

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: ITALY

**Transcript of Anita Lombardi
Interviewers: Bruno Grazioli, Lauren Duncan**

Location: Bologna, Italy

Date: July 16, 2019

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Anita Lombardi was born in Vittorio Veneto in 1988. She graduated from college with a degree in Philosophy and works as a freelancer. She works as the Secretary of the Board of the Lesbian Association in Bologna.

Bruno Grazioli is the Resident Director of the Italian Studies Program for Dickinson College in Bologna (Italy). He has studied in Italy and the UK, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and French, an M.A. in Pedagogy and Promotion of Italian Language and Culture at the University Ca' Foscari of Venice, an M.A. and Ph.D. in Italian Studies. For over a decade he was faculty in Italian at Smith College and twice served as academic director for study-abroad programs in Florence (Italy). Since 2018 Bruno directs the Italian Studies Program in Bologna where Dickinson students deepen their knowledge of the Italian language and culture. He developed and taught a course on Italian Activism combining traditional instruction in class with volunteering/community engagement work in local organizations. He has published "Social activism Italian style: building a community of practice through language immersion and civic engagement while studying abroad" for Routledge (2021) and co-authored "Crisis as Opportunity: Reimagining Global Learning Pathways through New Virtual Collaborations and Open Access during COVID-19" for *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* (2022). Currently Bruno is co-writing a book chapter titled "Building A Practice of Hope in International Education" for a two-volume publication for Cornell University Press.

Lauren Duncan is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Psychology at Smith College, in Northampton, MA. She obtained her Ph.D. in Personality Psychology and a Graduate Certificate in Women's Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She teaches courses in the Psychology of Women and Gender, Political Psychology, and the Psychology of Political Activism. Her research focuses on individual motivation for participation in collective action, particularly among women and LGBTQ+ individuals. While at Smith, she began studying the Italian language and culture (Dr. Grazioli was her first teacher, who became her friend and collaborator) and was able to extend her research on the psychology of activism to conduct oral histories with Italian feminist and feminist LGBTQ+ activists. She has recently written about "Better policy interventions through intersectionality" (*Social Issues and Policy Review*, 2022), the childhood origins of Gloria Steinem's feminist activism (*Journal of Personality*, 2022), "Psychology and political participation" for *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation* (2022), and "Power, gender, and collective action" for *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychology Power & Gender* (2023).

Keywords: LGBTQ+ Rights and Intersectionality

Lauren Duncan: Let's begin with your family history. In particular, I would like to begin with a conversation about your childhood and first of all with your family. What do/did your parents do?

Anita Lombardi: Well, my father is a journalist and video-maker, so he works for some newspapers, essentially making videos, telling stories; my mother is an elementary school teacher, she works with primary school boys and girls, but she's also an artist, a painter, a performer. And I have a younger sister.

Bruno Grazioli: What does she do?

AL: My sister is an opera singer, she also does that, she does music, and then she does many jobs to survive, so to speak, but her profession is singer, musician.

LD: How old is she?

AL: She's 28, I am 31.

LD: Do you have other sisters or brothers?

AL: No, just her, just her.

LD: What was it like to grow up in your family?

AL: So, well, it was—I have a very stimulating family, in the sense that my family is comprised of people that have always encouraged a lot creativity and also self-exploration, so supporting the choices that we daughters could make in our lives, so it is a good experience, it was a good experience to grow up in my family. They have also always offered many cultural stimuli, fewer socially more culturally. What else? We are all separated now, we live in four different places, four different cities, but during childhood it was a very solid nuclear family, very welcoming, very—I don't know how to say it. They were two very supportive parents. I don't know if my answers are detailed enough...

BG: You already gave answers to some of these questions, so there's no need to ask them. Were there other important close relatives?

AL: Yes, my grandmothers, both my maternal grandmother and my paternal grandmother, to whom I am very attached; they too, with their lives, their histories, have been significant models for me; they are still alive. One grandfather I was very close to is dead, and another

is still alive, but we have a relationship more—I would not put him on the list of meaningful people.

BG: Does most of your family come from Veneto, or...?

AL: My mother's side is from Veneto¹; my father's side is from Lombardy².

BG: Anyway, all of the North, right?

AL: My grandmother is Abruzzese³, actually, so we are obviously mixed.

