear division is perceived between an inside world (the world of the feminist movement) and the outside world (the world outside of the feminist movement, the “normal” world). This sensation of partition between these two environments in which Viola and other militants navigate has a trickle effect on their sense of identity, which gets split in half accordingly. One self belongs in the inside world, and the other in the outside world. This feeling is described by Viola with the concept of “militant schizophrenia” where within a feminist militant there are two different and conflicting entities living within her that cannot coexist in the same environment, thus one has to be shut down. She gives the example of having to shut down her feminist militant self in the outside world in order to preserve herself from attacks and judgements by non-feminists. However, the same is applied in the inside world, in which she cannot necessarily be her “outside self”, or is not given the space to express her personal concerns that don't relate or resonate with the collective and its mission. Moreover, there is a sense of isolation in embodying feminist consciousness, that although it provides knowledge and awareness, it does also bring loneliness and at times a feeling of hopelessness when reflecting on the state of the world. Viola feels vulnerable living in her own skin, feeling the constant threat of unraveling, having to keep together these parts of herself that are not allowed to coexist at all times. This has reminded me of the feminist killjoy and Ahmed's reflection on this figure being a “container of damage”, a “leaky container”, that falls apart and tries to reassemble herself and the worlds that are crumbling around her. Fragility and messiness become woven into feminist identity and experience, which meddles with more whole-some and clear cut definitions of what a feminist identity looks like.

Having said this, what are popular ideas on feminist identity? What makes a powerful militant? This brings me to a critical reflection that was brought forth by Verde and that led me to review Gay's work as a way to expand more on the connection between feminist identity and

feminist ideals possibly present within a feminist movement. Verde brings forth an important concept: the model militant. She describes the model militant as “a militant who is strong, imperturbable, who is powerful enough that nothing can tarnish her.”. Here we can see the importance of stamina, strength, and power which could be argued to be affiliated to dominant patriarchal ideals of masculinity especially revered in masculine leaders. Moreover, Verde describes this as being an “unspoken rule” amongst militants, a code of behavior in which showcasing one's strengths and concealing one's weaknesses is perceived as being more evolved and closer to embodying the model feminist militant. It might come to no surprise to the reader that through this rhetoric of the model militant, I was reminded of Gay's discussion on essential feminism and the figures of the “good feminist” and the “bad feminist”. The model militant has very much in common with the ideal feminist, or “good feminist”, that is championed by essential feminism. The good feminist and the model militant could be considered sisters as they both are ideals of what a feminist should be and embody: a strong, rigorous, and unshakeable individual completely dedicated to the feminist cause who is meant to become a figurehead of the movement and to be placed on a “feminist pedestal”. Most importantly, they are both ideals that are very much out of touch with the complexities/intersections of individuals and the complications that come while navigating dominant unjust systems, let alone simultaneously trying to dismantle those same systems. In fact, these models, as Gay explains, are mostly meant to be incarnated by proper white, heterosexual feminist women, which of course erases and limits who gets to be considered a good feminist. Hence, Gay proposes the figure of “bad feminist” to promote a more complex, inclusive, attentive, and realistic definition of a feminist.

Both Gay and my co-creators, are unsatisfied and critical of having to abide to an unrealistic definition of feminist selfhood, thus try to redefine their notions of the former by weeding through what is fictitious and meant to serve power dynamics and getting in touch with the more intricate, messy, and intimate realities of being a feminist. Through the lens of these types of essentialist models, especially when pertaining to feminist militants discussed in this research, not only are many individuals getting bypassed or criticized for not being a model militant, but entire realities and challenges that come with being a feminist militant get neglected because they are not seen as worthy of being discussed. If one cannot be candid about their struggles, especially ones that are critical to their continued participation in the movement, and has to abide to a code that limits their selfhood and relegates them to the role of a “worker bee”

for the sake of the cause---what type of feminist vision is being endorsed? What is the role of labor and how does it affect feminist living? What kind of social relations are being practiced? These will all be explored in the following chapters as my focus will turn to the collective, the relational, and the visionary aspects of feminism.

## Chapter Two:

### **Joy(less) Militancy: the Achilles heel of feminist activism**

I placed the discussion on feminist movements, relationality, and labor in the center of this research for a reason. Not because the other themes that are elaborated alongside these are somehow less valuable, however I believe that the role of the feminist collective, its premise, its practices, and its internal relations, are a major part of what feminism is built around and survives on. Because feminists and feminist collectives serve such an important function, they can have great effects on both the direction of the cause itself and the experience of the militants participating in its continuity. The ethics and practices championed by the movement and the way militants treat each other and others intertwine, as well as end up being a crucial component of the type of vision and social fabric that follows. This has become a relevant concern for myself and my co-creators when reflecting on the status of Italian feminism and its current most prominent representative Non Una Di Meno. Non Una Di Meno has meant very much for a lot of people, myself and my co-creators included, who have been hoping for a grassroots and big-scale feminist movement in Italy. Hence, the preoccupation and focus on NUDM, which brings me to the need to stop and reflect on the momentum and the craze for change felt within activist spaces today that I mentioned in the preface.

As it is important to direct our energies to the problems in our society and elaborate on potential ways to change it for the better, I find it also necessary to turn inward and appraise ourselves and the ways we are going about to foster change, especially in activist collectives. I see feminist movements not only as powerful political agents, but even more so as beautiful microcosms representative of how societies could be, how caring and interdependent individuals can come to form a social reality that has not been experienced before and can give us insight on what we can do now to be and do better for each other. I want this to be very clear as this chapter unfolds and will present critiques towards practices and relations that have been witnessed within NUDM. This portion of the research is not to tear down a movement, or suggest any form of impossibility to the feminist cause, but to point out and elaborate on perceived shortcomings that could come as a cost to feminist militants as well as to the longevity of NUDM. What follows then, is an interview collage, a literature review, and an analysis section that will expand upon

Italian feminism and NUDM, the role of activist labor, the social fabric of the movement and its shortcomings, as well as its ethical limitations and reach.

### **Section I: Interview Collage**

For this chapter, I have gathered the co-creators' insights on their experiences with working in a collective such as the Non Una Di Meno feminist movement. The three main topics that are discussed in this section will be activist labor, the movement's contributions to Italian feminism, and perceived obstacles and shortcomings. In the conversations with Verde, Rosa and Viola I tried to find out, how did activist labor affect their life and the relations among feminist activists? How do they observe the impact that feminist movements have on the political landscape? And finally, what dominant ideologies and practices adopted by NUDM do they see as corrupted and why? These will be themes that will come up throughout the interviews and will be explored in the sections to come.

#### ***On Feminist Activist Labor:***

*Can you tell me about the work you do/did in NUDM?* This question aimed at creating a safe space for the co-creators to reflect on and share their thoughts on their experience in NUDM and how their work as activists impacted their everyday life. The results provided an overarching theme which all three co-creators supported with their responses: the connection between the work done in activist movements and personal and relational wellbeing, as well as status within the movement.

Verde: 00:45:00 “A tension I felt was triggered by the apparent need and angst in feminist spaces to do a lot to compensate for the lack of feminist political presence in the last couple decades, and having to simultaneously keep up the strenuous level of effort required..it felt like a form of productivism”

00:45:25 “The first few years of Non Una Di Meno, that’s all I was doing. I invested my life, my everyday life on it”

00:46:58 “The work and the pace were unsustainable. I only withstood it because activism is my life, I made a life choice, renounced other things for this.”

00:48:03 [*referring to the daily work to keep the movement relevant, constantly in the know on current developments in feminist theory, growing in size and goals, reaching out through social media with constantly updated social commentary, and planning public assemblies and protests*]

“It was a lot because we decided to set very big goals. This required a lot of work. Everyone could only provide the energy they were able to give. Who does more, is more noticed and valued, has more control over the situation, more power at the end of the day. This thing here creates aversion and differences”

01:11:03 “It is also a question of class. Who stays in Non Una Di Meno today is not the *milanese* working class [*referring to the local NUDM chapter in Milan of which Verde was a part of*]. It’s a small, bourgeois reality with great visions but out of touch with the struggles of precariousness. The issues aren’t the same. The privileged positions of some have become the standard, instead the more precarious situations of others have become the oddities that aren’t taken into account and dealt with. The people in leadership positions are female intellectuals and scholars who have been in politics for some time and do not necessarily live difficult lives.”

Viola: 00:30:25 “The issue with the organizational frenzy in NUDM is that it makes assemblies environments in which to discuss plans and logistics, instead of places in which discussions of concepts, contents, experiences, and opinions can take place. To counteract this frenzy, there is the need to stop once in a while and organize meetings for consciousness-raising and to deepen our understanding of current feminist themes and literature. Also, organizing should remain horizontal, and not asymmetrical which at times happens and it creates divisions. The organizational frenzy goes against care. New people that come to NUDM tend to leave because they are confronted with a challenging environment which is not always super welcoming as we would want it to be. They need to have very thick skin. Some recurring issues are that time is scarce, there isn’t a fixed place in which to hold meetings, and we don’t pay much attention to each other. For a new person coming into NUDM, they are confronted with previously initiated assemblies, new themes, language, and topics that are not re-introduced and further discussed upon, intimidating public speaking, feeling excluded-especially if new to activism, and feeling a sense of abandonment since they are not given much attention”.



00:55:13 “There is a tendency of going into burnout, it’s important to take care of ourselves. Federici has talked about joyful militancy. First and foremost it must be a joy for those that do it (militancy) and sometimes it’s not really like this” [*referring to having to keep up with the pace and effort of feminist living and activism. Mentions Silvia Federici, Italian and American feminist scholar and activist, who had presented her thoughts on joyful militancy at a NUDM meeting*]

01:05:00 [*on taking care of herself and strategies of resistance she implements*] “I take periods of extended time off from the activity (from NUDM), I had to learn to. There isn’t a pretense that the level of attention and presence must always be the same. To preserve myself, I decided to quit working in the area of communications because it exposes you more to difficult news which are emotionally taxing. It’s important to shut yourself off from being hyper connected with the world of information. Asking for help and sharing with the collective helps”

Rosa: 00:09:23 “A heaviness (to my daily life) has been added, a la “feminist killjoy” [*referring to Sara Ahmed’s figure discussed in her book Living a Feminist Life (2017)*]. To counteract this, I have been leaning more towards a feminist latin american approach, in which joy is centered. Less destructive critique, more constructive critiques, more positive in action”.

00:31:40 “I see it (NUDM) as a great action machine, this in my opinion is a very good thing because it consistently produces a reading of the world from a feminist perspective. But I can confirm what I told you last time when we saw each other [*referring to my previous interview with her over Zoom for my “Splitting Bubbles” paper*] and I have explored this deeper since then. I have realized that this hyper connectivity causes me great anxiety, performative anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, and it was developing what I initially felt at Casa Delle Donne which urged me to reach out to NUDM in the first place, this “do-do-do” [*tr. fare-fare-fare. expression to indicate constant work and production at a fast and constant pace*]. And it’s also worth mentioning that in the meantime I have changed as well, I am less interested in certain projects and I favor others. I wasn’t able to cultivate the project that I cared for the most in NUDM. I am interested in relational projects, cultivating more intimate relations. In NUDM, the inside relational issues were never confronted seriously because there was a need to further the agenda. There were also exclusionist behaviors and asymmetrical measures that informed how to treat certain people versus others.”

00:37:03 “My life is not the movement, the movement is part of my life. I know that certain people in the movement would have rushed to my aid if I had needed it, but in my everyday life I wasn't able to devote myself enough to really feel this network [tr. rete. *referring to a supportive social network made up of other activists in NUDM*]. I felt that my experience was far from one that could've endured this pace and I wasn't really able to get closer, especially during the pandemic (I caught covid). I have a lifestyle that doesn't coincide, except during certain times in the past when I was fully committed, I was doing a lot and I was exhausted, I felt like I couldn't understand anything. It was an amazing experience, super intense, but now I could never keep up at that pace”

00:42:27 “You become NUDM and there are expectations in NUDM. The level and pace of production is equivalent to ones found in a formal job (and I already work forty hours per week as a domestic violence operator at Casa Delle Donne). It's alienating, this sociality is alienating, it's alienating this level of production even from a militant standpoint”.

### ***On the movement, part I:***

*What are your thoughts on Non Una Di Meno? What do you think are Non Una Di Meno's contributions to Italian feminism?* With these questions, my objective was for my co-creators to share their general feelings about Non Una Di Meno and their opinions on its impact on feminism in Italy today. They ended up focusing mainly on NUDM's position as Italy's main big-scale feminist movement of our generation, its international connections, and its discursive and practical difference with previous feminisms/feminist movements. This discussion is supposed to provide the reader with a more localized perspective of the movement in question and its standing from an activist perspective.

