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Wonder feminisms: comics-based activism against gender violence in Italy, intersectionality and transnationalism

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the denunciation of gender-based violence has become widespread in Italy. Capitalising on the groundbreaking work of feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s, a significant number of contemporary Italian collectives and networks have succeeded in bringing to the attention of mainstream media the issues of femicide, domestic abuse, rape and denied reproductive rights. Artistic practices have played a crucial role in this process of mainstreaming. This article examines four comics-related artistic experiences and it will do that by means of a hybrid methodology that brings together the social sciences method of the semi-structured interview with artists and activists and the Cultural Studies/Social Semiotics practice of textual/visual analysis. The adoption of these two approaches allows to gather insights both on the dynamics that regulate the ideation, realisation and promotion of the artistic campaigns and on the results of the same artistic practices, which is to say on the cultural products and their potential impact. These two areas are considered as interdependent, as demonstrated by the results of the study, which suggest that a deeper involvement of activists with transnational intersectional feminist movements generally corresponds to a more inclusive, effective and participative artistic product.

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Gender violence, namely ‘harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender’ (UNHCR 2021), is a widespread phenomenon that in Italy, as in the rest of the world, disproportionately affects women. According to the Italian National Statistics Institute, 31.5% of women between 16 and 70 years old suffered some form of physical violence (ISTAT 2014).¹ Since the beginning of the 2000s, Italian feminist activism has succeeded in shedding light on the issue, which is now widely discussed at a political and journalistic level (Romito 2008, 1–2). This resulted in a significant increase of media and cultural productions discussing the problem of gender violence (Laviosa 2015; Bettaglio, Mandolini, and Ross 2018; Mandolini 2019). The field of graphic narratives was not excluded, as testified by the presence of numerous Italian graphic novels published in recent years on the topics of femicide, sexual violence, intimate partner

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abuse and negation of women's reproductive rights (Mandolini 2020b). The interest of artists and creators in addressing a social problem like gender violence is complemented by the proliferation of artistic practices used by feminist associations and grassroots movements such as the *Lucha y Siesta* collective in Rome and the transnational movement *NUDM* to raise awareness on sexist abuse. These include artistic initiatives² that explicitly interact with the popular and accessible medium of comics.

This article aims at deepening scholarly understanding of comics-based feminist activism against gender violence by mapping its dynamics and by analysing its productions in the Italian context. Notwithstanding the clear national dimension of the study, national, cultural and social borders are here approached as a porous conceptual space innervated by the numerous transnational collaborations and influences that interfere with the analysed artistic material. Given this general arrangement, the article's objective is articulated in two specific points. On the one hand, the article studies the artistic products and it evaluates their ability to offer an inclusive portrayal of gender violence, thus respecting the intersectional dimension of the phenomenon. On the other, it proposes an inquiry over the impact that transnational exchanges between feminist movements and associations had on the development of the studied artistic products and their level of inclusivity.

Following a necessary interlude that outlines the article's theoretical framework, namely transnational and intersectional feminist thought (Alvarez 2000; Crenshaw 1989; Desai 2015; Moghadam 2015; Preciado 2003) as well as theories on feminist activism (Lacy 1995; Stubs, Silva Teixeira-Filho, and Lessa 2018) and gender violence (Brison 1999; Cahill 2001; Herman 1997), four comics-related artistic experiences will be examined by means of a comparative analysis: *Shero*, a brochure and itinerary exhibition by Step-Up! and *D.I.Re.; Ti amo da (farti) morire* [I love you to make you die], a graphic guide by the association *Donna Ceteris; Matrioske parlanti contro la violenza ostetrica* [Talking matrioskas against obstetric violence], a series of participative vignettes by the collective *Freedom for Birth*; the *Luchadoras* project, a transmedia and multiplatform action by the women's shelter *Lucha y Siesta*.

The methodology selected for the study is hybrid, as it brings together the social sciences method of the semi-structured interview with artists and activists who participated in the initiatives and the cultural studies/social semiotics practice of textual/visual analysis. The adoption of these two methodological approaches allows us to gather insights both on the dynamics that regulate the ideation, realisation and promotion of the artistic campaigns (empirical research) and on the results of the same artistic practices, which is to say on the cultural products and their potential impact (research on representations). The areas of the empirical and that of the representational, in this sense, are not considered as separate. On the contrary, they are here acknowledged as spheres that significantly influence each other. In other words, the products of activism, their quality, their innovative potential and their capacity to positively disturb the patriarchal symbolic order that legitimises the social phenomenon of gender violence (Bourdieu 2012, 7–11) are necessarily connected to the series of feminist practices, networking strategies and political approaches implemented by the feminist activists who produced them. This interdependency is demonstrated by the results of the study, which suggest that a deeper involvement of activists with transnational intersectional feminist

movements generally corresponds to a more inclusive, effective and participative artistic product.

Artivism, comics and gender violence: towards a transnational and intersectional subjectivity

The term artivism (to which some scholars prefer art activism or activist art) describes a set of practices where political activism is combined with artistic creation. Artivism differs from political or critical art as it works for bringing change by directly tackling specific social issues rather than by merely proposing a critical reflection on them (Groys 2014; Lippard 1984; Serafini 2018, 'Approaches to Art Activism'). Notwithstanding this scholarly categorisation, clear-cut divisions generally do not apply to artivism, an area that, as Lucy Lippard argued, is driven by 'a spirit of multiplicity and integration', tends not to 'narrow choices' and finds in the principle of hybridisation its distinctive characteristic (1984: 343–344). When talking about artivism, hybridisation refers primarily to the adulteration of the otherwise conceptualised as separate realms of aesthetics and politics. In this sense, artivism promotes an aesthetization of politics and a politicisation of aesthetics that disrupts previous limitations, thus potentially determining change both in the political and in the artistic spheres (Groys 2014; Kester 1998, 'Ongoing Negotiations'). This contamination often results in the impossibility of assigning a specific function to participants and creatives, who transit between different discursive sectors and do not fit in the restraining roles of artist or activist. Moreover, artivism promotes hybridity by relying on networking among subjects involved in different societal spheres (e.g. art, politics, media production, education) and among artivists belonging to diverse communities or cultural contexts who exchange best practices and support each other at a transnational level (Lippard 1984, 355).