LD: Can you give us an example of what activities you do with your grandmother, for example? Something special?

AL: Well, when I was a teenager, I lived for many years with my paternal grandmother, my father's mother; now she lives in Veneto, so we don't see each other often, but I lived with her, so we shared the everyday bits of life growing up as an adolescent. She is an important person, she was one of the first women who divorced in the Seventies, in a one-horse town, and then she never married again, so she divorced leaving three children and my grandfather. She is a person that was meaningful because she is a very independent woman, very free.

BG: Even today?

AL: Yes, even today. She has always done politics, although she never managed to get herself elected anywhere.

BG: Politically active?

AL: Yes, yes, yes, she was a candidate in the municipality, in a small context, locally, but she participated actively in public life, in the political parties, on the left specifically. Yes, she is an important person because in any case my grandmother is 88 years old, so there weren't many women even in the Seventies, when she divorced, that had made this type of choice.

¹ Veneto is a region located in northeast Italy along the Adriatic Sea. ("The Veneto." Italy Heaven. <https://www.italyheaven.co.uk/veneto/>. Accessed 7 March 2022.)

² Lombardy is a region in northern Italy bordered by Switzerland to the north. ("Lombardy Region." Italy Heritage. <https://www.italyheritage.com/regions/lombardia/>. Accessed 7 March 2022.)

³ Abruzzese is a word meaning 'from Abruzzo', which is a southern region in Italy. ("Abruzzese." Collins's Dictionary. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/italian-english/abruzzo>. Accessed 7 March 2022.)

My grandmother has always been sensitive to using the feminine grammatically, for example, from the time I can remember, not even this is common.

BG: In reference to...?

AL: Herself, that is to say in the sense, for example, it seems banal but still today if there is a group of women, people say “We are all (guys) together” but my grandmother always said “We are all (women) here” instead, which seems like a trivial thing, but it isn’t trivial now that there is a revival of certain feminist themes above all, however my grandmother was doing it from the time I remember, so, this is important.

BG: This is your father’s mother?

AL: Yes, my mother’s mother is more traditional; the classic grandmother who cooks, is welcoming, maternal, so she is less of a model from that point of view, but it is a strong affectionate bond anyway.

LD: Are your parents political?

AL: No, that is my mother is a feminist, also my mother divorced because she was being pressed into only the role of wife and mother, so she wasn’t content to live like that anymore; although my mother had always worked, but the situation remained that the family caretaking role, in addition to work, fell very much on her shoulders; not because my father is—how to say this—a man who doesn’t do things, but simply one does it this way—I don’t know how to say it. It is a habit, it isn’t an ideological choice, but simply one does things this way, it is taken for granted that the wife takes care of the daughters, in our case, cooking, cleaning the house, so at a certain point my mother separated from my father for this reason. The history of my family is made up of divorces, of women who decided to become independent while paying the price of this choice—what was the question?

BG: If your parents were politically active.

AL: Actually they are not politically active, that is the family was a bit closed, in a very strong sense in its core, but not particularly attentive to expanding social relationships, so on the one hand the transmission of certain—I don’t want to say “values”—but convictions, positions, critical thinking, these were transmitted but with little relationship with other people, so my parents aren’t two activists, they have never been involved in group contexts, so going beyond politics, not even collective social contexts.

BG: So, what are the political and social values that you learned from your family?

AL: Well, in any case my family makes explicit the importance of free thought, the importance of individual choice with respect to situations, which was made explicit, it was transmitted, it wasn't intuited, it wasn't indirectly understood, but came to be exposed as something positive, the fact of being faced with situations, from the smallest ones to the collective ones, and to be able to reason about them and to evaluate if something could work for me or not, it didn't have to work, so not necessarily being in agreement. This is what was transmitted, just as the divorces of my grandmother and my mother were motivated, with these reasons, with more or less awareness based on a path that they over time, it wasn't that...but more or less explicitly over time they were motivated with the need to be able to live their own lives in a significant and full way, in an independent way. These are concrete teachings that were transmitted to me and my sister, for example, in addition to the values of knowledge, of study and culture; these were important. My parents are book lovers, of study; neither of them graduated from college but they always have a lot—so to speak—offered intellectual stimuli in various respects, from art to literature to science. These ideas are transmitted consciously, that is not that they only “breathe” them, they are truly discussed, focused on.