Verde: 01:43:00 “Non Una Di Meno, especially in its first year, was a watershed, it brought a form of radical political activism from the ground up that had not been seen before. It gave back legitimacy to feminism, centered the female experience, and practiced care. There is a need to see the full picture to understand NUDM's impact. Currently, there is a political crisis: there isn't an actual “left” in Italy [*referring to a more radical, socialist or communist left, similar to the leftist parties present in the 60's and 70's in Italy*], a political social fabric, or a meaningful

presence of neighborhood political subjects like before [*referring to either individuals or grassroots collectives in urban neighborhoods, which were popular back in the 60's and 70's*]. Neoliberalism has destroyed everything and has severely infiltrated politics, even the more radical ones. There is a need to start fresh, rewrite political projects from scratch, and find new ways to work together. When it comes to feminism, from the 1970s to the inception of NUDM, the dominant framework has been sexual difference, which discouraged any other type of feminist reading of society. With NUDM, our generation [*referring to millennial/gen z generation*] has the chance to redefine the discourse from the ground up, and distance it from sexual difference which is no longer relevant. We needed to carry out a new premise starting from the fact that by now precariousness tends to be so vast in Italy that it is difficult to find a woman who has only sexual issues as their only problem in the world. Being a woman now mixes with economic /class issues, sexual orientation, citizenship status, race, ability, etc. ".

Viola: 01:03:00 “The transnational collaboration has been very central to NUDM’s impact. Global predisposition is an important feature of NUDM. The goal is to unite all struggles, like with the choice of March 8 [*referring to International Women’s Day in which many feminist movements around the world, especially ones affiliated to NUDM, march/protest and organize international assemblies on relevant feminist topics and the state of the world*]. In Italy, we receive a lot of what comes from abroad, not so much the opposite. We are always a little behind from a theoretical point of view. Diversity and diverse subjectivities are more visible in a South American environment, or in the United States, or other EU countries. This connection is an important lifeline that nourishes the movement and enriches the discourses both from a theoretical point of view and from a “practices” point of view. This exchange has awakened and radicalized Italian feminism. The closest thing to mass feminism in Italy in the last couple decades was *Se Non Ora, Quando*, which was a form of hyper bourgeois feminism linked to formal political parties. Before NUDM there were only small collectives, without the same strength and visibility. Internal and external support was important to keep participation strong. NUDM’s strength manifests through the amount of people it manages to involve. Such manifestations had not been seen for a while. There is great female participation. Also, it has branches all over the nation, which means that even more remote places can engage with its politics”.

Rosa: 00:48:13 “NUDM is very important. It opens Italy to Latin America and other nations in the struggle. Transnationalism is increasingly gaining more importance. It connects the struggles, it presents initiatives of protests that welcome different realities. Non Una Di Meno started in October of 2016 inspired by Ni Una Menos in Argentina, which got their own start after the murder of Lucia Perez. Everything is connected. With transnationalism you recharge yourself with bigger relationships, join struggles, expand goals and horizons, and enrich the discourse. The pandemic has united us even more nationally and internationally: women and young people have been the most disadvantaged. There is no longer welfare and health as permanent rights. All this is common internationally. However there are drawbacks to transnationalism. Too much attention is placed only on the macro, which distracts from what is closest to more local realities. You lose even more incentive to care for relations within the movement, because it loses value when compared to the bigger, transnational agenda”.

***On the movement, part II:***

*What are some internal issues within the movement that you have witnessed? What are potential shortcomings and faults that Non Una Di Meno should address?* The intention with these questions was to go deeper with my co-creators about NUDM, and this time by focusing on the potential ethical, relational, and ideological deficiencies they might have witnessed or experienced during their time in the movement. Both Verde and Viola brought forth their concerns which centered on the asymmetries, exclusions, and shortcomings of the movement that they felt problematic and/or getting in the way of NUDM’s revolutionary potential.

Verde: 40:00:00 “Although it theorizes on intersectionality and decoloniality, racialized women are only participants and not protagonists. White visions prevail. Whiteness reigns in NUDM. This is something that I felt personally, as a daughter of black Haitian parents who have suffered from racism, and rendered insufferable this asymmetry within the movement”

54:30:00 [*On reason why she left NUDM*] “I have seen NUDM increasingly take on a very ideological attitude and lose that willingness to do social and trade union work, and instead acting as a political subject like any party [...] that never gets its hands dirty where people suffer

and has no idea how to make it happen, some things are just said, like a slogan to the point that even anti-violence centers [referring to women's shelters], the general left NUDM [...]. When the anti-violence centers left NUDM, the social work part of NUDM project took a backseat, the spirit of being in contact with social contexts was lost.”

1:01:00 [*On the approach/mission of NUDM*] “Ideological and abstract are the two key words. What I no longer find myself in is the idea that women outside of NUDM must become aware of being oppressed and join NUDM to free themselves. I don't find myself in the model of raising awareness. I do not feel like the enlightened feminist who goes to teach feminist catechism to other women. The problem (and this is what the anti-violence centers taught me and not the ideological feminists) is this: violence, women are willing to recognize it as such when they have the possibility of a concrete solution to get out of the violent situation they're in. Because becoming aware that we are in a violent situation and not having any other alternative in front of us is too painful, the brain and the heart can't take it, if there is no concrete solution in front of us, there is no willingness to call that thing violence, thus it will remain something that we are willing to endure. So I have become impatient with this work here to make women aware that they are oppressed without offering them concrete solutions. I find it bordering on incorrect”

1:04 “You have to become aware of the system and your situation, but also what you need from me, how I can help. It is I who have to become aware of the others, not the others who have to become aware of my feminism ”

1:08:00 “Just the unavailability of going out of one's comfort zone. NUDM only does what it already knows how to do. It doesn't experiment with new things, or different roles.[...] The theoretical or ideological language is exclusionary, and the practices are not directed towards disadvantaged lives. There is a fear of being in contact with unknown things or situations for fear of making mistakes. Language + performance + slogans, that can be the more accurate description of the political moment of the last ten years. That's not enough by any stretch.[...] It's still very much attached to the sort of politics that centers on the assembly, talking about stuff, making plans, but not actually doing the work step by step in between meetings”

Viola: 00:22:13 “At NUDM there is a lack of queer and racialized subjectivities. NUDM is centered on the heterosexual, female, cisgendered experience. There are age differences amongst the participants, so there are differences in thinking and speaking on the queer themes between

generations. An intersectional queer theme is young in Italian activism. There are some misunderstandings. The struggles are seen as distinct, consequently there is difficulty in organizing together. The history of Italian feminism was based on the gender binary. This may have influenced the centrality of the woman in NUDM. Feminism disappeared for a long time in the Italian radical left. LGBTQIA+ becomes an etcetera, an addition. The hard core of NUDM are the people who have been there from the beginning who are people who have a long political experience and have been in other political environments. Especially in this demographic, there is a struggle in understanding a certain type of language and experience that is more complex and that is present in the queer and racialized demographic. Also, there are specificities depending on the city or branch of NUDM. The issue of class and economic difference is more felt in Milan than in other cities. You can feel the difference between highly educated militants who do a certain type of work compared to other people with more difficulties".

## **Section II: Literature Review**

Contrarily to the first chapter's process for which I figured out early on a connection between the sources and the interview insights that would come to capture feminist (militant) selfhood, this chapter's focus on feminist militant collectivity, relationality, labor, and the experiences of my co-creators surrounding all three of these aspects, I found it harder to find supporting literature that had previously elaborated on these themes. From what I could attest during my research, it was not easy to come across literature that centered on feminist militancy and feminist movements, especially when trying to find analyses that expanded on the embodied experiences of these and were not solely focused on providing historical documentation. Specifically, Italian feminist militancy has not necessarily been much accounted for up until recently, and even so, I had trouble coming across literature on more contemporary renditions of feminist activist movements. Nevertheless, my aim for this chapter remained to provide an in-depth analysis of the materialization and the prevalent roles and impact of relations/relationality and labor within feminist movements. To ensure this, I decided to support this research with literature that I believed appreciated the importance of feminist militancy and movements, namely Giovanna Parmigiani's *Feminism, violence and representation in modern Italy* "We are witnesses, not victims" (2019), Cinzia Aruzza, Nancy Fraser, and Tithi Bhattacharya *Feminism for the 99%*

(2019), and Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery's *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (2017).

Besides providing an adept foundation for interventions on relationality and labor in feminist movements, most of the research shared narrows on or at least considers the Italian sociopolitical and activist context, which helps me when having to start from my co-creators' experiences and the NUDM feminist movement, all very much pertinent to Italian politics. By studying these works, I gained more awareness of the historical patterns of Italian feminism, as well as the contemporary global resuscitation of feminism that primarily lives in the form of expansive, intersectional, and international grassroots activist movements. Moreover, they provided me with a scholarly feminist perspective on what a fulfilling militant life should look like and what practices or iterations of feminism could be corruptive or damaging to movements trying to disavow capitalist, racist, and classist principles. All of these insights will favor a thorough discussion of the state of Italian feminism today and the shortcomings that come with the misuse of labor and of the potential that relations amongst militants could bring. Thus, this section will start with a review of Parmigiani's historical account of contemporary feminism to provide the reader with some context on the patterns that have been identified in Italian feminism which Parmigiani captures with the metaphor of the "karstic river" and today's politics of visibility, followed by Aruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya's anti-capitalist analysis of global feminist movements and the drawbacks of liberal feminism, and finally, concluded by Bergman and Montgomery's observations on the dangers of "rigid radicalism" found in many movements across the world and the importance of joy in militancy.

### **Parmigiani: Italian Feminism (Today)**

In 2019, Parmigiani publishes *Feminism, Violence, and Representation in Modern Italy* in which she explores the word and phenomenon of *femminicidio* (femicide) as a tool that ignited a new and contemporary wave of feminism and provided it with legitimacy in the national political discourse. Based on nearly two years of fieldwork among feminist activists, Parmigiani reflects on the myriad of ways in which violence inflicts the lives of women in Italy, as well as how traditional and contemporary representations of female suffering under patriarchal violence have shaped (and are shaping) the future and status of this demographic. Furthermore, and of interest

to this research, she delves into the work that feminist activist collectives have put to reestablish feminism as a political force and as a relevant intellectual space in which to meditate on, interpret, and center the Italian female experience. To contribute to this chapter's discussion on feminist movements, as well as to localize my research and provide some recent historical context, I want to bring attention to Parmigiani's interpretations of Italian feminism, especially its more recent manifestations.

According to Parmigiani, once second wave feminism "lost" its momentum in the mid-to-late 1980's, it would take some time still for feminist thought to reemerge from the academy, the *librerie delle donne*, and the smaller groups of consciousness raising into the public arena. Visibility will be a major challenge for years to come in the new millennium as newly organized feminist collectives step out from their bubbles and push their way through public discourse to make their presence known. When reflecting upon the feminist movement in Italy, Parmigiani and her interviewees agree upon this very poignant descriptor: the karstic river. "The Italian feminist movement is like a karstic river", as Parmigiani points out, 'the metaphor of the karstic river is used frequently and ubiquitously among Italian feminists in order to interpret and narrate the history of Italian feminist movements and it responds to the need to find a shared historical narrative that comes to terms with the diversification and the divergences between the specific experiences of the different feminisms that have been developing in Italy since the beginning of the past century' (Parmigiani 2019, 50). Like a karstic river, Italian feminist history is described as having been nonlinear and having developed with alternate phases punctuated by presences and silences, appearances, and disappearances. This vision of a karstic river is put in opposition to the more linear flow of a river under the sun which seems to have a more reliable and predictable nature. This need to see Italian feminism under a shared historical narrative is meant to also counteract the imposed invisibility and misrepresentation of the feminine experience in major historical and national moments such as during the Resistenza (i.e., the resistance movement that fought against Fascism during the Italian Civil War, 1943–1945). To this, Parmigiani shares Segal's argument on how the construction of the collective memory around anti-Fascism stresses how men "did" the Resistenza, while women just "contributed" to it (50). The patriarchal discourse around Italian history and its total erasure of women's and other marginalized communities' presence and role in constructing it, build up a frustration and a sense of ambivalence, felt especially by contemporary feminists, towards the periodical emergence and



disappearance of feminist presence in the public arena exemplified in the karstic river metaphor. As Parmigiani poignantly illustrates, this irregular pattern representative of the Italian feminist presence in society might have been a result of choosing not to be misinterpreted and exploited by others' gazes but it also ran the risk of looking like a way of not existing or impacting society (51).