Another type of hybridisation prompted by artivism has to do with the break of boundaries between the dimension of the personal and that of the political. By relying on the idea that 'self-expression is a prerequisite for self-empowerment' (Lippard 1984, 341), artivism fosters creative participative methods of political action that are deeply rooted in the principle of exposing the domain of the subjective (which is traditionally ascribed to the area of art and aesthetics) at a public level (the level which is traditionally connected to politics). It is not by coincidence that feminist thought, together with its notorious insistence on the need to approach the personal as political, contributed to the historical consolidation of artivism as a recognised practice. This is confirmed by the pivotal contribution made to artivism and its theorisation by Suzanne Lacy, a conceptual artist and activist who introduced the category of New Genre Public Art to identify artistic processes that directly interact with the community by addressing social issues that affect their existences (Lacy 1995). Lacy was among the first artists to consistently experiment with a process-oriented, participative and community-based political art which focussed, as that of her student Mónica Mayer, on the issue of sexual violence.³

Scholars who investigated artivism and feminist artivism in particular noticed how most of these projects (as it is the case with Lacy's and Mayer's) allow a creative horizontality that opens up to the possibility of expression of marginalised subjects like women (Serra, Enríquez, and Johnson 2018, 109). This, in turn, testifies to the ability of feminist artivism to support women's subjectification (Stubs, Silva Teixeira-Filho, and

Lessa 2018), which is to say a process of re-appropriation of that agency that patriarchal societies deprived women of by relegating them to the role of object (of male desire, gaze, and reproductive needs). Subjectification is also a crucial process when it comes to the practical and symbolic struggle against gender violence. This is clear if we consider that feminist philosopher Ann J. Cahill conceptualised sexual violence (one of the most widespread types of gender violence) precisely as a series of acts aimed at annihilating the victim's personhood and agency (2001: 191–197). Other scholars have then stressed that, for survivors of rape and domestic violence, the process of overcoming the trauma necessarily passes for the reconstruction of the person's sense of self (or subjectivity), which is generally gained through exercises of re-narration and representation of the self (Brison 1999, 41; Herman 1997, 37).

This article argues that Feminist activism's commitment to the promotion of subjectification and its contrast to the issue of gender abuse are well exemplified by existing comics-based creative practices. Here, the expression 'comics-based creative practices' refers to artistic projects that engage with the medium of comics and its specific semiotic elements (e.g. sequentiality, the combination of words and images, the speech balloon and its related iconography) as well with its canonical genres (e.g. the superhero genre). Artivism has been resonating in comics-based creative practices around the globe. An example is the project *Superheroínas por el aborto legal, seguro e gratuito*, which was started by an Argentinian collective of artists interested in supporting the local feminist campaigns for the legalisation of voluntary termination of pregnancy.⁴ The project consisted in the publication, through social media like Facebook and Instagram, of images of superhero characters carrying the green handkerchief that was used as symbol of the pro-abortion movement (Gandolfo and Turnes 2020, 3). By associating activists for reproductive rights to powerful figures borrowed from the superhero imaginary, the project contributed to the symbolic re-subjectification and empowerment of women. Another case is the Indian project *Priya's Shakti* (<https://www.priyashakti.com/>), a creative response to the 2012 Delhi's gang rape⁵ that involves artistic comics-based practices. The creators produced five comics books centred on the character of Priya, a young rape survivor who, with the help of the Hindu goddess Parvati, becomes a superhero struggling for the liberation of women from the yoke of violence. *Priya's Shakti* is an ongoing multimedia project deeply intertwined with local and global activism against gender abuse in which comics' 'transmedial narrative potential' (Rippl and Etter 2013, 213) is exploited so to incorporate different artistic expressions such as video, street art and augmented reality. Transmediality, together with a clear dialogue with the superhero genre and with comics' narrative abilities, contributes to the creation of a diffuse iconography that relies on the figure of a female superhero whose strong subjectivity is devoted to the cultural challenge of patriarchal domination.⁶

But which kind of subjectivity should activism against gender violence promote? And how should they do that in a context where the processes of subject formation and identity construction are crucial to, and at the same time problematic for, the production of feminist consciousness and the establishment of feminist movements? From the end of the 1980s onwards, feminist thinkers and activists started to denounce the limiting and excluding connotations attributed to the term 'woman', the social and historical category of feminist identity and struggle.

According to this new wave of feminists (the so-called ‘Third Wave’), the notion of ‘womanhood’, around which the feminist subject coalesced during previous waves of feminism dominated by white, middle-class and hetero-cis-normative women, was a fictitious category that helped challenging patriarchy but preserved other hegemonic identity paradigms by excluding non-white, non-hetero-cis-normative, non-middle-class and postcolonial subjects from its discourse (Preciado 2003, 164). It is not by coincidence that in these years Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) developed her theory of intersectionality, which insisted on the importance of analysing gender-based discriminations together with other forms of oppression (based on race, sexual orientation, gender conformity, class, etc.) that affect women belonging to marginalised demographics. Third Wave and Intersectional feminism, in this sense, prompted feminist movement’s inclusivity and challenged its previous essentialising attitudes, which is to say its tendency to identify inherent ‘characteristics common to all women, which unify them as a group’ (Stone 2004: 135). By relying on the concept of difference more than on that of unity, intersectional feminism opened up to the possibility of a new feminist subject that, with Paul Beatriz Preciado, we can define as ‘*queer* multitude’. The ‘*queer* multitude’ is an intrinsically plural subjectivity composed by bodies who, in a series of heterogeneous forms, deviate from the heteropatriarchal norm and from other oppressive cultural orders such as the imperative of whiteness or classist discrimination (Preciado 2003, 160–161).

