

The Deep River of Feminism

From Ni Una Menos to Non Una di Meno

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At a recent conference organized by the International Consortium of Critical Theory, María Pia López was asked, “What would you like this book to achieve?” I was struck by her answer: “Political enthusiasm!” López expressed the desire for her book to broaden our imagination, surpassing academic audiences and objectives to reach people and resonate with other struggles. It is with this same desire that I respond to López’s book here and attempt to draw connections between the Argentinian Ni Una Menos and the Italian Non Una di Meno.

Reading *Not One Less: Mourning, Disobedience, and Desire* is first of all part of a process of bearing witness to the emergence and development of a transnational feminist movement with its new questions and articulations: “We are witnessing the dawn of feminism in real time, hearing the questions it poses and seeing the disobedience it incites.”¹ López’s book provides the opportunity to pay attention to the powerful feminist struggles happening in Latin America and how they are inspiring movements in other contexts.

Here I first explore to what extent López’s theorization of Ni Una Menos, presented in her book, can be useful in understanding the emergence and development of Non Una di Meno in Italy. The call of “not one less” in fact resonated greatly in Italy where, with a mass demonstration and a national assembly in Rome in November 2016, feminists launched a new movement. Making reference to Paola Rudan’s earlier contribution on the Italian movement and its role in the organization of the International Women’s Strike,² I argue that the process leading to the emergence of Non Una di Meno can be understood as the result of local circumstances as well as transnational developments.

I then reflect on the extent to which this movement can characterize itself as transnational and illustrate to what degree a dialogue between different countries, and specifically between Argentina and Italy, is explicit and ongoing. I argue that the call of “not one less” contributes to the formation of a transnational identity and conceptualization rather than a transnational organizational structure.

As founding member of the Ni Una Menos collective, López provides unique insights into its genealogy and imagery. The book is in fact a reflexive recollection of events from her involvement and embodied experiences of feminist mass protests and deliberative assemblies. On the uncertain terrain on which current feminist movements operate, the book serves as an archive of practices developed within Ni Una Menos as well as an honest account of its internal struggles, tensions, and conflicts. Declaring, as López does, how the account provided is a partial and embodied perspective on a very heterogeneous movement is in itself a political act. First, it serves to affirm once more the importance of the feminist practice of *thinking together* in order to make sense of what does not make sense.³ Moreover, it is an act of recognition of the collective dimension of knowledge production that stands in contrast with the tendency to measure and reward individual achievements, a tendency typical of neoliberal academia.⁴

Similarly, the arguments and reflections I present in this contribution are necessarily partial and result from my involvement as a feminist researcher developing an autoethnography of the Non Una di Meno movement for a period of three years (2016–19) and participating in the work of one of the movement’s assemblies, Earth, Bodies, Territories, and Urban Spaces. One of the many groups forming the movement, this assembly brings together activists from different localities and points to the intersection between various issues and struggles: while challenging gender binarism, it also aims to surpass speciesism⁵ and denounce the exploitation of natural resources and the earth at the base of capitalist societies. My observations therefore emerge from my participation in mass demonstrations, online discussions, and deliberative assemblies; my contribution as occasional translator and interpreter; and a variety of interviews and informal chats.

From the start, the book presents a challenge: how to conceptualize and document an ever-transforming movement even more varied than the sum of the voices it contains? López highlights that her writing emerged from exchanges and experiences within the movement, thus acknowledging the heterogeneity of voices corresponding with infinite possibilities of interpretation: “one singular intervention in a land of multiplicities, on a terrain of untested practice and disparate discussions” (4). This attention to multiplicity and openness to experimenting with new practices is also reflected in López’s writing style, which combines political sensitivity, sociological acumen, and poetic imagination. This is expressed, for example, through the use of powerful natural metaphors: “The feminist rebellion, like a

deep river, does not always surface at the same time in all places. It silently modifies the landscape. What was once naturalized becomes intolerable, the exploitation behind the habit revealed" (148). The image of a deep river serves as a figure for how feminism moves through different territories, emerging often at unpredictable times in unexpected places, creating bonds of trust and shared desire across borders. A stream of the deep river of Not One Less has in fact reached Italy, contaminating Italian feminism with its name as well as with some of its mobilization strategies and organizational practices.⁶ As López points out, "This surging tide is international and polyglot. It is capable of reinventing and transforming itself" (2).

It is important therefore to interrogate how this reinventing and transforming takes place and what the contextual characteristic and transnational developments or events shaping these processes of transformation are. By reflecting on these aspects, I attempt to consider whether and to what extent López's framework can serve to illuminate a conceptualization of the Italian Non Una di Meno movement. In her book, López retraces the steps that contributed to the emergence and development of Ni Una Menos. While the genealogies of Italian and Argentinian feminism are of course very different, as I will explain here, the connection with the cry of "not one less" is rooted in the experience of gender-based violence, as well as in the shared awareness of the risks posed by an alliance between neoliberal and neoconservative forces.