Thus, although this pattern might have served well for times of regrouping, expanding, and rearticulating the feminist optic and cause, in recent years it has become imperative for most feminist collectives to challenge this tendency and come out in the open. This brings Parmigiani's discussion to contemporary feminist collectives who have lived through the feminist river's "drought" and were thirsting for change. Growing up and aging into one's political subjectivity in this arid and seemingly hopeless climate, has produced restless and much more aggressive attitudes toward the need for visible and tangible social change and militancy. Moreover, as Parmigiani noted in her fieldwork, there were two aspects, sometimes intertwined, that seemed to inflame the spirits of the women participating in feminist debates: the issues around the need to be visible in the public political arena, and those stemming from the need to be acknowledged (tr. *riconosciute*) by other generations of feminists who at times seemed skeptical about the potential of the new feminist generation (Parmigiani 2019, 55).

The first manifestation of this new generation's potential and commitment to the feminist cause and to re-enter the political arena came from the feminist collective *Se Non Ora Quando* (SNOQ, "If not now when") in the early 2010s, followed by *Non Una Di Meno* who Parmigiani acknowledges as being the most prominent and influential feminist movement of its time that has opened up the Italian feminism to international cooperation and has branched its mission and reach by introducing concepts such as intersectionality. Both movements have brought back the enthusiasm towards large-scale protests and strikes that have been dormant for many years. Currently, *Non Una Di Meno* each year on March 8th for International Women's Day brings together thousands of people and women nationally to strike and bring awareness to the multitude of issues and acts of violence inflicted on women and the most marginalized in Italy and internationally. The media coverage of these events is unprecedented and has given great visibility to women's groups for the first time in many years, even if not always in the best light or for the right reasons. Nonetheless, as Parmigiani argues, the emergence of these big-scale feminist movements has represented a reappearance of the karstic river, which has provided an

answer to the anxiety around visibility that many feminist women sought. Moreover, this emergence inspired other feminist collectives, many of them new to activism, to organize across the nation and prove to older feminist generations and society at large that a new day of feminist militancy was upon us (56).

### **Arruzza, Fraser, & Bhattacharya: Feminism for the 99% vs liberal feminism**

In 2019, Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya published their work *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* as a political project and as an anti-capitalist analysis of today's feminism. The vision of feminism that the authors hold is one that denounces any form of oppression, exploitation, and expropriation caused by the one culprit that they perceive as being responsible for most of past and present suffering, namely capitalism. Throughout their manifesto, capitalism is described as the social system responsible for socio-economical divisions, historical appropriation, gender and sexual violence, racial injustice, political unrest, war, and environmental degradation. All these phenomena form the crisis of society that is being felt collectively at present and that is pushing people to organize. Feminism, specifically Feminism for the 99% proposed by Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya, if it recognizes capitalism as the primary source of all struggles and espouses an intersectional vision that is at once feminist as it is anti-racist, anti-ableist, queer, and environmentally conscious, it has the potential of being the causing force of capitalism's demise. In their own words, "Contra fashionable ideologies of "multiplicity," the various oppressions we suffer do not form an inchoate, contingent plurality. Although each has its own distinctive forms and characteristics, all are rooted in and reinforced by, one and the same social system. It is by naming that system as capitalism, and by joining together to fight against it, that we can best overcome the divisions among us that capital cultivates: divisions of culture, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and gender." (Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya 2019, 55).

Besides the global and persistent harm capitalism inflicts on societies and the planet, capitalism is also a major contributor to the erasure or domestication of revolutionary organizing and spirit. A specific and very current iteration of capitalism that has corrupted many forms of resistance including feminism has been global and financialized neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is described by Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya as "that exceptionally predatory, financialized form of capitalism that has held sway across the globe for the last forty years. Having poisoned

the atmosphere, mocked every pretense of democratic rule, stretched our social capacities to their breaking point, and worsened living conditions generally for the vast majority, this iteration of capitalism has raised the stakes for every social struggle, transforming sober efforts to win modest reforms into pitched battles for survival” (Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya 2019, 3). Neoliberalism is the coercive and enticing force that is understood by the authors as being responsible for a form of mainstream feminism called liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is the type of feminism that is most represented in mainstream media, which champions the idea that social equality and emancipation, in particular women’s equality and emancipation, are best reached through social reform and female empowerment in the workplace. Although liberal feminism might at times sound more radical, as when it condemns “discrimination” and advocates for “freedom of choice,” it still very much refuses to address the socioeconomic constraints that make freedom and empowerment impossible for the large majority of people; as Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya claim, the real aim of liberal feminism is not equality, but meritocracy and rather than seeking to abolish social hierarchy, it aims to “diversify” it, “empowering” “talented” privileged women to rise to the top while outsourcing oppression and excusing liberalism while it disguises regressive policies with an image of progressiveness (11).

What the authors suggest instead as a counter feminist movement is more aligned with the “strike feminisms” (as defined by them) that have been surfacing globally in more recent years. On March 8th, 2017, many feminist collectives around the world, including Non Una Di Meno, joined in strike to restore the political essence to International Women’s Day, and to reclaim the roots of the act of striking present in historic struggles for workers’ rights and social justice. Moreover, and most importantly, according to Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya, this promising movement has invented new ways to strike and infused the strike form itself with a new kind of politics, which is broadening the scope of the feminist cause and the understanding of class struggle, as well as replenishing the repertoire of strike actions, once large but dramatically shrunk by a decades-long neoliberal offensive (Arruzza, Fraser, and Bhattacharya 2019, 7). This way of doing feminist militancy is akin to the feminism that the authors envision, which does not limit itself to “women’s issues” as they are defined, that understands the interconnectedness of race, environment, and capital, and is willing to take the stand for all who are exploited, dominated, and oppressed under neoliberalism and capitalism.

### **Bergman and Montgomery: joyful militancy and rigid radicalism**

In 2017, Bergman and Montgomery published *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*, with the intention to uncover the reasons behind the feelings of inadequacy, competition, angst, exhaustion, and fear present within social justice movements today that compromise the staying power and impact of militancy. Woven into this intention is the need for militancy to be present and thrive, especially in times of duress, to fight against injustice and to introduce better ways of coexisting, as well as the premise that militancy and joy should not be oppositional, but very much connected in order to withstand the exertions and complications movements will have to face. Bergman and Montgomery go about exploring militancy, its need for joy and the drawbacks of rigid radicalism through their own interpretations and research, as well through interviews they conducted of well-known feminist scholars and authors on this topic.

Bergman and Montgomery's understanding of joyful militancy comes from their interpretation of Spinoza's conceptualization of joy. According to Spinoza, joy is not an emotion but an expansion in one's power to affect and be affected; it is a process of transformation that makes one capable of new things, with others, and encapsulates what Spinoza appreciates as the meaning of life (Bergman and Montgomery 2017, 29). Although oftentimes joy gets associated with happiness, the latter is not something that is always felt in the experience of joyful transformation. On the contrary, the process of joy can involve pain, confusion, and uneasiness. Because joy is meant to transform and reorient people and relationships, it will present discomfort and challenges in order to acquire new capabilities collectively, which in turn will encourage to do things, make things, undo painful habits, and nurture enabling ways of being together (29). Joy is the capacity "to do more, and feel more", and because of this, it is connected to creativity and the embrace of uncertainty, freeing itself from established orders, structures, and morals, and creating a space for emergent orders, values, and forms of life (29). In short, joy does not come by avoiding pain, detachment, and discomfort, it is instead practiced to disengage with ongoing forms of domination and to bring into existence new and transformational ways of being; contrarily to happiness which is often used as an "anesthetic" to maintain the status quo, joy is not a fleeting feeling, something to chase after, or a specific recipe for a fulfilling life

passed down by dominant discourse and/both institutions, it is a force that can be invoked and exercised to transform oneself and the world.

In the context of revolution and militancy, joy is a vital process of growth and of cultivation of collective power, which has the potential to sever the dependence on Empire (here understood as “the web of control that exploits and administers life” which gets reproduced in all forms of domination). As Federici affirms in the interview with Bergman and Montgomery included in the text, “joy is a palpable sense of collective power. [...] This feeling of the power to change one’s life and circumstances is at the core of collective resistance, insurrections, and the construction of alternatives to life under Empire. Joy is the sentipensar, the thinking-feeling that arises from becoming capable of more, and often this entails feeling many emotions at once.” (Bergman and Montgomery 2017, 54). This power that joy has, especially when cultivated collectively, can strengthen and enhearten activist movements and provide, as Federici calls it, the ‘active passion’ that moves movements forward and empowers them to oppose and change undignified ways of living and circumstances. Joy is put in relation to militancy as a vital tool for the latter by Bergman and Montgomery to suggest a form of militancy they coined “joyful militancy”. According to Bergman and Montgomery, joyful militancy is to be “militant about joy”, which places joy as a primary and cherished component that informs and influences not only the radical change that movements want to see in society, but also the ways in which militancy can be experienced singularly and collectively having joy as an ethic to be cognizant of. With joyful militancy, the authors want to link fierce struggle, which has commonly been associated with militancy, with intense affect; in their own words, “rebellions and movements are not only about determined resistance but also about opening up collective capacities. With joyful militancy we want to get at what it means to enliven struggle and care, combativeness and tenderness, hand in hand” (59). Moreover, joyful militancy wants to hold space for experimentation within militancy and the creation of multiple forms of subversive and ethical living and co-living to avoid fixed states of being.

This move towards joyful militancy was ultimately inspired by the need to counteract what Bergman and Montgomery refer to as “rigid radicalism”. Rigid radicalism is understood by Bergman and Montgomery as a potential source of restraint when it comes to revolutionary transformation. Rigid radicalism is described as being a common phenomenon amongst militant groups, one in which radicalism becomes an ideology with a set of arbitrary beliefs and do’s and

don'ts in regards to militancy. From this perspective, revolution can only be achieved by a form of militancy that values obligation, self-sacrifice, 'hard work', and constant critique. Bergman and Montgomery trace rigid radicalism back to Empire as a primarily Euro-colonial phenomenon, that is, it is most intense in spaces where whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and colonization have the strongest hold, as well as to Christian moralism (Bergman and Montgomery 2017, 144). However, it is important to note that rigid radicalism came to be as a reaction to Empire, as a way to dismantle dominant and oppressive systems, and it was adopted by many militant groups as a way to ensure successful take-overs.

A foundational premise in rigid radicalism is the idea that people and movements are inherently flawed and lack what it takes to bring meaningful change unless they strictly follow specific guidelines, principles, and ways of living. In other words, rigid radicalism "is both a fixed way of being and a way of fixing", "a tendency to generate certainties and fixed answers that close off the potential for experimentation", as the authors suggest (Bergman and Montgomery 2017, 141). Unfortunately, rigid radicalism is witnessed and experienced in many activist movements today and results in militants going into burnout, feeling inadequate and ashamed when compared to others' more "perfect" ways of being militant, getting silenced or dismissed when proposing new alternatives or when expressing any form of personal request or weakness. Rigid radicalism ultimately corrupts relationships within militant groups and stifles the creative powers of joy by draining out vital energies with the enforcing of external norms and standards and by feeding insecurities and anxieties (152). As Bergman and Montgomery state, the greatest tragedy of all is that rigid radicalism converts radicalism into a stifling ideal, "like a horizon that is always in view, distant and receding", and limits militants with two choices "either continue in a stifling and depleting atmosphere, or leave and attempt to live the form of life that is offered up by Empire."; because of these reasons, many have been led to abandon milieus or to comply to this way of militancy because their very survival depends on remaining in these spaces (152).

### **Section III: Analysis**

This is the chapter that presents the most conflict. As argued by Parmigiani and by my co-creators in the other sections of this chapter, NUDM has come to represent the resurgence of

feminism and revolutionary politics for many. Its large-scale protests and assemblies across the nation, and its significant presence on social media platforms have made NUDM not only a political force to be reckoned with but more importantly a go-to source of political insight and cultural critique for many young adults maturing into their political subjectivity. Moreover, many have been turning to NUDM for ethical guidance and inspiration while a revolutionary vision is collectively conjured to oppose the injustice witnessed and experienced nationally and internationally. As I have illustrated in the previous section, even scholars such as Parmigiani and Arruzza have identified NUDM as a refreshing, powerful, and much needed change for Italian feminism since it has brought back a more radical leftist vision and approach to organizing to the contemporary political arena.

Because of what it represents and the strides that it has been making, it had me and my co-creators conflicted when having to analyze and recount how NUDM is getting in its own way and might need a reset before moving forward with its agenda not just for its own sake but for the sake of a more inclusive, equitable, and sensible militancy that in turn can serve as inspiration for a better way of relating and coexisting in society. In order to uncover and delineate this point further, the last section of this chapter will bring together my co-creators accounts of NUDM's shortcomings and the authors' insights and concepts on militancy described in the literature review. I will be focusing mainly on my co-creators experiences of productivism, exhaustion, and exclusion within NUDM and analyze them by referring to the concepts of the karstic river, liberal feminism, rigid radicalism, and joyful militancy. The objective of this section is to provide a reading of militancy that includes the ways in which it can stifle revolutionary prospects and relations by (consciously or otherwise) conforming to capitalist notions of labor and merit and patriarchal ideals of organizing.