In the area of representations of gender violence, the adoption of an intersectional perspective prevents from the risk of exclusion of specific victim categories and from the issue of essentialising the cultural gender hierarchy (superior men VS inferior women) from which violence originates. Both these risks are quite common pitfalls in the mainstream (mainly journalistic) portrayal of sexist abuse, where visibility is a privilege generally assigned to women who comply with the paradigm of the ‘ideal victim’ (Christie 1986; Greer 2003, 49). In Italy, as elsewhere, victims who are commonly treated as newsworthy are usually white, non-migrant, young women (Giomi 2013, 136–140) who do not exceed the boundaries established by the feminine gender role and heteropatriarchal standard (they are often cisgender and depicted as good wives, partners or mothers) (Binik 2015; Mandolini 2020a, 262–265). These tendencies contribute to the cultural reproduction of a generalised, though unrealistic and exclusionary, image of femininity that perfectly recalls the patriarchal definition of women as a homogeneous Other constructed as passive, objectified and controllable. On the basis of this symbolisation, sexist abuse is labelled as natural and, consequently, legitimised (Bourdieu 2012). In light of this, an expressively pluralistic and intersectional portrayal of gender abuse victims and survivors able to challenge the current imaginary is crucial.

Intersectional feminism is historically and conceptually linked to the adoption, both by activists and thinkers, of transnational feminist practices (Desai 2015, 120), which is to say networking strategies that overcome the rigidity of national boundaries so to foster collaborations with feminist movements or collectives based in different cultural contexts but possibly affected by similar issues (Desai 2015, 119). What Valentine Moghadam called TFN (Transnational Feminist Networks) is as old as feminism, but it increased significantly following the emergence of globalising trends and of Transnational Feminism’s theorisations (2015: 55–57), which, not by coincidence, appeared just after

intersectional feminism and promoted the same emancipation to the exclusionary outlook of previous feminist practices and theorisations.⁷

The following sections of this article will analyse the level of inclusivity of the representations produced in the context of Italian comic-based artistic practices against gender violence. The aim is to verify whether the theoretical and historical connection between transnational feminism and intersectional thinking/politics is confirmed by the actual presence of a relationship between the transnational networking of the Italian groups and their ability to propose an intersectional comic-based representation of sexist abuse.

Corpus selection

The corpus of works and practices to be analysed includes four artistic projects: *Shero*; *Ti amo da (farti) morire*; *Matrioske parlanti contro la violenza ostetrica*; the *Luchadoras* project. These are all artistic products that directly engage with the comics medium and were ideated by grassroots or semi-institutionalised feminist groups active in the context of gender violence prevention in Italy since 2012.⁸

The aforementioned initiatives directly originate from the world of activism, which determined the exclusion of other materials, such as graphic novels on the topic of gender violence that I analysed elsewhere (Mandolini 2020b). Another product that was excluded from the corpus is *Fanzaghirò*, a crowdfunding project initiated by 40 Italian comics artists that produced a brochure where the character of *Fantaghirò* (1991–1996), the warrior woman from a fantasy TV series by Lamberto Bava that was extremely popular in Italy during the Nineties, is re-interpreted. The project contributed to fund the activities of a women's shelter in the city of Bologna. Similarly, two comics-based initiatives against gender violence promoted by the Lazio Region and by the Asti City Council, respectively titled *Un fumetto contro la violenza sulle donne* (2016) [A comic against violence on women] and *Il cielo che si tinge di rosa* (2019) [The sky turns pink], were not included in the corpus because of the lack of a specific feminist affiliation of the associations that realised them. The same can be said for the brochure with the *Diabolik* character of Eva Kant *Quando una donna deve difendersi* (2016) [When a woman needs to defend herself], by *Ti amo da morire* ONLUS, a group that works on the issue of gender violence from a generalist and non-feminist perspective.

These exclusions clearly limit the number of artistic experiences analysed. However, despite this limitation, the corpus is adequately diversified as it includes products originating from feminist groups active at different political levels (grassroots movements or collective and more institutionalised associations), working on different forms of gender violence and approaching comics and their formats either in traditional or experimental manners.

SHERO, A comics contest for the Istanbul convention

SHERO is a campaign promoted by *Step-Up!*, a working group active within *WAVE* (Women Against Violence Europe), which is the European transnational NGO that gathers women's shelters active at a national level. The Italian network of women's shelters (*centri antiviolenza*) *D.I.Re.* (Donne in rete contro la violenza [Women network

against violence]) is an active participant within *WAVE* and was among the promoters of the project, which consisted in the production of a call for artists directed at young women comics creators interested in drawing a brief story centred on the figure of a female superhero that acted following the guiding principles of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Among the winners, we can find three Italian artists selected by *D.I.Re.*: Beatrice Candreva, Federica Manfredi and Francesca Rosa. Their works, together with that of Serbian, Finnish, Spanish and Macedonians creators, were later printed in the multilingual brochure *SHERO. WAVE Cartoon Brochure* (2019, https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WAVE_shero_versione-web.pdf), which was made freely accessible online. They were also turned into itinerary exhibitions managed by *WAVE* at a European level and by *D.I.Re.* at a national level.