As López recalls, Ni Una Menos protests started as a way to denounce the rising number of rapes, kidnappings, and femicides in Argentina. The first massive strike in October 2016 followed the brutal femicide of sixteen-year-old Lucia Pérez. While these incidents are fewer in Italy, similar cases continue to emerge there, such as that of the repeated sexual violence toward a thirteen-year-old girl by a group of young men linked with organized crime (*ndrangheta*) in Melito, a commune in the south of Italy.⁷ What contributed to the launch of the Non Una di Meno movement in 2016 was the brutal femicide in Rome of a young woman, Sara di Pietrantonio, who was killed and set on fire by her ex-partner. As Rudan points out, this femicide "was only one in a long list of episodes of male violence against women, but the last straw that triggered a strong and decisive political response."⁸

Angered by the relentless succession of femicides in the country and by the diffuse media narrative that too often justifies perpetrators, a network of feminist groups and associations called a national assembly, which took place in October 2016. A variety of LGBTQIA+ collectives, unions, parties, and individuals participated in this initial assembly and in a national demonstration organized in Rome in connection with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 26. The demonstration gathered two hundred thousand people, proving to be one of the biggest marches in Italy in years but receiving very little media coverage. Importantly, the demonstration was followed by an assembly,

which saw the participation of two thousand people.⁹ This was the first of many assemblies through which a new political subject, and simultaneously a collective of existing entities, emerged, engaging in a process of analysis and writing that led to the elaboration of a political program: the “Feminist Plan to Combat Male Violence against Women and Gender-Based Violence.”¹⁰ Through the process of collective writing that led to the publication of this plan (which lasted one year) feminists, relying on preexisting relations of trust or forming new political friendships, were able to newly articulate the structural roots and varied manifestations of gender-based violence in Italy. Opposing punitive approaches centered simply on harsher punishments for violence perpetrators and narratives aimed at revictimizing women and gender dissidents, feminists from Non Una di Meno recognize and highlight the global scale of the problem of male violence against women and gender-based violence. The emergence of feminist movements all over the globe in the last decade, such as SlutWalk,¹¹ the antirape protests in India,¹² women’s participation in the Arab Spring,¹³ Pussy Riot in Russia, FEMEN in Ukraine, the Polish Women Strike,¹⁴ the Women’s Marches,¹⁵ mass feminist protests in Spain and Turkey, and the #MeToo and Time’s Up¹⁶ campaigns also signal the systemic and widespread character of patriarchal violence and are evidence of a reignited sense of urgency to denounce and eradicate it.

It is also by looking at these varied mobilizations that one can understand the historical moment in which the International Women’s Strike was possible. As Paola Rudan illustrates, Argentinian feminists, inspired by their Polish sisters who were mobilizing against the abortion ban, proposed a transnational day of strike on March 8, 2017.¹⁷ Gradually feminists in more than fifty countries responded to the call and engaged in the organization of a strike, which manifested in various ways depending on the local necessities and limitations. The strike was guided by a shared recognition of the systemic and nonexceptional character of patriarchal violence and of its connection with economic violence. As Rudan explains, “The strike made a difference because it allowed feminism to go beyond the borders of the ‘woman question,’ to become both a mass political practice and a means by which to question the whole neoliberal order at the very moment in which patriarchal violence had begun to be recognized as fundamental to it.”¹⁸

Just as Argentina went through an escalating neoliberal and conservative phase between 2015 and 2019, Italy, one of the countries hit deepest by austerity policies in Europe, witnessed the gradual rise of a populist and xenophobic far right. Queer-trans-feminist mobilizations had been the most active and able to denounce the effects of late neoliberalism, refusing any distinctions between lives worth protecting and others considered disposable. The demand not only for “survival” but for a *vida digna* (dignified life) resonated in Italy, as did a push for the articulation of a constructive feminism that analyzes the effects of capitalism on our lives,

questions the neoliberal division of labor based on the devaluation of reproductive work carried out mostly by women, and proposes alternatives such as the feminist commons.¹⁹ In open contrast with any form of “lean in” or neoliberal feminism, the International Women’s Strike / Paro Internacional de Mujeres became a way to start prefiguring a feminism for the 99 percent.²⁰