### **The Issue of Visibility**

Should activism feel like labor? And if so, under what standards is labor considered labor? Is militancy better off in an environment that centers on productivity and meritocracy? These were questions that ran through my mind as I was interviewing my co-creators about their activism in NUDM. As I was interviewing them, concepts reminiscent of capitalism such as productivism, hyperconnectivity, organizational frenzy, work/labor, and burnout would emerge when referring

to their militancy in NUDM. All three of my co-creators described their militancy as work, as a second full time job which required quick-paced production and continuous effort. The long hours put into organizing marches and public events, the bureaucratic wheelings and dealings with local governments and legislature, the daily posts and publications on social media, the emails and the constant communication amongst members of the same chapters and beyond, keeping the movement updated with national and international news, learning and discussing new concepts and terminology from academia, the weekly assemblies to further the agenda, the conferences to moderate, following and aiding to micro and macro causes...all this and more was the work that my co-creators put into their militancy with NUDM and felt was required of them. Verde referred to her time in NUDM as tense and strenuously effortful, to the point where she felt it resembled a “form of productivism”. Viola referred to NUDM’s militancy as “organizational frenzy” in which collective encounters are meant for planning and producing, not discussing, reflecting, or sharing. Rosa referred to NUDM as an “action machine” that required its militants to be always “on”, a phenomenon that she called “hyperconnectivity”. Keeping up, catching up, and putting in the utmost effort for NUDM’s cause lead all three of my co-creators to either go into burnout, feel inadequate, feeling dissatisfied, or needing to distance themselves from the movement temporarily and/or permanently.

When reflecting upon the possible reasons behind this laborious environment, Verde had a theory that saw NUDM’s angst and state of constant production as a need to compensate for the lack of a feminist political presence in the last couple decades. This theory could very well be supported by Parmigiani’s concept of the karstic river. In the 90’s and early 00’s, Italy’s lack of a radical left in dominant politics, the overall support and enforcement of capitalist market and neoliberal mindset, and activist movements, such as feminist movements, remaining out of the public eye, enabled a more sterile and disinterested political environment that did not encourage any form of counter-politics. As Parmigiani explains, the reemergence of feminism in the mainstream media and discourse in more recent years came to be because of the urgent and fierce need of feminist movements like NUDM to regain credibility and visibility after a long hiatus in which feminism was assumed to be either dead or unnecessary by the general public. This urgency also escalated as right wing populist parties and alt-right groups rose in favor and following, and have become a menace to the most disenfranchised. Thus, like a river getting over a drought, NUDM’s loud, active, and visible feminism was what it took for feminist discourse



and vision to resonate with the public again. Indeed, visibility is one of the key elements that has meant a lot for feminism's reemergence into contemporary politics, however, with it have come new responsibilities and challenges that have impacted militancy and militants.

Visibility can bring legitimacy to the cause, it can attract more attention and media coverage which in turn helps with exposure and garnering growing support. Moreover, visibility can strengthen and intensify the impact that militant tools and tactics, such as national strikes and assemblies, have on hegemonic discourse and institutions. Yet, visibility can also lead to exposure to oppositional hostility, manipulation, and appropriation, as well as build up anxiety towards having to consistently meet the high expectations that come with causes for liberation. This push and pull towards wanting to reap visibility's bounty and endowment, while also feeling overwhelmed with the exposure and responsibility that comes with it, has been a dilemma that former Italian feminist activist groups have had to deal with, as Parmigiani points out; this dilemma has influenced the irregular pattern of the Italian feminist karstic river, with some feminist movements refusing visibility to avoid violence, defamation and being taken advantage of by hegemonic institutions, at the cost of making an impact. In contrast, NUDM's response to the issue of visibility has been to embrace it in full force. In order to shield the movement from co-optation and backlash, as well as to prevent another draught of feminist militancy, NUDM has had to turn the movement into a well engineered militant machine. It has been able to extend its reach and influence by adopting a similar system to a large-scale press office with multiple chapters all across the nation producing content, organizing events and assemblies, reaching out to activists and allies in multiple daily emails and social media posts, joining local protests, and planning and executing strikes. This line of action has allowed NUDM to gain the legitimacy and strength that it still exercises today, but at what cost? And by whose standards?

### **Workplace Activism: the neoliberal grasp on organizing**

One of the major complaints that came from my co-creators about their militancy in NUDM was the pace and the level of production that was required to contribute to be an integral part of the movement. The word productivism was brought up as a defining term for the type of militancy and work that would get done in NUDM; Verde understood this laborious and active way of

doing militancy as a means to compensate for the lack of feminist activity and visibility in the political arena in past decades. The productivism in NUDM's militancy made sure that "things got done", but according to my co-creators, this drive came at the cost of building new and meaningful forms of relationships/coalitions with other militants within and outside the movement, providing a safe space in which to express one's vulnerability, and a place of refuge for the many more disenfranchised comrades to turn to when in need of "real-life" aid and support. Because of the "organizational frenzy", the "do-do-do", and the "impossible pace", people like my co-creators who experience precariousness and financial insecurity, have felt at times excluded from organizing and decision-making when not being able to contribute at the same level as other militants from more secure financial backgrounds who had more time and resources that enabled them to be more present, updated, and thus more appreciated. Trying to hold down a job or multiple jobs, tending to their private lives and well-being, while also keeping up with and contributing to the movement's agenda has resulted in feelings of inadequacy, burnout, and depression, to the point that a break or breaks or leaving NUDM entirely turned into viable solutions and acts of self care and preservation. Being in NUDM felt like having another full time job, as Rosa recounted from her own experience, one in which she felt drained and alienated from because of having to be always "on" and productive, as well as not feeling encouraged to discuss or bring up her struggles with the group at large. As Viola and Verde pointed out, it is not surprising that the people at the forefront of the movement are generally white, cis, heterosexual, educated, middle class women, who have had past militant and political experience and/or/both are students and younger people who are well-versed in progressive politics but who are far removed from many forms of struggle.

Having a more privileged dominant demographic paired with this strenuous work ethic creates many disparities amongst militants, narrows the scope of the issues that get prioritized in the movement's agenda, and intimidates/discards new and other people with different life experiences. Although NUDM's ethics, vision, and cause are supportive and informed by intersectional feminist thought grounded in the understanding of systemic oppression and how it manifests and affects different people in different ways, as well as inspired by an anticapitalist worldview, its internal organizing and relational practices might still be influenced by capitalist notions of work, value, and merit. There is then a discrepancy between the theory and the practice of NUDM. As Verde mentioned in her interview, "who does more, emerges (gets

noticed) more, is more in control, and ends up having more power”. I would argue that this manner of differentiating people and consequently people’s position and relevancy/worth in the movement (and arguably outside of it) according to how much work they do for the cause can be indicative of a neoliberalist bias. If only more privileged individuals are able and available to do the work of activism, they will be the ones who will be awarded more merit, in turn they will be given more legitimacy and more decision-making power when it comes to deciding on what causes/discussions to focus on which will be more likely representative of their own interests/experiences/sensibilities, and thus will attract and ‘empower’ like minded individuals who will follow in their footsteps and advance a similar relationality and agenda.

Is activism really better off this way, focusing primarily on the reach of its message and its visibility, and engaging with its mission and advocates as if in the workplace? Or are these priorities and ways of organizing hindering NUDM’s revolutionary potential and inviting social ranking and discrimination? According to Auzza, Fraser and Bhattacharya, neoliberalism, the contemporary financialized form of capitalism, has had an influence over feminism and has led to the creation of mainstream feminism, also referred to as liberal feminism, to form. Liberal feminism is very much tied to capitalism and firmly believes that women’s liberation is found in the empowerment and emancipation of these in the workplace; liberal feminism is not interested in dismantling social hierarchies and dealing with the reality of socioeconomic oppression, rather its priority is to advance a privileged few and place them at the top of the ranks along with the rest of the oppressors. Auzza, Fraser and Bhattacharya do not believe NUDM to be a liberal feminist movement, quite the opposite, they believe in NUDM’s radical potential and intentions, and I side with them on this for the most part. However, it cannot go unnoticed how even though the objectives and activism of NUDM are not informed by neoliberal feminist politics, the framework and tools they are using are reinforcing mechanisms of exclusion, erasure, and oppression.

### **Loosening the grip on militancy**

While I was meditating on activist labor and its ways, I started to make connections with formal institutionalized work. What is work and the workplace if not rigid? From the structure, to the organizing, to the long hours, to the strenuous efforts, to the diplomatic work relations, to the

deadlines, to the expectations, to the results. All of it is fixed, is linear, is integral to a method, and must be repeated and reproduced in this same manner to keep the enterprise afloat. The focus of the movement is to produce and to stand out in order to keep people engaged and maintain legitimacy. This has seemingly been how NUDM has been practicing their militancy: produce, promote, stay afloat. The frenzy and anxiety to maintain political legitimacy and keep the feminist vision and possibility alive, especially after such a long hiatus and during these times of fascist uprising, has led for this movement to go in survival mode, one that is very reminiscent of a traditional way of doing militancy that can be identified in many militant groups of the past and present. From what I have interpreted, especially from Verde's observations, this militancy is hardened and is not willing to take chances or do things differently, instead, it prefers to stay in the comfort zone that is using the same tools, principles, and frameworks of oppressive environments, such as the workplace. At its core, is the belief that resistance movements and the people in it are flawed and permeable, therefore are in need of strict guidelines and modes of operation in order to not corrupt or sabotage the mission. Very much like in a work environment, trust and flexibility are not easily given, as workers are not to be counted on completely and must be overseen and instructed at all times. Moreover, the mission itself is seen as something that is very much external to the group, something that needs to be reached or taken from somewhere else, as "society" and institutions are what happens at its borders and change is concretized once everybody else is aware of the movement's feminist teachings and vision. Verde amusingly called this promotional method of "spreading awareness" as "feminist catechism", where activists become feminist emissaries that school the "unawares" about their feminism, instead of learning more about others' experiences and needs and coming up with ways on how to help. All this makes me wonder, although the producing and promoting of feminist thought and theories is valuable, is it enough? Or even better, is it the only way to practice feminist militancy and actualize change?

I found Bergman and Montgomery's concept of rigid radicalism a generative onset to piece together what I believe could be holding back NUDM and contemporary feminist militancy. Bergman and Montgomery understand rigid radicalism as being a common manifestation of militancy that advocates for a thorough sociopolitical change while maintaining strict and pessimistic views on how change can be achieved and how the work being done in pursuance of it should look like. I found their description of rigid radicalism "a fixed way of

being and a fixed way of fixing” as incredibly poignant as it captures not only the limitations that rigid radicalism puts on its vision for change in the future but also on the way of *being, experiencing, and creating* that change in the present; it inhibits and oversimplifies the temporality of change, putting a starting and ending point to something that is understood as being inaccessible until the finish line is reached. What is not being considered is how people change while working towards change, how minds and bodies absorb and mold accordingly and in spite of it, how these impact and are impacted by each other, and how living and practicing the desired outcomes in the present could bring about even better possibilities. According to them, rigid radicalism has been the default *modus operandi* for many militant groups, and to its credit, it has paved the way for many important reforms and takeovers, introduced counter-political viewpoints, and most importantly, it has united countless people under important causes.

Beyond its achievements, my issue with rigid radicalism has more to do with its “stamina”, its view on change, and its impact long term. Under rigid radicalism, revolution is foreseeable only if its militants adhere to its values of self-sacrifice and hard work, and commit to a lifestyle in which depletion, burnout, and constant self-doubt are regarded as normal and indicative of virtue. In my opinion, this begs the question, can this way of radicalizing go the distance? Can militants stick to this way of living long enough to see change happen or will they eventually lose faith and leave this taxing environment? The realities and costs of radicalizing are felt and endured first and foremost by militants, who by joining a movement might risk financial losses, mental and physical health deterioration, violence and backlash, decline in self esteem, loss of relationships, and isolation. What I think is important to consider is, if militants are the faces, minds, and arms of the revolution, why is their well-being not taken into consideration and is considered part of the movement’s “health” assessment? Why aren’t other types of militant relations encouraged outside of collaborative yet distant (and at times competitive) interactions? Can militants and radicalism be more than just part of an “action machine” for change?