The three works showcase a clear intersectional and non-essentialist representation of gender violence and its actors. Candreva's work, titled 'Rise of Forgotten S-Heroes', assigns visibility to migrant victims of gender violence, thus challenging the aforementioned exclusionary but widespread portrayal of the ideal gender abuse victim as white and Italian. The one-page graphic narrative is divided into three parts that evoke the phases of a physical and existential journey carried out by a migrant woman who emancipates herself from loneliness, sexist abuse and prostitution by joining a group of migrant survivors of gender violence. The focus on the idea of sorority is directly linked to the symbolic formulation of a pluralistic feminist subjectivity composed by individually diverse women who find in the resistance to patriarchal oppression their common ground. The inherent heterogeneity and transnationality of this collective subjectivity is furtherly elicited by the inclusion in the comic strip of the motto 'Jin jiyad azadi' (women, life, freedom, in Arabic). This was used in the Syrian Kurdistan region of Rojava by women combatants who became a transnational symbol of feminist strength since 2011 for their struggle against the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).⁹

Manfredi's and Rosa's comics, despite focussing on the characters of clearly white women superheroes, provide the readers with a representation that questions feminine stereotypes, thus challenging the notion of a stable and homogeneous feminist subjectivity that responds to specific characteristics that supposedly and essentially differentiate women from men. This, as documented in the section dedicated to the definition of this article's theoretical framework, is a trait of intersectional feminist practices and thought (Stone 2004: 135). Manfredi (Figure 1) draws on the Chinese martial art of kung fu and on the Japanese tradition of kintsugi art (the art of repairing objects by highlighting their crevices) to create a superheroine whose main ability is that of restoring the heart and personhood of survivors of gender violence. The interdependence of words and images and the references to the superhero genre are two of the medium-specific features of comics that Candreva uses in order to craft her intersectional representation. The verbal component of the page exercises a descriptive function: that of explaining the connection between kintsugi art and the work of re-composition that survivors of gender violence need to carry out in order to 'reborn more beautiful and stronger than before'. Far from simply illustrating the text, the set of four panels that compose the page relies on a presentation strategy traditionally employed in superhero comics to highlight the powers and physical characteristics of the character that symbolises/represents gender

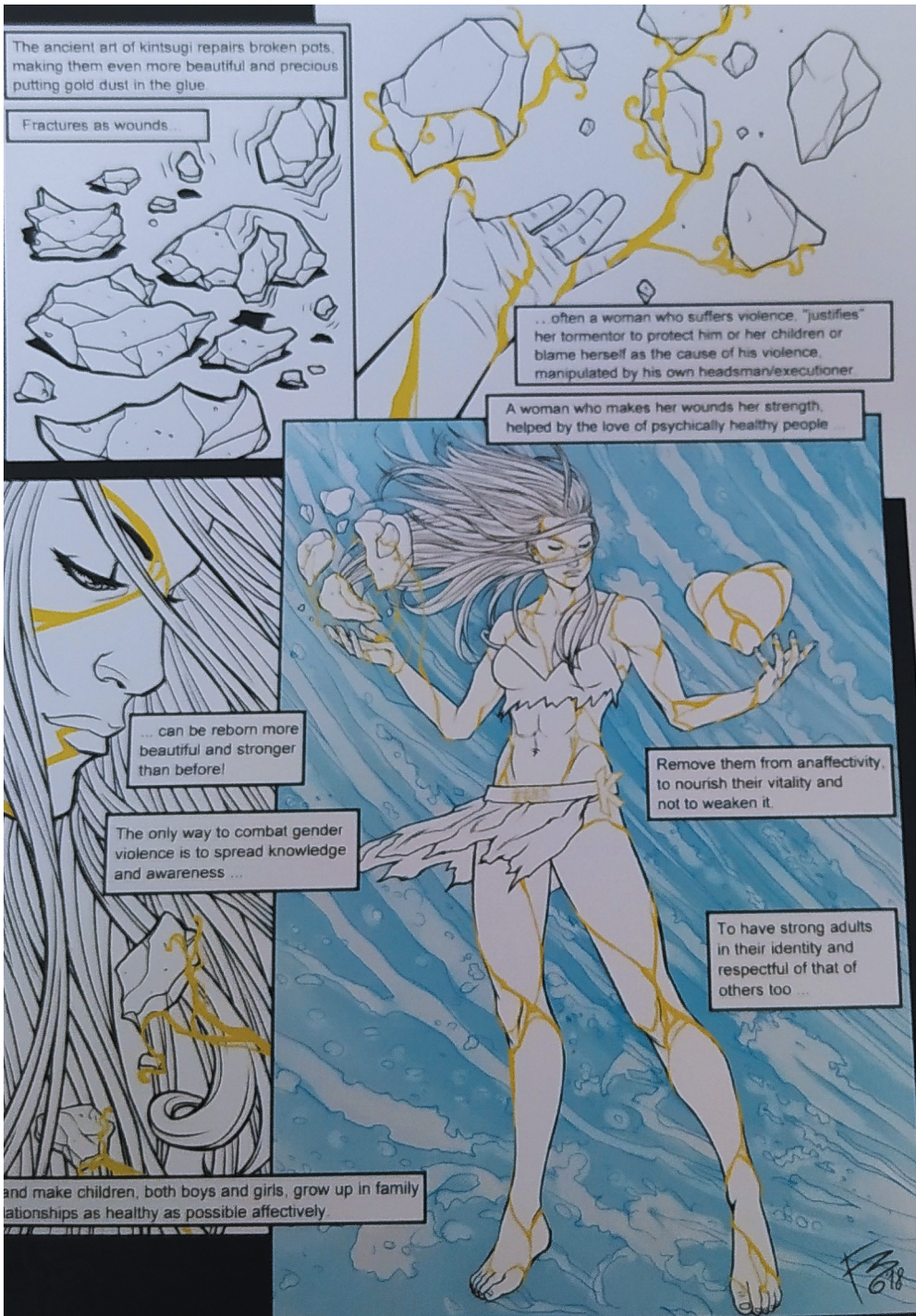


Figure 1. F. Manfredi, *SHERO*. WAVE Cartoon Brochure (2019), p. 12.