The organization of the strike facilitated the emergence and strengthening of connections between feminists at the transnational level. A dialogue between activists in different countries had been ongoing to a certain extent, with limitations according to geographical distance or linguistic differences. Favoring horizontal and participatory practices and refusing any form of hierarchy, the call of “not one less” contributed to the formation of a transnational identity and conceptualization rather than a transnational organizational structure. One of the activists I interviewed in my research explained in fact how there is an ongoing process of *spontaneous contamination* between movements, with practices being borrowed and the sharing of slogans, hashtags, and songs.²¹ Non Una di Meno adopts similar organizing and mobilizing forms to the ones narrated by López in her book: placing the body at the center of protest, in street demonstrations and in assemblies where pain or rage are made bearable and joyful moments emerge by inhabiting a space together, however briefly. Furthermore, the articulation of common claims and demands shape transnational cognitive frames.²² Through processes of political translation, facilitated by the use of digital communication, a specific language is developed and reproduced across borders.²³ Italian feminists adopted, for example, the Spanish slogan “Sister, I believe you,” which, as López points out, “constructs a ‘we’ that is supportive and welcoming, a political community” (16). These processes of contamination are explained by one of Ni Una Menos’s founders, Cecilia Palmeiro: “a spontaneous and collective translation flow between different national and regional languages, between visual and verbal languages, between different levels of a language (from everyday to theoretical language, and vice-versa), including poetry and the languages of social media, public discourse and the bodily languages of social protest . . . can describe the logics of our activist network.”²⁴

Finally, a common element in the development of this movement in Italy, Argentina, and beyond is the strengthening of neoconservative forces, organizing transnationally to oppose “gender ideology”:²⁵ a rhetorical device invented by the Vatican, which, as López explains, “condenses the knowledge gained through gender theory and feminist and LGBTQIA activism and public policies that strive for the recognition of diversity” (88). With antigenderism increasing its influence within and outside institutions at the transnational level, and with the unexpected alliance between fundamentalisms and the free market, a feminist analysis becomes ever more urgent.²⁶ Feminists connecting across borders under the call of “not one less” denounce how the protection of traditional gender norms is used

to preserve an exploitable *feminized* labor force replacing the welfare state. These regressive tendencies, manifesting themselves differently depending on the locality, consist of attacks on the right to abortion, the rise of systemic male violence, an unfair penal system, toxic narratives about gender-based violence, attacks on places where women self-organize, and the intertwining of gender-based and racist oppression.²⁷ In the Italian context, the suggestion that “gender ideology” will negatively impact individuals, families, the nation, and Christian civilization is continuous with the xenophobic discourse that justifies inhumane closed-borders policies and deaths in the Mediterranean. Feminists from Non Una di Meno challenge this discourse, opposing securitarian approaches to migration, contesting *femonationalism*, and highlighting institutional failures to address the trafficking and exploitation of migrants’ labor.²⁸

With the cry of “not one less,” therefore, a new collective body has started taking shape, with activists moved by vulnerability and rage, and also by the desire for a radical transformation of the status quo. Like a deep river, Not One Less flows across borders as well as gender binaries, becoming a trans-, multiracial, international movement. The growing diffusion of this movement, however, faces attempts at repression, an antigender backlash, as well as the challenges presented by internal tensions, misunderstandings, and conflict.²⁹ Additionally, the ongoing global health crisis has complicated the capacity of feminists to construct moments of encounter, and activists’ efforts have been hampered by isolation and overwork. Digital tools, however, have been harnessed in the organization of multilingual assemblies online or the calling of transnational days of action by groups such as Feministas Transfronterizas and EAST (Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational). Given the strenuous circumstances hindering our efforts to prefigure a feminist world, we must ask ourselves how to reinvent protest in a time of crises of global health and of care and how to further strengthen ties across borders to continue, as López suggests, “betting on a world in which all differences have a place, in which lives are not disposable” (148).

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Notes

1. López, *Not One Less*, 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Rudan et al., "Strike."
3. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*.
4. Deschner, Dorion, and Salvatori, "Prefiguring a Feminist Academia."
5. The idea that human animals have greater moral rights than nonhuman animals.
6. Sabsay, "Political Aesthetics of Vulnerability."
7. Salvatori, "Feminism in Transit."
8. Rudan et al., "Strike," 241.
9. Rudan et al., "Strike."
10. Salvatori, "Feminism in Transit"; Non Una Meno, "We Have a Plan."
11. Mendes, *SlutWalk*.
12. Dey, *Nirbhaya*.
13. Newsom and Lengel, "Arab Women."
14. Bielska-Brodziak et al., "Where Feminists Dare."
15. Emejulu, "On the Problems."
16. Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, *Digital Feminist Activism*.
17. Rudan et al., "Strike."
18. Rudan et al., "Strike," 242.
19. Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, 65.
20. Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent*; Emejulu, "On the Problems."
21. Salvatori, "Feminism in Transit."
22. Monforte, *Europeanizing Contention*.
23. Doerr, *Political Translation*; Palmeiro, "Ni Una Menos."
24. Palmeiro, "Ni Una Menos."
25. Garbagnoli, "Against the Heresy of Immanence."
26. Bielska-Brodziak et al., "Where Feminists Dare"; Korlczyk, "War on Gender"; Salvatori, "Lost between the Waves."
27. Cirillo, *Se il mondo*.
28. Farris, *In the Name of Women's Rights*; Non Una Di Meno, "Abbiamo un piano."
29. Salvatori, *Feminism in Transit*.

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