I believe that a good place to start could be loosening the grip that rigid radicalism has on militancy, and expanding on Bergman and Montgomery’s “joyful militancy”. The way Bergman and Montgomery expand upon the meaning of joy opens up a whole set of questions and possibilities for what activism can look like without the restraints of prohibitive capitalist and patriarchal principles and tools. Joyful militancy involves placing joy as an ethic, one that

expands the power to affect and be affected, that allows to open up processes of growth and transformation both singularly and collectively, and free oneself and others from structures and orders. When joy is centered and prioritized, it becomes clearer that militancy has a lot more to offer than what it has provided so far. What I believe could be feminist militancy's greatest potential is the opportunity to practice revolutionary and joyful ways of being together, of "doing" society, within the movement, and sharing this to the rest of the world. Joyful militancy calls for care, attunement, vulnerability, conviviality, friendship, and flexibility as vital components of all relations, especially ones amongst militants, who will get to experience the collective transformations brought forth first-hand. Militancy is the optimal space to learn how to share struggles, to be attuned to each other's wants and needs, to depend on each other, to hold space and care for one another. What would militancy look like if more focus (if not *the* focus) was put on relationality and forming community? What could militancy and movements do if resources were put into creating real and better alternatives for living in the present, a network of care and sustenance that could disrupt our dependence on the dominant oppressive system? These are all reflections that I will expand upon in the following final chapter which will center on the revolutionary power of building community and radical care, and the potential these practices have to redefine militancy.

## Chapter Three:

### **Comrades for (a better) life: putting the care in militancy**

Chapter three is going to pick up from chapter two's discussion on militancy and from there explore in more depth the subversive power of community-building and radical care, and the potential it has to redefine militancy by opening up its form and its practice. A deciding factor for why I chose to dedicate an entire chapter on the building of community and radical care has a lot to do with the inspiring work I read on these two subjects and how my co-creators responded when brainstorming for ways NUDM and feminist movements in general could grow and develop a more attuned and interdependent practice. The work that I will be crediting and reflecting on for this chapter has been produced by authors and reading groups who are also activists, and who have witnessed and practiced firsthand the power that fostering community in collective activist spaces and building care networks has.

By reflecting with my co-creators and delving into these authors' work regarding these practices, my intention is to make space for a reexamination and meditation on how feminist activism and feminist movements like NUDM would look like if alongside the organizing, protesting, and spreading awareness, alternative communities were built on principles of care and mutualism to eventually lean off Empire and serve as a drawing board for visionary projects. On another more ambitious note, what if feminist movements and collectives *were* care-networks and communities, and utilized assemblies and strikes as tools and methods to show support for different causes on a large-scale and takeovers? Using these questions as a point of reference and the insights of both my co-creators and the authors I chose as inspiration, this chapter will unfold following the same structure as the previous chapters, an interview collage, a literature review, and a final analysis section that will unpack the meaning, the need, and the potential of care and community building.

## Section I: Interview Collage

This final interview collage will present quotations I chose to share from the discussion my co-creators and I had about what we think could improve or expand feminist organizing. The quotations focus primarily on relational and care practices which had been previously delineated as the main sore spot of the militancy they experienced in NUDM. Interpersonal care, mutualism, self-organizing, and community building are all subjects that were brought up and were suggested as being exciting jumping off points when rethinking feminist collectives and militancy. Other themes that my co-creators, mainly Verde and Rosa, elaborated on were the practicalities of interpersonal care within a community/activist collective, the importance of imagination when envisioning a better future, and the value the word and relationship descriptor “comrade” has especially in an Italian feminist collective setting. My co-creators reflected upon how a more involved and ‘collectively-minded’ sociality could change activist work, practices, and responsibilities. What I suggest to the reader as they go through these excerpts is to understand this as a brainstorming session with no specific direction or finish line.

### *On the role of care in activism:*

*Do you think that care makes a difference in activist spaces and militancy?* The objective for this question was to open up our discussion on the subject of care and their thoughts on care as a meaningful practice/principle that should be central in feminist activism. Before I asked this question, I did not know my co-creators’ stance or understanding on care. Care was a subject that I was getting into on my own, almost separately from this research. To my surprise, my co-creators were not only informed on this topic, but were already seeing it as a practice that was lacking in NUDM and that should instead very much be part of a collective’s militancy. What follows are excerpts of my co-creators discussing their opinions on care and the potential it holds for revolution by changing and strengthening relations in feminist collectives and beyond.

Rosa: 00:39:00 "I wish that care would have been taken more seriously in NUDM. If we had stopped for a moment to talk to each other but to talk to each not as activists but also not as feminists, removing the role, stripping us of the roles, I would have slowed down a lot anyway



because it was not sustainable, but I would have cultivated a different relationship now [...] I proposed having consciousness-raising groups and sessions to be honest about what we were all going through personally and figuring out ways to help each other since many of us struggle with precarity, but it was dismissed..and that's when I knew to say bye”.

Verde: 02:09:00 [*elaborating on the social change she would like to see and the practices that have to be part of this change*] “The question of care should be understood as central in feminist spaces, because not only women, femme, and feminized people have a specific experience of oppression, but also have a familiarity in the work of care as it was originally imposed in many cases, and they have gained knowledge on how to take care of others which in this world they get exploited for, but in the world we want they have a strategic potential to build care-networks. In that setting, their skills for caring are no longer used to benefit a system of oppression but for revolutionary collectives and projects [...] Care is strength, it's a powerful force. We need to find the ways and the places to share these skills so that they will lead to stronger relationships and build subversive communities from the ground up. The daily practice of care, the type that experiences and manifests the kind of sociality that we would want to have, could be the most powerful practice of all while going against the system”.

***On self-organizing, mutualism, and community building:***

*What are practices that make for better relationships and collectives?* This question was inspired and encouraged by my co-creator Verde's enthusiasm on the topic of relationality. I wanted to inquire further on what she thought were meaningful and effective practices that would embolden relationships and what vision she had for society. She proceeded to elaborate on her own militancy after leaving NUDM, how she believes mutualism and actively/concretely aiding one another should be a primary practice and objective in feminist activism and in society at large. She expands on the importance of building community from the ground up, the specific practices she's been carrying out in her own militancy and self-organized community, and the role of feminist ethics in all of this. Moreover, she delineates on where she learned about this type of interdependence and concrete solidarity from, and the type of social change she wants to see.

Verde:00:57:49 "My way of doing politics has become just this: I live in a neighborhood in the outskirts and I work with these women basing our efforts on their needs as migrant working women and on the principle of solidarity that makes us collectively activate. I don't care if these women identify themselves as feminists or not, the important thing is that we help each other to overcome the problems of being women, of being racialized, and precarious. This approach was completely lost at NUDM and I proposed giving concrete answers and support for those who were experiencing the consequences of having come out of violence, or were enduring poverty, etcetera. Concrete solutions based on solidarity were not taken seriously, the willingness to do this part of the work was not given"

01:05:00 "When I think of concrete support, I think of mutualism, an explosion of it. For example, during the pandemic, with my neighborhood and self-organized community, we created a solidarity network, mainly composed of women, femme, and feminized people. We did the shopping, babysitting, after-school/homework, telephone support, trade union assistance, navigating bureaucracy to obtain state aid, citizenship, income, and started a collective economic solidarity fund, in which we donated whatever little we had to start our own neighborhood bank to finance projects, class action lawsuits, provide aid, etc. It has been amazing, and we are officially organized now. Women and people ready to ask and give solidarity, it has created new social relationships and strengthened bonds. We know now that we have a whole community that can support us and with whom we can share all that is good".

02:02:00 "I define my militancy as feminist because of the practices of mutual solidarity, of believing in each other, of being sisters in the sense of giving each other support in everyday problems as well as big picture stuff, in creating and tailoring a care network around each person who's struggling. I am happy I have found and founded something that practices this form of feminist militancy". [...] "The teaching of NUDM is important but above all I think the anti-violence centers were my ultimate teachers. The anti-violence centers are places where care has been practiced for 40 years with the backing of theory that is really effective because it comes from the practice that experiments and in turn reproduces its results in theory. For me this practice creates models from which to draw inspiration in order to deal with the theme of

violence of any kind and getting free from those oppressive ties. I feel the need to reproduce this knowledge they imparted to me in many different situations. The anti-violence center is above all a physical place, available every day, which can be accessed by those in need, where one experiences another way of relating, a relationality in which there is an immediate response to the expressed needs of those in difficulty and where collective work is actually collective as a network is created around each person in difficulty and tailored for what the person needs to make their journey. It is a space where you feel comfortable defining what the path is and being vulnerable because you have the support and the aid of the people around you who are committed to you and to each other. Solidarity is felt on the skin, relationships are everything as they are the reason why there is a network in the first place”.

02:06:13 “This is the horizon of social change that I would like to practice and make happen: social recompositions, seeing each other as a response to our needs. Building real concrete communities and rebuilding interdependent social ties that do not exist at the moment. Social reconstruction must look at women, the feminized, the racialized, at their specific living conditions because for them the radical politics that failed in the last century are male politics which weren’t able to realize that the white man’s experience of oppression is a partial experience [..]”.

***On the power of imagination and practicing:***

*How do you come up with ideas for a better life?* The importance of imagination and practice in militancy have been two underlying themes throughout my discussion with Verde. Verde believes that in order to bring about change, we must open up our collective imagination and come up with new ways of being and living together. A way to do this, according to her, is trial and error, practicing and practicing, and allowing ourselves to get inspired from what we do. She believes we need to acknowledge our current oppressive realities, but she firmly objects on dwelling on these to the point it stifles our imagination. Instead, she finds practicing community organizing, working together, and cultivating a collective dynamic spirit as being more effective in creating a new and better social fabric and relations.

Verde: 00:19:01 “It’s also the issue of having concretely experienced the joy of a different world [*referring to the experiences she had in feminist spaces*] more than just the act of sharing common suffering. I think there are two components of the practice of feminism, the first is about feeling each other all around our shared condition of oppression, and the second is about finding each other all around the shared joy and feeling of liberation when we do things differently than what the system imposes”.

02:18:00 “I want to do militancy differently because this is not a hobby for me, it’s because I want a different life, and that comes with manifesting the horizon in the present. It’s an imaginative practice that helps you come up with things that you never thought about before. We need to really set our imagination free and not fixate on how terrible our lives are. We need to cultivate a dynamic spirit that increasingly grows comfortable with practicing and trial and error. This will enable the activation of new modes of relationality within the context of community organizing and self-organizing. In turn, these types of relationships will support and safeguard a new social fabric”.

02:10:03 "Realizing that there is always a third way in which our efforts are put together to invent what does not yet exist starting from what I and we really want, what I and we dream about or what I and we need. For me, these are the important practices that feminism brought to politics in the past, inventing what didn't exist yet, experimenting with self-organization and making it a reality, like anti-violence centers, neighborhood nursery schools, reproductive care counseling centers, etc.”

***On the meaning of being compagn\*:***

*Why is the word ‘comrades’ used in feminist activist spaces?* I included this last excerpt from my discussion with Rosa to show how within Italian feminist activism there is already a word for the type of relation that fosters the need and desire for liberation. Compagna/o/i/e/u/ae (comrade in English in all its gendered denominations) is a word that Rosa brought up in multiple occasions in previous collaborations as well, and for this specific project, I felt compelled to ask her why she used this word to describe herself and others within NUDM, and what her feelings and

thoughts were about this nomenclature. She proceeded to elaborate on her knowledge on and experience with this word, the attachment she has to it, and how this word is indicative of the type of relation there is amongst militants. When recounting this interaction, I thought to myself, could this word and its ramifications potentially be used to describe future relations amongst ourselves, both inside and outside of militancy?

Rosa: 00:56:10 “Even though I am currently not active in NUDM, I still very much feel like a compagna. For me, compagna has a profoundly beautiful meaning. Most likely it has a historical link with the Italian resistance and socialist/communist wave of the last century, however I think the way that feminist movements and other liberation movements use it nowadays is more indicative of the relationships amongst militants, of having practiced militancy together. It means that with you, together, I'm doing politics, politics from the ground-up. You try to change things with other people with whom you may not have everything in common but with whom you share the desire and the need for a better life. It is with that desire there that you find yourself within the collective. It's different from friendship, it's more than any other sentimental bond. It's just a different category of relationship and love and once you encounter it you don't let it go easily”.