violence survivors. This presentation, which reaches its climax in the last and biggest panel where the superheroine is showcased full-body while displaying her superbody's abilities, ends up only partially matching with the expectations generated by the verbal description. The superheroine's body is graphically portrayed as innervated with scars of previous wounds that contribute to accentuate her muscular features, thus questioning her homologation to the standards of feminine beauty. The artist's decision to exploit the superhero genre's technique of emphasising vigorous and plastic bodily features allows her to design a figure that does not conform to a conventional image of femininity.¹⁰ This, coupled with an 'additive' (McCloud 1994, 153–154) relationship between words and image, contributes to the re-definition of the category of feminine beauty mentioned in the text beyond the patriarchal and essentializing principles of softness and passivity.

In the case of Rosa's strip, further elements challenge gender conformity at a visual level. In her story, the superheroine's role is played by the mother of a young girl who finds the strength for leaving the abusive marriage she is trapped in. Her daughter, who is the central character of Rosa's narration, describes her situation of family violence and liberation through references to colours: red, that she links to acts of abusiveness; blue, her favourite colour; yellow, the colour associated to the liberating/ed mother. The chromatic palette and its explicit juxtaposition to particular emotions facilitate the reader's deconstruction of the gendered symbolism associated to femininity and implicitly proposes a concordance between a gender-neutral colour like yellow and the possibility of overcoming the yoke of violence.

This inclusive and intersectional representation is clearly fostered and influenced by the transnational dimension of *D.I.Re.*'s artistic action within *WAVE*, a group that follows a feminist method of networking that Sonia Alvarez defined as 'transnational IGO-advocacy logic' (2000: 31–60). *WAVE* is, in fact, an association that entertains close collaborations with European institutions, as testified by the decision of building the *SHERO* project around the Istanbul Convention. The same can be said for *D.I.Re.*, which gathers women's shelters that, despite originating from the Italian grassroots feminist movements of the seventies and eighties, are nowadays services that receive national funding and that openly state their interest in dialoguing with local and international institutions for bringing change in the life of women.¹¹ The pan-European dimension of the activist work undertaken by the groups involved in the campaign *SHERO* is accompanied by further transnational influences confirmed during an interview I carried out with Alice Degl'Innocenti,¹² activist within *Step Up!* and co-curator of the Italian side of the project. Degl'Innocenti stated that part of the inspiration for *SHERO* came from the connections that she established with Arab female comics artists met in the context of the Tunisian artistic festival Chouftouhonna and by the work of Deena Mohamed, who created the webcomics with a female superhero *Quahera* (<https://qaherathesuperhero.com>). In the case of *WAVE* and *D.I.Re.* a linear relationship seems to exist between the richness of the groups' transnational links and the inclusivity of their representational practice.

Ti amo da (farti) morire, A graphic guide against gender violence

Different is the case of *Ti amo da (farti) morire*, a comics-based brochure published in 2015 by the Sardinian association and women shelter *Donna Ceteris*. The brochure is

a guide including practical information on violence against women drawn by Laura Congiu and Stefania Costa. Graphic guides aim at raising awareness on gender abuse and fruitfully employ the comics medium by exploiting its ability to combine words and images that interdependently describe/illustrate each other (McCloud 1994, 155–156). The productivity of the format is testified by the growing production of graphic guides offering information and commentary on gender-related issues in the Anglophone world. These include *Gender: A Graphic Guide* (2019), *Queer, A Graphic History* (2016), *Sexuality – A Graphic Guide* (2021). In this sense, *Donna Ceteris*' publication might be considered an interesting precursor. However, the content of the book is problematic if analysed following the intersectional approach that this article selects as its theoretical framework. On one side, *Ti amo da (farti) morire* is characterised by a clear lack of attention towards diversity. Throughout the guide, victims are portrayed as monolithically white, heterosexual, cisgender and able, a representational strategy that excludes numerous victim categories. This contributes to the reproduction of the 'ideal victim' paradigm of representation already mentioned in the second section of this article (Christie 1986; Greer 2003, 49); it also testifies to a lack of awareness on (or interest in taking account of the core principle of intersectional theory according to which 'any liberation movement [...] that focuses only on what all members of the relevant group [...] have in common [not on their differences] is a movement that best serves those members of the group who are least oppressed' (Srinivasan 2021, 17).

Moreover, in *Ti amo da (farti) morire*, characters – female victims and male perpetrators – are represented as inflexible opposites who engage with functions and behaviours that never really exceed the script of patriarchal roles and gendered identities.

The book opens with a reflection on the differences between women and men that engage, among others, with the theories developed by the psychotherapist John Gray, author of the bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992). The over-reaching idea proposed by Gray, according to which men and women diverge significantly in their psychic functions, is reproduced and confirmed by the authors of the guide, who introduce the problem of intimate partner abuse by highlighting the biological and, to a minor extent, social asymmetries between the sexes. Here, the Butlerian idea that the binary of sex is, as much as that of gender, a cultural/scientific simplification (Butler 1999 [1990]: 10–11), which is crucial to an intersectional thinking willing to include intersexual, non-binary and transgender/transsexuals in its view, is not taken into consideration.

The naturalisation of the opposition between uniformed men perpetrators and women victims that the aforementioned representational strategy fosters is reproduced in the short graphic narrative *Fine di una fiaba* [End of a fairy tale], by Bepi Vigna, Stefania Costa and Ilio Leo, which is inserted at the end of the book. Here, the comics' technique of showcasing different temporal planes in the same page (or double page) (McCloud 1994, 104; Chute 2008, 453) is used to propose a visual association between the female figures (a mother and a daughter who experience domestic violence) and the male ones (the protagonist's abusive father and her violent husband). This sharp distinction between men, who are portrayed with monstrous features, and women, who are depicted as suffering victims (Figure 2), allows the reader to identify patriarchal structures as the root of sexist violence but ultimately confirms the gendered simplifications and binarisms



Figure 2. B. Vigna, E. Congiu, I. Leo, *Fine di una fiaba*, in *Ass. Donna Ceteris Ti amo da (farti) morire* (Arkadia 2015), pp. 94; 96.

on which patriarchy itself relies. Moreover, the authors' decision to insist on what Saira Mohamed described as the 'all-too-common perception of perpetrators as cartoonish monsters' (Mohamed 2015, 1157) is detrimental to the recognition of gender violence as an ordinary and structural societal issue affecting people who should not be erroneously labelled as deviants. A more multifaceted and intersectional representation of the victims' and perpetrators' subjectivity would have prevented the authors from replicating these rhetorical pitfalls, which are invariably ascribable to the assimilation of essentialising tendencies that the adoption of an intersectional approach would have at least mitigated.

The lack of an intersectional attention for the issue of inclusivity corresponds to the association's scarce commitment to transnational networking. During my interview with the president of *Donna Ceteris* and ideator of the graphic guide, Silvana Maniscalco, she admitted that the group prefers to work at a local level and never really had the resources to cultivate significant relationships with feminist transnational movements, a practice that, however, they aim at implementing in the following years. *Donna Ceteris* does not even belong to the national network of women's shelters *D.I.Re.* despite a common origin in the area of feminist activism.¹³ The case of *Donna Ceteris* testifies to a continuity between the lack of transnational commitment in the activist practice and the absence of an inclusive approach in the representations proposed at an artistic level.

Matrioske parlanti contro la violenza ostetrica, Participative vignettes for reproductive rights

A completely different approach and result is linked to another artistic project initiated by the Roman collective *Freedom for Birth* (FFB) with the participation of the trans-feminist network *Non una di meno* (NUDM). *Matrioske parlanti contro la violenza ostetrica*, which is the name of the project, consisted in the reproduction of a series of images of matrioskas (the symbol of the movement *NUDM*) with a speech balloon located in their belly. The speech balloon was filled by the members of the collective with sentences aimed at denouncing the phenomenon of obstetric violence¹⁴ and its manifestations (e.g. forcing the woman into unnecessary or unwanted medical procedures; denigrate the woman for her choices or behaviours; fail to recognise the woman's ability to choose with competence and dignity). In some cases, the speech balloon was left blank so to allow participants in virtual or physical gatherings like demonstrations to print and show a matrioska (which was made freely available in *NUDM's* website) in order to talk about their own experience of discrimination in the area of reproductive rights. Both typologies of matrioskas circulated widely between 2016 and 2017. As confirmed by Mirta, an activist of *FFB* with whom I carried out an interview, the images were used during demonstrations organised in various Italian localities for the 25th of November 2016 (the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women



Figure 3. Matrioske parlanti contro la violenza ostetrica. Screenshot taken from Non una di meno's website.

and Girls) and for the 8th of March 2017, as they were either carried by participants or affixed to walls.

As the screenshot taken from *NUDM*'s website (Figure 3) demonstrates, the inclusivity and intersectional appeal of the project is directly linked to the polymorphous characteristics of the matrioskas, which include clearly non-white traits and even non-binary symbolic features, such as that of the matrioska with moustache. According to Mirta, it is precisely this graphic depiction of the feminist subject as all-encompassing that allowed an ample and diversified participation to the campaign. When Mirta states that 'the matrioskas were carried not only by mothers but even by girls, young women and middle-age men', she confirms the comics-related images' ability to promote a process of identification and/or solidarity that contributes to widening the spectrum of feminist subjectivity. The serialisation of the matrioska's image and the iconic potentials of cartooning (McCloud 1994, 48–52) allow viewers and users to approach the images as part of the same project but, at the same time, as diversified. This is furtherly amplified by the insertion of the speech balloon, which reproduces an idea of continuity in difference by including a verbal content that refers to the common topic of obstetric violence despite conveying a set of assorted messages. In other words, the artistic project exploits the comics medium potentials so to allow them to serve the cause of intersectional feminism, where unity-in-difference, or the criticism of the false dualism between separateness and inseparability, is a crucial principle (Gunnarsson 2017, 117).

The intersectional outlook of this project is not surprising if we think of the significant amount of work done by *NUDM* and *FFB* within transnational feminist movements. *NUDM*, to which *FFB* is closely linked, was born in 2016 as an Italian spin-off of the Argentinian movement against femicide *Ni una menos* and rapidly grew as a popular network gathering feminist activists all along the Italian peninsula. The connection with the Argentinian struggles testifies to the belonging of the group to an 'international identity solidarity logic' (Alvarez 2000, 31–60) that differs from the aforementioned 'IGO/advocacy logic' for its grassroots dimension. This non-institutionalised partnership with Latin American feminist movements was confirmed by Mirta, who talked to me about the inspiration that her collective took from activists who worked on the issue of obstetric violence in Central and Southern America. Other collaborations were not absent among the activities of *FFB*, whose name derives from a documentary by Toni Harman and Alex Wakeford distributed in 2012 that triggered European and global initiatives on the theme. As in the case of *D.I.Re.*, the association between the existence of transnational networks or influences and the implementation of a representation that carefully considers the principle of inclusivity is clear.