## **Section II: Literature Review**

In this final literature review, I borrow from activist knowledge, specifically the wisdom and experience of queer, black feminist thought and disability justice activists in order to educate myself on the radical histories and visionary practices of community building and collective care. These readings have enriched my research, as well as my capacity for imagining different ways of being in relation with one another and how this in turn could change society as we know it. Histories and praxes of mutual care and creating community have long been in existence and exercised, especially by people living in the cross-fires of white supremacist, capitalist, ableist heteropatriarchy's oppression. As author and activist Mia Birdsong writes, “people do not survive racism, xenophobia, gender discrimination, and poverty without developing extraordinary skills, systems, and practices of support. And in doing so, they carve a path for everyone else.” (Birdsong 2020, 21). One of the objectives for this section and chapter as a whole, is to appreciate and highlight the reality that is the development of skills and wisdom

under the misgiving and injustice that is the condition of survival. Having to live with the loom of systemic violence representing a constant threat to one's resources, freedom, and dignity, people find safety and survival by finding alternative solutions to prevent ruin and by turning to each other for support and care. Many have relied on kinship ties for resolve, however for those who were estranged from or could not (solely) rely on their original families, as well as those who did not have a family at all to begin with, have found themselves with the longing and necessity to create new connections and relationships to depend on and call family. Many black, non-white, queer, disabled, femme, and poor people have had to create communities to count on for aid, solidarity, love, knowledge, protection, and survival. Receiving and providing care has meant gaining skills and awareness in order to navigate and deal with the practicalities and delicacies of an adverse environment, as well as learning to be attuned to other's and one's own needs while simultaneously expanding one's understanding of who deserves care and their own capacity for it.

A second objective for this literature review, is to introduce the reader to the work of these writers in the context of militancy and feminist activism. Beyond the appreciation for care and community-building in a broader societal sense, what is relevant for this research is to acknowledge these practices and envision them as guiding forces and frameworks for social justice organizing. As mentioned previously, all three works have been written by authors who understand care and community as political, who appreciated care and community building as revolutionary mediums for interpersonal and social change, and have contemplated on and practiced these in the context of activist movements and community organizing. Care and community are first and foremost collective practices, and as such, are especially powerful when adopted by movements not only as part of a grander vision for the future, but as subversive capacities exercised upon presently and meant to provide more favorable ways of being and relating in society. The works I have chosen to illustrate the significance and potential of care and community-building in this section are Mia Birdsong's *How We Show Up: Reclaiming Friendship, Family, and Community* (2020), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018), and The Care Collective's *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (2020). Each work will discuss care and community-building through their own insights and experiences on these (and lack thereof) and by exploring themes/realities of interdependence, friendship, and justice.

### **Mia Birdsong: liberation is in community**

In 2020, activist and writer Mia Birdsong published her book *How We Show Up* as an invitation to community and models for connection. Birdsong attributes the offset of this book to the discussions she had after many of her book presentations with seemingly successful and therefore ‘happy’ individuals according to American dreamist ideals, who instead confessed to her how deeply unsatisfied, isolated, and disconnected they felt in their lives. Birdsong’s premise for *How We Show Up* is how especially in these times of heightened political unrest and systemic oppression it is crucial to rethink the ways we “do” society and experience interpersonal relationships; how we show up for others and how they show up for us has the potential to not only change individual lives but to awake our deepest and dearest need and desire which is interdependence on a large and collective scale. Birdsong refers to writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin’s quote that has been documented as a piece of advice he gave Sol Stein, a close relation of his, “The place in which I’ll fit will not exist until I make it.”, and expands on it by reframing this as a collective responsibility we have towards ourselves and others if we aspire to social change and liberation. To this end, Birdsong writes, “As a politically radical Black woman and a curious person, I am committed to living the most liberated life I can with those around me. And I’m not interested in having to step out of my daily life to have it or in creating a separate place in isolation from the rest of the world—that leaves too many people behind. We have to make it where we live.” (Birdsong 2020, 93). Liberation is understood as a collective project which is achieved by depending and being depended on both in principle and as a daily practice.

Birdsong’s vision for the future is one that sees community as the blueprint for societal formation and sociality. In contrast to the relationality prescribed by the white-supremacist, capitalist and heteronormative culture embedded in the American Dream, one that does not encourage individuals seeking help, fulfillment, and love outside of themselves and their nuclear family, Birdsong asserts that in order to have a better collective future, communities must be created in which people can form close intimate relationships outside of their immediate family, and are allowed to show vulnerability and ask for help when in need. On this she writes, “We need a vision of community that is relevant and future-facing. A vision that brings us closer to one another, allows us to be vulnerable and imperfect, to grieve and stumble, to be held

accountable and loved deeply. We need models of success and leadership that fundamentally value love, care, and generosity of resources and spirit.” (Birdsong 2020, 13). Care, love, and generosity then must replace individualism, greed, and disconnect as the new ethics to uphold to guarantee closer relationships and communities, and change the social fabric as a whole. However, in order for these values to be legitimized and in turn encourage the formation of strong close-knit communities, we need to reorient ourselves around what we understand as individuality and interconnectedness, as well as cultivate self-reflection and compassion towards others. Birdsong unpacks what we understand as individuality by referring to Desmond Tutu’s explanation of the South African concept of Ubuntu in this memorable quote “It is to say, my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life. We say a person is a person through other persons. It is not I think therefore I am. It says rather: I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share.” (19). Experiencing humanity then is never severed by others’ experience of humanity, the way we define ourselves and go through life is enveloped within a framework of connectedness and interdependence. Understanding this is a fundamental first step of cultivating self-reflection and informing the ways we should engage with others. Moreover, by recognizing this inherent human condition in which our individuality is entwined with our connectedness with others, Birdsong asserts that we have a responsibility towards ourselves/others to care: “my understanding of care—care of myself and care of others—has become void of the binary framing of this or that, input and output. Suddenly, care of others is care of myself. Care of myself is care for others.” (38).

A final insight relevant to this chapter is Birdsong’s reflection on friendship. According to Birdsong, with the settling of the ethos of the American Dream, friendship and community overtime have lost their meaning and have been shrunk to very limited definitions and experiences. Birdsong elaborates on friendship by referencing author and scholar David Hackett Fischer’s etymology of the word “freedom” and its connection to friendship. Birdsong writes that in Fischer’s work *Liberty and Freedom*, he explains the word free is derived from the Indo-European *friya*, which means “beloved.”, and similarly, the word “friend” also shares this common root with freedom; a free person was someone who was “joined to a tribe of free people by ties of kinship and rights of belonging.”, and in turn, freedom was the idea that together we can ensure that we all have the things we need, including love, food, shelter, safety (Birdsong 2020, 17-18). In turn, freedom is understood by Birdsong as an individual and collective



endeavor, as something that is achieved through being connected and being accountable. Interdependence is bound with accountability to ensure the wellbeing of the collective. As Birdsong explains it, accountability is always tied to the collective, and it involves “seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others. It’s about recognizing when our behavior is out of alignment with our best selves.” (18). Having said this, friendship as we know it now, is still very much limited to relationships that do not necessarily require this type of commitment and awareness, it is assumed that romantic (heteronormative) partnerships are the only forms of relationships that are necessary and in which one can rely on for survival and care, and in turn friendships are more associated with pastime and not livelihood. Thus, Birdsong suggests, that part of the challenge is to think expansively about our friendships in order to encourage community building and create new ways of relating to one another that are interdependent and accountable.

### **Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha: disability justice, collective care, and healing**

In 2018, Lambda Literary Award-winning writer and longtime activist and performance artist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha publishes her collection of essays *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018) in which she explores the politics and realities of disability justice, a movement that centers the lives and leadership of sick and disabled queer, trans, Black, and brown people, who through their struggle, activism, and acquired skills/wisdom have conjured a radical vision for liberation derived from community-building and mutual collective care. Piepzna-Samarasinha introduces the reader to the disability justice framework as one that appreciates that all bodies are unique, essential, and have strengths and needs that must be met, as well as one with long collective legacies “of cultural and spiritual resistance within a thousand underground paths, igniting small persistent fires of rebellion in everyday life.” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 21). These legacies of resistance and wisdom have been carried forth and practiced by “sick and disabled people of color, queer and trans disabled folks of color, and everyone who is marginalized in mainstream disability organizing”, who in turn are at the center of disability justice (21). Moreover, disability justice is an intersectional movement that asserts ableism helps make other forms of oppressions such as racism, christian supremacy, and

queer and transphobia possible (21). Because of the intersectional makeup of oppression, the focus on collective liberation, and the histories and knowledge of disabled/black/poc/queer/trans/poor people, disability justice proposes a radical vision of liberation that includes all living beings and is manifested through the creation of self-organized, interdependent communities whose members are attuned to each other's needs and exchange care (28). Interdependence and mutual care webs are understood by Piepzna-Samarasinha as not being a recent white ableist discovery, but part of the legacies of many precolonial (and after) Black, Indigenous, and brown communities, and at the core of disability justice (41). According to Piepzna-Samarasinha, these two concepts are effective and meaningful if they respond to the reality and need of access; to start-with and prioritize access means to stand with the radical notion that all people deserve to have access to basic income, autonomy, freedom of movement, healthcare, and many other forms of care that would allow them to live dignified and joyful lives (65-76). When access is centralized within visions of liberation, interdependence and mutual-aid turn into practices of radical love (66).

Unfortunately, access and the necessity of collective mutual-aid are not only challenged by individualistic, capitalist, and ableist moralities and institutions, but are often discarded in activist movements. Although many abled activists and activist movements will gladly add "ableism" as one of the forms of oppression in need of dismantling, they will run their protests and radical efforts in an inaccessible way "with the ten-mile-long marches, workshops that urge people to "get out of your seats and move!" and lack of inclusion of any disabled issues or organizing strategies.", thus reproducing the same discrimination and exclusion they claim to not take part in (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 123). Moreover, within many activist organizations, welcoming and attending other's needs, wants, and pace is not yet seen as a necessary practice and responsibility, and this behavior, according to Piepzna-Samarasinha, is indicative of a lack of collective care. For Piepzna-Samarasinha care is not meant to be only an individual responsibility, but a collective endeavor. On this she writes, "Collective care means shifting our organizations to be ones where people feel fine if they get sick, cry, have needs, start late because the bus broke down, move slower, ones where there's food at meetings, people work from home—and these aren't things we apologize for. It is the way we do the work, which centers disabled-femme-of-color ways of being in the world, where many of us have often worked from our sickbeds, our kid beds, or our too-crazy-to-go-out-today beds. Where we actually care for

each other and don't leave each other behind." (109). In order for strong, interdependent, and caring communities and activist movements to flourish, we need to heal legacies of "scarcity, survival, and deep, unpacked grief" that inform the ways we are hesitant and at times bitter when asking for and are asked to help; there is an underlying understanding that people should get by on their own and not burden others with their needs, and if one has the audacity to do so, this individual is seen as either spoiled, an opportunist, or someone who's incompetent (123).

Thus, for activist movements to truly be revolutionary, they have to increasingly disavow these limiting beliefs that enable division and exclusion, while learning to be of service by caring for the collective and putting each others' needs before any type of agenda, committing to not leave anyone behind because they cannot keep up with ableist notions of activist labor. In short, there is a lot of healing to do within activist movements that must be addressed and taken seriously: "Most folks I know come to activist spaces longing to heal, but our movements are often filled with more ableism and burnout than they are with healing. We work and work and work from a place of crisis. Healing is dismissed as irrelevant, reserved for folks with money, an individual responsibility, something you do on your own time. Our movements are so burnout-paced, with little to no room for grief, anger, trauma, spirituality, disability, aging, parenting, or sickness, that many people leave them when we age, have kids, get sick(er) or more disabled, or just can't make it to twelve meetings a week anymore." (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 97-98). There is a fierce need for care-reciprocity, nurturing a culture of appreciation and respect towards care and emotional labor by drawing on the knowledge and legacies of care organizing embedded in disability justice movements and communities: "I am dreaming the biggest disabled dream of my life—dreaming not just of a revolutionary movement in which we are not abandoned but of a movement in which we lead the way. With all of our crazy, adaptive-devised, loving kinship and commitment to each other, we will leave no one behind as we roll, limp, stim, sign, and move in a million ways towards cocreating the decolonial living future. I am dreaming like my life depends on it. Because it does." (135).

## **The Care Collective: universal and promiscuous care**

In 2020, The Care Collective, originally a London-based reading group aiming to understand and address the multiple and extreme crises of care, published *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* to share their research and offer a queer-feminist-anti-racist-eco-socialist political vision of 'universal care'. They begin the manifesto by introducing the reader to the care shortage in our relationships/kinships, communities, states, and planet; they intentionally bring up these four different scales of society to concretize the impact that 'carelessness' has on each of these, and how they all effect each other. According to the authors, neoliberal capitalism is at the epicenter of this care deficiency because, in the last forty years, governments have increasingly accepted it's near-ubiquitous positioning of profit-making as the organizing principle of life, which in turn has meant systematically prioritizing the interests and flows of financial capital, while ruthlessly dismantling welfare states and democratic processes and institutions (The Care Collective 2020, 4). Neoliberal capitalism's institutionalized pervasiveness in all aspects of life has allowed its grasp to reach and influence the way people relate and interact with each other, as well as their opinion of giving and receiving care and who should or should not be involved in it. Taking care of others, attending to others' needs, has been historically carried out by women and marginalized people, and because western capitalism is entrenched in a white-supremacist heteropatriarchal social organization, this practice/labor has been devalued and cast aside as "unproductive" and demeaning, and far removed from what an independent, self-sufficient/self-serving, model citizen would concern himself with or need. The dominant neoliberal model has extended and deepened these legacies of depreciation towards care and its gendered associations, alongside the archetype of the autonomous, entrepreneurial citizen whose only relationship to other people outside of his family is one of competitive self-advancement (5). The result of all this has been a culture and a sociality mostly concerned with competition rather than co-operation, making care something that is seldomly practiced and discussed about.