Luchadoras, A squad of female fighters protect a women's shelter

The last artistic project I will look is the *Luchadoras* project started in 2019 by the Roman group *Lucha y Siesta*. The group has extensively employed comics-based artistic practices in order to maintain the activities that, since 2008, they carry out in an occupied building where they have organised a women shelter and a feminist cultural centre. Following a notice issued by the City Council of Rome, which wanted to sell the building that officially belonged to them, the women of *Lucha y Siesta* started a series of campaigns aimed at avoiding the eviction.¹⁵ Among these, the *Luchadoras* campaign ideated by the

comics artist and *Lucha y Siesta* friend Rita Petruccioli, which consisted in a call for action (A #DrawThisInYourStyle launched through social networks) directed by Petruccioli to other comics artist and illustrators interested in reproducing in their own style the image of a *luchadora* (a women player in the Mexican sport of *Lucha Libre*). Petruccioli's call was endorsed by hundreds of creatives who illustrated a squad of racially, bodily and stylistically diversified female superheroes ready to virtually defend *Lucha y Siesta* from the eviction. The drawings circulated widely online, to such an extent that they became iconic of the collective's struggles, and many of them were later printed and attached in the walls of Rome.

As [Figure 4](#) testifies, the *luchadora* symbol is reproduced, in the campaign, as a manifold image where age, race, body shape and degree of adherence to the iconographic principles of femininity change so to include the most diversified set of typologies and meet Preciado's idea of a 'queer multitude' (2003: 160–161). In other words, inclusivity showcases as a crucial component of this campaign. Moreover, the campaign dialogues with and at the same time problematises the tendencies to hypersexualise and stereotypize that, despite the aforementioned queering potentials of the genre, historically characterise the superhero aesthetics (Heinecked and Bell 2004; Stabile 2009). Petruccioli, with whom I carried out an interview,¹⁶ explained this concept saying that by opening the icon of the *luchadora* to the interpretation of various authors, the collective avoided the risk of merely opposing a stereotype with another politically correct stereotype (such as the one of the chunky black woman) and successfully challenged standardisation by embracing multiplicity. This extended, as in the case of *FFB*, the possibility to transform the *luchadora* image in a tool to increase political participation. A *luchadora* mask template (<https://luchaysiesta.com/campagne-e-materiali/>) was made available online so to allow participants to print and wear it for selfies or during demonstrations, thus furtherly contributing to *Lucha y Siesta*'s feminist carnival of diversity. The message of inclusivity is also conveyed by another initiative that combines the images of the *luchadoras* with speech balloons: that of *Lucha 2.0*. Here, the activists let the *luchadoras* speak about *Lucha y Siesta*'s idea of offering their services against gender violence as a 'bene comune', a common good that needs to be preserved because, being inclusive, it belongs to everybody.

The *luchadoras* campaign's ability to incorporate in their artistic practice an intersectional ethos corresponds, once again, to the transnational efforts of networking undertaken both by Petruccioli and *Lucha y Siesta* in the area of grassroots/non-institutional feminist activism. The collective's name and the reference to the Mexican figure of the *luchadora* testifies to the partnership that the group established with *Colectiva Cereza*, a feminist association from Chiapas. Moreover, during our interview, Petruccioli mentioned her ongoing collaborations with European collectives that promote gender equality in the comics industry, such as the French *BD Egalité* (<https://bdegalite.org/>). This connection provided the artist with crucial insights for the organisation of an auction of *luchadoras* illustrations and other art pieces donated by creatives to sustain *Lucha y Siesta*'s activities. During the auction, participants could make an offer by showing the 'pugno di fuoco' [fire fist], a hand hold paddle sign specifically designed by Petruccioli, who drew on a symbol widely used by NUDM to represent the collective's fierce political resistance. The strategy of the paddle sign, which was later re-used during demonstrations, thus becoming another tool for participation and inclusivity, evokes



Figure 4. Luchadoras. Screenshot taken from Lucha y Siesta's Facebook page.

a protest that BD Egalité organised in 2016 at the Grand Prix de Angoulême to denounce the underrepresentation of women in the comics festival. In that occasion, the audience were asked to observe a series of comics and guess, by showing their paddle signs, the author's gender. Petruccioli mentioned the artistic performance in our interview and recognised it as a source of inspiration. As in the cases of *D.I.Re.* and *FFB, Lucha y Siesta*'s operation suggests the existence of a correlation between the transnational potentials of the group of activists and the intersectional dimension of their artistic representations.

Conclusions

Italian comics-based activism against gender violence is generally devoted to an inclusive representation of the phenomenon, which is able to enhance participation of diverse subjectivities in the feminist struggle. However, this tendency is not pervasive and is directly linked to the presence, in the feminist group's political network, of transnational relationships that clearly enhance the collective's ability to engage with reflections and practices ascribable to intersectional feminism. As the case of *Donna Ceteris* demonstrates, intersectional feminism is still not ubiquitous in the Italian context.

The quality of the transnational connections also affects the level and type of participation that the artistic products promote. Semi-institutional groups driven by a 'IGO advocacy logic' such as *WAVE* and *D.I.Re.* employ the comics medium in a traditional manner, thus relying on its narrative and sequential features as well as on its conventional distribution channels (the printed brochure, the exhibition and the online format). Grassroots collectives belonging to what Alvarez defined 'international solidarity logic', such as *Freedom for Birth* and *Lucha y Siesta*, are clearly driven by the need to experiment with the comics medium and its potentials in order to compensate their limited financial resources. This produces a fruitful dialogue with other media and genres, like street art and illustration, with which the comics-based products share new platforms (e.g. the social media page, the demonstration banner or mask, the city walls) and new audiences. The transmedial cooperation enhances the level of participation connected to the artistic practices and functions as a model to increase the already transmedial and inter-medial dimension of comics production in Italy and beyond (Di Paola 2019; Rippl and Etter 2013).

More homogeneity can be observed in relation to the groups' ability to engage with glocal (global + local) artistic practices, as all the associations cultivate both transnational relationships and national, regional and/or urban exchanges. As a result, the artistic products are often malleable and adapt to a wide (often web-based) circulation as well as to more site-specific types of dissemination (exhibitions, demonstrations, wall affixation). It goes without saying that this glocal capacity is connected to the choice of embracing porosity as a guiding principle that disturbs not only national and regional boundaries but also the conceptual division between the online and the physical dimension of activism.

These practices contribute to the development of representations that foster symbolic inclusivity and showcase an intersectional perspective even though the artists and activists directly involved in the design of the campaigns belong to privileged racial/ethnic categories, most of them being white Italians. Further research should investigate the absence of non-white and non-Italian women in the area of comics-based activism against gender violence, an absence that, despite not directly affecting the area of the representation on

which the present analysis is centred, might identify an issue in the actual levels of social inclusivity that dominate intersectional feminist artistic circles in Italy.

Notes

1. Despite presenting a pretty detailed account on the phenomenon of gender violence in Italy, ISTAT data did not conduct a specific inquiry on the belonging of the victims to minority groups, which highlights the already documented tendency of Italian institutions to avoid specific debates on race and ethnic diversity (Pesarini and Tintori 2020). Unofficial statistics such as those published by the feminist network *Non una di meno* tried to compensate this lack and found out that among the femicide victims of 2021, 83% were Italian and the 17% were migrant women from countries like Albania, Nigeria, Sri Lanka or Romania (NUDM 2021).
2. With the expression ‘artistic initiatives’, I refer to campaigns initiated in activism contexts whose objectives are reached by means of a set of artistic practices. A more detailed definition and discussion of the term ‘artivism’ will be provided in the second section of this article.
3. Two works can be considered exemplary here: Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May*, which consisted of a creative and collaborative mapping of rape events in Los Angeles and also included self-defence classes for women, and Mayer’s *El tendadero* [The Cloethsline], a performance-based installation that facilitated women in talking about their experiences of sexual abuse. On the works of Lacy and Mayer, see Cabrera (2022 forthcoming); Herrera (2020: 12–17); and Roth (1988).
4. Up until December 2020, Argentina had a restrictive bill on pregnancy termination, which was allowed only in cases of sexual violence or when the pregnant woman’s health was at risk. Argentinian feminist movements organised to fight the law since 2018 and succeeded in their request to change it in 2020. As demonstrated by the fact that the pro-abortion movement originated from the movement against femicide Ni Una Menos (Diaz 2021), the negation of reproductive freedom can be classified as a form of gender-based violence as it deprives female-bodied subjects of their ability to choose over their sexual and reproductive life.
5. On the 16th of December 2012, the 22 year-old Jyoti Singh was raped and murdered by six men. The case caused a series of protests by feminists and women who demanded justice for the victim.
6. On Priya’s *Shakti* see Lodhia (2020, 791–792) and Wieskamp (2021).
7. On Transnational Feminism, see Grewal and Keplan (1994); Alexander and Mohanty (1997).
8. 2012 was selected because in that year the Italian feminist debate on the most extreme form of gender violence, femicide, entered the mainstream sphere (Mandolini 2020a, 248).
9. In Italy, the liberation movements of the Rojava region gained great resonance among left-wing and feminist groups. An example of this resonance in the field of comics production is Zerocalcare’s *Kobane Calling* (2016). On the representation of the Kurdish Women’s Protection Unit in Western media as a (not uncontroversial) symbol of female strength see Şimşek and Jongerden (2021;) and Dean (2019).
10. Interestingly enough, scholars in the field of comics studies have recognised the superhero genre as potentially fruitful for queering normative notions of corporeality. See Stein (2018) and Taylor (2007). Despite the genre’s potentials, numerous are the examples of superhero comics used to reinforce standardised notions of masculine and feminine corporeality. See, for example, Cocca (2014) and Felming (2015).
11. On the history and general ethos of the Italian ‘centri antiviolenza’ see (Creazzo). See also D. I.Re.’s statute (D.I.Re 2012).
12. To read the full interview, see Mandolini (2021).

13. Maniscalco stated that the association prefers to not label itself as feminist in order to avoid critiques in a national context where feminists still struggle with misconceptions and unpopularity. This strategic positioning does not prevent Donna Ceteris from actually following a general feminist ethos, which was confirmed by Maniscalco in the interview. This position highlights the uneven landscape of Italian feminist activism.
14. First adopted by Latin American activists, obstetric violence is an umbrella term that describes the series of physical and psychological abuses suffered by female-bodied subjects when it comes to reproductive rights, which include the macro areas of childbirth and abortion. Obstetric violence is theoretically (and in some places even legally) recognised as a form of gender-based violence (Herrera Vacafior 2016).
15. The eviction was actually avoided and, in August 2021, the Lazio Region bought the building, thus allowing the collective to continue their activities there.
16. To read the full interview, see Mandolini (2022).

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