What the Care Collective's authors propose in this manifesto is to counteract this limited and damaging form of social organization by putting care at the very center of life: "In this manifesto, we argue that we are in urgent need of a politics that puts care front and centre. By care, however, we not only mean 'hands-on' care, or the work people do when directly looking

after the physical and emotional needs of others – critical and urgent as this dimension of caring remains. ‘Care’ is also a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life. Above all, to put care centre stage means recognising and embracing our interdependencies.” (The Care Collective 2020, 5). Care is then not up to the individual, but it is a collective responsibility that appreciates our shared vulnerabilities and interconnectedness. Reframing care as a social capacity and individual/common ability is a way of legitimizing and recognizing the power care has to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the vast majority of people and living creatures, alongside the planet, to thrive. Moreover, under this framework, care is not only understood as an ethical and valuable practice/philosophy, but a societal organizing principle—from its people, to its institutions, to its values, to all its scales of life.

The type of care that the Care Collective envision is what they refer to as “universal care”. They describe universal care as a model of society in which care is placed front and centre on every scale of life (from our kinship groups and communities to our states and planet), mutual interdependencies and the ambivalences of care/caregiving are embraced, and, most importantly, the whole of society shares care’s multiple joys and burdens (The Care Collective 2020, 19). On a state and world scale, the universal care model pushes for the adoption of alternatives to capitalist markets (resisting the monetization of care and care infrastructures), the reestablishment and radical expansion of welfare states, and the mobilising and cultivating radical cosmopolitan conviviality, porous borders and Green New Deals at the transnational level (19). On a kinship and relational level, caring politics must pervade the ideas and scope people have on relational ties and responsibilities. To ensure that care is being practiced by everyone for everyone, this model must break open the limits that traditional familial structures places on care, and encourage more wide-ranging or “promiscuous” models of kinship, which in turn would allow to reclaim forms of genuinely collective and communal living (19). Promiscuous kinship, or better, promiscuous care is an ethic and practice “that would enable to multiply the numbers of people we can care for, about and with, thus permitting us to experiment with the ways that we care.” (33). Advocating promiscuous care does not have to do with caring nonchalantly or inadequately, it instead highlights the urgency of caring more and for more people, and redefining relationships, from the most removed to the closest. To help advance promiscuous care, the caring state and communities need to appreciate this ethic and furnish both carer and

cared for with the legal, social and cultural recognition and the resources and infrastructure they need (41). By providing this type of support and resources, people will increasingly feel more comfortable and safe to care for, about, and with strangers as much as familiars. Thus, advocating for universal and promiscuous care, would mean enabling closer, stronger relationships and communities to flourish, and turn the state's (and the world's) motive/purpose upside down in favor of caring politics.

### **Section III: Analysis**

Throughout this chapter, my co-creators and the authors have brought up the urgency for a stronger, closer, and collective relationality which they see as a possibility if centered on the principle and practice of care. According to my co-creators and the authors, care is not just something that should be talked about on the fringes of our lives, outside of the mundane, or just as a more sympathetic approach towards others, instead, its believed to be an ethic and tool of a new social organization, from the most personal relationships, to the relationships between states and our relationship with the planet. As argued by the Care Collective, care must be appreciated as a social capacity, activity, and a collective responsibility to uphold in order to sustain the welfare and thriving of all living beings as well as the planet. As Birdsong and Piepzna-Samarasinha remind their readers, care is also a skill resulting from legacies of survival and interdependency in many marginalized communities throughout time. The line between taking care of oneself and taking care of others is blended, muddying the perimeters of individuality and individual preservation, while also not falling prey to generalizations and assumptions that would standardize, limit, and in turn render unhelpful our ways of providing care to each other. To understand our needs and desires, as well as other's, we must learn to be more attuned to one another and shake the boundaries of what is acceptable to share and who to share it with.

The concepts elaborated by Birdsong, Piepzna-Samarasinha, and The Care Collective such as mutual care, mutualism, respective care, universal care, and promiscuous care are all pushing for a breaking open of our learned/imposed relationship structures which circumscribe who we should ask for help to and to whom we should give help in favor of a more diffused model in which we can count on more people outside of our families or romantic/personal

relationships. Circles of accountability and interdependent communities that center the praxis of care and the context of the collective are no easy feat to realize, as we are held back by white supremacist, heteronormative, ableist, and neoliberal capitalist cultures that value profit over welfare, individual success over collective wellbeing, nationalism over humanity, which become harmful breeding grounds for all forms of systemic oppression and interpersonal discrimination. What can be done then? Where can we start? The good news is that our state of interdependence is something that we experience everyday, it's an all-encompassing reality that is materialized in every interaction at every scale of society, and the way we tend to this connection we all share with each other determines our singular and, more importantly, our collective well-being.

What I have come to believe, especially thanks to Verde sharing her experience with community organizing, is that in order for people to start recognizing our interdependence and the transformative power of care and care politics, they need to see and/or experience firsthand that there are alternatives, and, above all, to know that these alternatives will allow them to care for others and to be cared for, especially in the face of oppression and precarity. This is when I think activist, feminist, and social justice movements could play a key role in experimenting and creating these alternative communities, giving more and more people the possibility to be part of these projects and contribute to the vision, all the while allowing these collectives to get larger and larger and become valuable oppositional social organizations. Having said this, I want to reflect and invite the reader to reflect with me while recounting what has been shared about caring politics and community-building, and imagine the ways in which militancy could change and in turn change the world.

### **Caring militancy part I: centering care in movements**

I started this chapter by pondering on how feminist activism and feminist movements like NUDM would look like if alongside the organizing, protesting, and spreading awareness, alternative communities were built on principles of care and mutualism to eventually lean off of the dominant system and serve as a drawing board for visionary projects. Moreover, what if feminist movements and collectives *were* care-networks and communities, and utilized assemblies and strikes as tools and methods to show support for different causes on a large-scale and takeovers? What kind of impact would that have on militancy and our social organizations at

large? Of course, these are questions that are not meant to be answered, or at least not right now, because their potential is exercised by using them as perpetual starting-points for experimentation with care politics and inter-relationalities in the context of social movements. But one thing is clear from what has been shared by co-creators, and that is, that militants need to be accounted for and be accountable in feminist activist spaces, starting from the way they relate to each other, the expectations that they place on one other, and how both pertain to the vision the movement has for liberation. As discussed previously, a pattern in NUDM that my co-creators elaborated on almost unanimously was the lack and/or lacking practice of care within organizing, which according to them has led to the weakening of the social bonds in the movement and the increasing occurrences of burnout and militants dropping out of the cause. If activists are leaving movements, are not feeling supported and heard, and are experiencing severe declines in or threats to their health, then this should be taken seriously and as an indicator that the ways of organizing need to change. Movements don't last and thrive if people are discouraged, exhausted, and are not willing to stay. Movements die out, or their vision gets stale and reduced to slogans, or eventually are co-opted and lose their radical significance. Activists are people who are not immune to systemic oppression and the structures, they do not exist in an alternative universe where they don't experience precarity, discrimination, and injustice. As my co-creators' attested, while activists are doing militancy, they are also trying to survive the realities of living in these societies and dealing with the repercussions and legacies of trauma. Why can't movements then be first and foremost a refuge? A space in which militants can go against this system and at the same time be really supported by their movements? What if movements were the beginning of a new form of social formation?

If this proposition should be taken seriously, collective care must be centered. Movements should rethink their strategies when it comes to their agenda and their organizing, and more importantly, they should prioritize the collective. The collective starts with the activists that are carrying the movement on their shoulders, and the vision of a better society should be amended, experienced and practiced now. As Piepzna-Samarasinha asserts, for movements to truly be revolutionary, they must disavow ableist, gendered, heteronormative, racist, capitalist, and individualistic notions of care, healing, and access (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 123). Meaning, care and healing must not be trivialized, dismissed as "not real activism" or "not real labor", and expected to be carried forth solely by femme, disabled, queer, or people of color, and



access to care in all its manifestations must be recognized as the starting point and prioritized in organizing. The legacies of care and healing in disabled, queer, and non-white communities and social justice movements, must be recognized as the blueprints for the type of sociality that could be practiced in feminist movements.

Prioritizing the well-being and flourishing of the collective must be accompanied by adopting care as an ethic and practice, and centering the realities, needs and desires of the most disadvantaged. For example, as Piepzna-Samarasinha explains, practicing collective care would entail movements to become attentive spaces “where people feel fine if they get sick, cry, have needs, start late because the bus broke down, move slower, ones where there’s food at meetings, people work from home”, places where the realities, vulnerabilities, and necessities of living under Empire are acknowledged and acted upon, not just discussed as if its influence doesn’t extend to activist relations and organizing (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 109). Doing militancy as if it were a job that could only be performed adequately with long daily (and often inaccessible) meetings, long-distance marches, constant emailing, researching, writing, sharing, reaching out to venues/government agencies/press, etc., is not only unsustainable in the long run and exclusionary, but might just not be the type of organizing that will lead to experiencing and making change. If collective care was centered, if activists could rely on and be relied on each other for care and survival, if the work of militancy was creating care-webs and communities and procuring the necessary resources and infrastructure..what type of change could that manifest?

### **Caring militancy part II: activist social recomposition**

I have come to believe that one of the major manifestations of collective care in an activist movement would be the change in relationality. Rosa argues that one of the first steps would be for feminist activists to slow down their agenda and instead take the time to really get to know one another as people, putting aside their roles as militants. To care for and to be cared for, must start from a place of attunement, of the will to to come into contact with people’s realities and vulnerabilities, of sharing one’s own. As people who are not used to practicing care in our communities and societies, we might assume we know what people’s lives look like, or what they need. As a result of this, unfortunately in the context of activism, the idea of struggle under oppressive systems might be generalized to fit in a tidier ensemble more digestible for slogans,

manifestos, and protests. Moreover, as argued by Verde, Viola, and Rosa, if the movement is not composed of a multiplicity of diverse human experiences and knowledge, the agenda might take the form of the majority party, which might in turn overlook and/or take for granted other forms of oppression and specific realities.

Of course, this is not to say that movements like NUDM do not do their research and tackle different feminist theory, in their manifestos they very much vouch for and position themselves with an intersectional feminist approach, or that they practice a purposefully exclusive and careless relationality. However, I have come to understand as of a result of my co-creators' experiences with relating to other activists in NUDM, that this impersonal way of relating to one another, firstly, it discourages people with different intersections to join the movement and/or to contribute their knowledge and skills to the cause as they may feel that the agenda is already fixed and unchangeable, secondly, it does not enable meaningful conversation which in turn could lead to new insights and previously unacknowledged blind spots, and thirdly, it does not respond to the need for collective care and stifles attempts for change of social formation. This makes me ponder, if social change starts with the social, and if well-intentioned, aware, and radical collectives do not practice better ways of relating to one another, how can the urgency for social change be transmitted outside of the movement in such a way that responds to people's realities? How can a movement grow and its politics spread if it does not provide alternative ways of living and a support system that counteracts the problematics and injustices people experience on the daily?

During our conversation, Verde asserted, "this is the horizon of social change that I would like to practice and make happen: social recompositions, *seeing each other as a response to our needs*." And it's the "seeing each other as a response to our needs" that facilitated my reflection on the potentially subversive idea of implementing community-building and collective care in militancy, not just part of the strategy, but as a change of social formation that responds to the realities and necessities both of militants and people outside the movement. I believe that these two practices could provide a safe space and a support network for activist to not just do militancy, but to also to experience and experiment firsthand new ways of relating and being in society which disavows oppressive, capitalist, and individualistic social organizations that keep people from seeing each other as interdependent and collectively go against the system. I found Birdsong's interpretation of care quite poignant and comparative to Verde's argument when

thinking about relationships and interdependence, “my understanding of care—care of myself and care of others—has become void of the binary framing of this or that, input and output. Suddenly, care of others is care of myself. Care of myself is care for others.” (Birdsong 2020, 38).

In an activist context such as NUDM, I believe that this idea of mutual care and interdependence is understood in theory, but it's missing the opportunity to practice this concretely within its own movement, amongst its own people. NUDM has already established its reach all across Italy, it has built a vast network of chapters in many major cities as well as in more remote regions who carry out local and national initiatives, protests, and assemblies. It would not be so far-fetched to re-imagine NUDM into a web of communities who care for and are cared for. Understanding and sharing the concept of interdependence and the urgency for a care-based society is not enough, because with this understanding and the desire for social change, comes accountability. Like Birdsong explains, interdependence is bound with accountability to ensure the well-being of the collective, thus if the social change that is being called for is one that acknowledges our interdependence and rejects a society that does not put care of the collective above profit and power, its supporters must be held accountable and account for the safeguarding of this caring social fabric. Understanding that we are all accountable for each other's well-being involves “seeing the ways we cause hurt or harm as actions that indicate we are not living in alignment with values that recognize our own humanity or the humanity of others.” (Birdsong 2020, 18); thus, in the context of activist movements, this means aligning the ethics and theory with the practice, protesting for a kind and caring society and practicing a caring sociality in the collective, as well as acknowledging and taking accountability when harm is being done. By tending to their sociality, they are doing politics, caring politics that center on the relational.

### **Caring militancy III: the relational is political**

As Verde expressed when reflecting upon change and how to enact it within an activist collective, we need to set our imagination free and cultivate a dynamic spirit in order to come up with what does not exist yet. This is a practice I want to modestly enact for this final section. So far, I have gone over the benefits of centering collective care in activist movements as an ethic and practice in their militancy, as well as directing their radical efforts towards relationality to amend harmful behavior and support each other. Although these are concepts that still have room to grow and have to be practiced thoroughly, I believe that it is critical that movements like NUDM take the time to turn inward and reflect on how their own ecosystem could become a starting point for a radical, caring, and inspiring society. Throughout this project, I have been imagining together with Verde, Viola and Rosa what it would look like if a feminist activist movement such as NUDM, with all its influence and chapters all over Italy, would commit to transforming into a network of radical and caring communities that provide real-life support to each other and any person in need, whether it is financial, housing, care, protection, mundane support, whilst coming together in assembly and protest. What this transformation could mean for people who are disconnected from community, who are in need of support, who are struggling to even survive under this system. What gave me pause and inspiration was The Care Collective's understanding of universal care and promiscuous care as subversive models of caring politics, and the way these would affect every scale of society, from kinship, to community, to state, to planet. Understanding care as "a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life", as an ethic that centers on interdependency and the universal access of all that is needed to thrive, as well as a subversive political tool that is meant to be cherished and practiced collectively regardless of familial connection at all stages of society, has given me enthusiasm and a framework from which to envision a similar model for militancy (The Care Collective 2020, 5-19). Following a similar model and basing it on NUDM's social composition, the first two scales that would need tending to (and are within the wingspan of this research) are kinship and community.

To unpack this, I want to draw from Verde's insight, as it has been most heartening. Verde has found her way of doing militancy through the practice of mutualism and becoming part of a self-organized community. Her choices and vision are founded on the principle of providing

concrete solidarity, where people form communities in which they share responsibilities, care work, errands, finances, and emotional support. She believes in the power of the collective and forming care networks to help each other while trying to survive and resist injustice. The type of relationality that Verde envisions is part and parcel of the change she wants to see in the world: a social recomposition founded on mutual solidarity, centering on the experiences of oppression of women/feminized/racialized subjectivities, one where stronger interdependent bonds encourage the formation of real and concrete communities with their own infrastructure and vision for the future. Differently from communes, these communities are not meant to be built in remote areas “outside of civilization” or as part of escapist projects, because as lovely they may appear and might also well be, many do not have the privilege to relocate or leave their jobs and families behind. These communities are made wherever people are struggling and want to be part of collectives in which they can be cared for and take care of others. In Verde’s case, the self-organized community she is a part of has been built by and in the urban neighborhood in which she resides during the Covid-19 pandemic; it was a collective effort in which everyone was struggling with precarity and turned to each other for survival. After the success of this form of concrete solidarity, the neighborhood has since adopted this relationality into their daily lives and is officially organized.

Community-building, concrete solidarity, and its resulting sociality has become the type of feminist activism Verde practices in order to exercise and experience the horizon of social change she would want to see. What can be gathered from Verde’s militancy? For one, how militancy can take many different forms, how caring for others and being cared for can not only help with immediate survival, but, secondly, can also inspire a new form of social organization in which the welfare of all, kindred or not, is everyone’s prerogative. Promiscuous care and universal care, care that is seen as everyone’s right and responsibility towards each other, can then be adopted as a form of militancy, a visionary model and practice for liberation. As Birdsong discussed, a close relationality, or friendship, is tied to freedom, to liberation: freedom is representative of an interdependent society that ensures the well-being of all (Birdsong 2020, 17-18). Relational ties don’t bind us, but are meant to set us free from scarcity, isolation, and oppression. So, for all intents and purposes, nurturing caring and interdependent relationships that result in collective efforts of welfare, can be understood as a radical effort towards liberation.

What finally brought this connection between friendship and freedom by Birdsong full circle for me, was Rosa's interpretation of comrade. As illustrated in the interview collage, Rosa, although is no longer active in NUDM, thus not active in a major feminist movement, still calls herself "compagna", or comrade in english. Compagna (and all its gendered denominations) is a nomenclature that has been used as a term of endearment and, most importantly, as an indicator of militant relationship within activist and resistance movements. Compagna is described by Rosa as indicative of "having practiced militancy together", of doing politics from the ground-up in a collective, of sharing the need for a better life with people whom you may not necessarily have much in common with, but with whom now you are practicing and creating a new horizon. Rosa describes it as being different from friendship, and being more powerful than any other sentimental bond. Taking Rosa's beautiful description of the relationships between comrades, the connection between doing politics together, caring for each other to create a better world, and developing these bonds within a collective is effortless. It is a relationship that centers on the models of universal and promiscuous care within feminist activist movements. The relationships that are built, the kinships that are fostered, are the life force for freedom. Thus, building comrade communities is militancy, is caring politics, is a vision for liberation.

## Conclusion

I decided to focus on feminist militancy and organizing because I recognized them as political and discursive microcosms from which I could learn the realities and philosophies involved in disrupting the status quo and providing a radical vision for social change. Studying feminist activism had become of interest to me as I shared a political affiliation and I was curious to learn more about all that makes a feminist activist, a feminist movement, and a feminist vision. The anthropologist in me wanted to provide an in-depth exploration of these three dimensions of militancy, pull them apart and put them back together again, to see the red strings and the cracks. Why would someone decide to become a feminist activist? What made their life any different from someone not engaging in feminist politics? What is it like to do politics in a feminist collective?

One of the first decisions I had to make was the context I wanted this project to take place in. I decided to focus on Italian feminism and on one of its most well-known contemporary representatives Non Una Di Meno because of my own Italian background and the enthusiasm I felt over their ascent in the political and cultural zeitgeist. I was finally seeing for the first time big-scale feminist politics of my generation advocate for the dismantling of gender violence and all its intersections. For one who grew up in a very chauvinist, right-winged, and discriminatory cultural and political timeframe with not much push back, this shift in politics from the ground up has meant a resurgence of hope for social change. Because of this context and the different dimensions of feminist politics I wanted to explore, I knew fairly quickly that I could not just base my reflection on theory alone.

I needed to bring in the personal and experiential, and that's when I decided to invite my co-creators, three feminist activists with years of experience in doing politics in feminist movements, in order to help me see what was out of reach for me on the outside looking in. Activists, advocates, militants are to me some of the most fascinating and inspiring subjects as they continuously try to embody what is yet unexisting. Interviewing them, discussing with them, listening to their insights and their opinions on their experience as feminist political subjects, what initiated their political journey, their activism in feminist collectives, their relation to other activists, and their vision for the future, has brought so much more dimension and depth to this research that I could have ever expected. With their keen observations and self-awareness,

they pointed out to me what I should focus on and explore more. On my end, I had to learn to zoom in and out and make the relevant connections to allow for this ethnographic project to come to be. What guided these efforts were the concepts and research from some of my favorite scholars and authors, who had written about feminist and social justice movements from different perspectives, which in turn helped me to refine my own considerations.

After completing my interviews, I knew that my instinct for not rushing to conclusions and taking a step back was right. I learned that there was much more going on than previously thought, and that I wanted to unpack all of this removing any romanticized notion I had towards militancy, and instead focusing on what needed to be acknowledged and discussed. To honor the complexity of my co-creators experience and insight on their feminist activism and their participation in NUDM, I decided to break down this broader reflection on feminist activism into three themes: feminist subjectivity, militancy and organizing in feminist movements, and worlding through care and community building. I arranged a chapter for each of these themes, and within these, three sections, an interview collage with segments of my discussions with my co-creators, a literature review with an overview of the pertinent concepts and theories I gathered from the authors/scholars, and a final analysis section in which I tied together the knowledge gathered by both Verde, Viola, and Rosa and the authors with my own analysis.

In chapter one *Feminist (Re)born, Feminist (Re)vision, Feminist (Re)definition*, I wanted to dive into the ‘coming to be’ of the feminist political subject, the ways in which their life and their perspective changes along with them, and the expectations and definitions often attributed to being a feminist militant. To do this, I shared my co-creators origin stories, their lives as feminist activists, as well as their considerations on the archetypical “feminist militant” and how they felt measuring up to it. I decided to start unpacking these by referring to three different ‘feminist figurations’, Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy”, Gay’s “bad feminist”, and Hartman’s “wayward” in order to explore representations of the feminist subject within feminist theory and their potential limitations when upheld as standards of “feminist perfection”. In bringing both the feminist figurations and my co-creators narratives, I was able to trace a possible pattern of development of the feminist political subject, one that is constructed from feeling, to reflection, to action, to living. I determined how the cultivation of a radical consciousness and vision is a meaningful and everyday practice of both the wayward and the feminist activist that emboldens their critique towards the system and their imagination for a better future. Finally, I was able to



discern the ways in which the upholding of certain standards of *feministness*, thus creating a “model militant”, can feel like an unrealistic and exclusive imposition.

In chapter two *Joy(less) Militancy: the Achilles heel of feminist activism*, having picked up on a potentially limiting pattern present on the personal scale of feminist subjectivity, I wanted to trace the ramifications of this on a collective scale, this time focusing more specifically on NUDM and the history and practices of Italian feminist movements, to get a better sense of the type of relationality that was being practiced and the forms of labor that were being carried out to further the cause. To this end, I shared the observations and critiques that my co-creators had on the customs, activities, and impact of NUDM, focusing specifically on the work they did (and were expected to do) as feminist activists in the movement and the limitations of NUDM as a result of their work ethic and at times questionable relational practices. This was the part of the research that brought forth the most tension as it revealed NUDM’s shortcomings as perceived by my co-creators. To understand this and get more perspective on this conflict, I decided to focus on the historical patterns of Italian feminism through Parmigiani’s analogy of the ‘karstic river’, on the connections between activism and Empire as explored by Arruzza, Fraser, & Bhattacharya’s work on liberal feminism and its relation to capitalist ideas of labor and social formation, and finally on the types of militancy through Bergman and Montgomery’s concepts of ‘rigid radicalism’ and ‘joyful militancy’. Opening up all of these different ways in which one might understand NUDM as adopting ‘the master’s tools’ in their militancy which in turn could have damaging effects on their cause and the livelihood of their movement at large, allowed me to move forward with the final scale regarding what type of changes and practice should be adopted in order to create a better vision of the future in the present.

To elaborate on this, in chapter three *Comrades for (a better) life: putting the care in militancy*, I chose to invite my co-creators to talk about their visions on what a better society would like, and in turn what type of militancy and/both the models movements should work with. Care and community-building were the two major concepts that they brought up the most, and because of this, I was inspired to do more research on the potentially subversive aspects of these practices. To this end, the literature that I found most compelling and that I ended up including in this section, was Birdsong’s reflection on the importance of community-building, Piepzna-Samarasinha’s analysis on the legacies and power of care through a disability justice lens, and The Care Collective’s manifesto on universal and promiscuous care and how to apply

this in all scales of life. Exploring all these different concepts and the visions that my co-creators have for a different society, encouraged me to consider care, community building, and the cultivation of close bonds as practices that could help cultivate a more caring militancy.

By interpreting and analyzing these three themes, feminist subjectivity, militancy and organizing in feminist movements, and worlding through care and community building, by juxtaposing and intertwining the experiential with the theoretical, I have tried to produce a comprehensive study of feminist militancy and organizing. Moreover, by highlighting and expanding on perceived issues and potential remedies elucidated by my co-creators, I hope this study will provide some support for those struggling with their activism and encourage movements to reflect upon their practices and sociality. Having said this, I believe this study has room to grow, and could be improved upon by engaging with more activists and/or multiple interviews, nationally and globally, in order to extend the range of themes and dynamics that comprise militancy. In addition, some fieldwork and participant observation in feminist collectives, as well as expansion of literature analysis, could provide an even more multifaceted approach and exhaustive study.

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