LD: What type of messages did you receive about sexual identity? Can you give me an example?

AL: Nobody in the sense that in any case all of my family, all the people that I had around me never talked about sexual orientation, heterosexuality was assumed. Maybe, I don't know, information was transmitted on the television news, situations of this type, so you might talk a bit about this topic, but it was tangential, like one can discuss any event that you see on television or you read in the newspaper, I don't know, it was talked about for a half hour, but it wasn't ever discussed—so to say—I didn't have a way to have models with respect to this type of subject, so in short, I didn't even imagine that people could have sexual orientations different from heterosexuality. It wasn't talked about it in general, I think, in family contexts, it's not that my family in particular was...then certainly, there was a sense of being able to potentially talk about this, in the sense that in any case my family was in some way able to deal with the topic by analogy, manageable, but it wasn't a theme, there weren't examples of this type.

LD: And messages about gender?

AL: Many, yes, many, not messages about the theory but about the practice, in the sense that the women in my family have had experiences of liberation in some respects. The fact that in any case women could make choices of a certain type was transmitted to me, and it was also encouraged, so my parents didn't ever think that I couldn't do things because I

was a girl, so I had good examples about this, good messages from this point of view, but maybe due to their personal experience, it was necessary to talk about this because a concrete situation existed in front of us and so these deeds that were also tragic, because in any case families were destroyed because of this situation, so an act of liberation also brought with it a lot of suffering, naturally, not just a heroic celebration. Let's say that the price to pay for this choice was accepted, that is, it was evidently considered to be acceptable, however strong, however significant.

BG: After overcoming the difficulties was there an improvement in family dynamics or not?

AL: Individually, yes, that is the four people in my family individually have taken significant steps to improve the relationships; collectively we are separated, we have four different lives. There are relationships, of course, but my parents don't see each other, they don't even yell at each other, that is, their point of contact is their daughters, they relate to each other for our sake, if it happens, if they have to talk about it, if they want to talk about it; but we live in four different cities, in four different houses, with other people. It was necessary to recreate a relationship with the nuclear family that is in balance, that is not negative, but also isn't like it was before, it is different.

BG: Are we are talking about the beginning of the 1990s, the mid-1990s, the 2000s?

AL: They separated in 2007.

BG: Ah, so recently.

AL: Yes, rather, I was 19. Clearly, they had years of difficulty, that then culminated in a separation. It didn't happen overnight.

LD: How is your relationship with your sister?

AL: Not great. I have an excellent relationship with my parents, but not a good relationship with my sister. It is cordial but not intimate. We have had very different lives because when my parents separated my sister was living with them, but I was at university, so she experienced the separation of the family in a different way than I have.

BG: She really experienced it.

AL: Yes, I had moved away, so even there, let's say, I didn't experience the separation, but I paid the price of the distance, so in some way each of us suffered for this in a different way,

so we were taking different paths in our youth. Also, we are different: I am very outgoing, she is very closed, so we have some differences. So yes, we don't fight but we don't share our daily lives or experiences.

LD: Your values are different.

AL: No, it depends, in the sense that the most fundamental ones, for example respect for other people is shared, in theory at least, but the practical action of these convictions maybe is different. In general, my family, my parents, don't really understand my choice to participate with other people in my life, because they are very individualist, all three of them, my sister most of all, this separates us; but my parents have accepted something that is different for them, maybe my sister less so, I don't know. I don't believe she understands very well why I do some things.

BG: What did you mean when you said that they don't understand your choice to participate?

AL: That is a need but also a choice, to participate with other people, that is the associative life, political and also private, so relationally. For me it is important to share my life with other people, on various levels and in various aspects. I am a bit different in this compared to my family, the family culture is not like this; they are more used to thinking on their own, to reasoning alone, even to take up fights, but individually. I, on the other hand like the exchange with other people. Recently my father told me "Now I understand that you like doing this thing, all right." They are surprised at the difference that they see between me and the rest of my family.

BG: Our questions try to shed light on the cultural difference between Italy and the United States, two different perspectives, so question F that talks about the "coming out story," it isn't that we are asking you "tell us when you did it," no. I imagine that you know exactly what I am talking about because in associative environments of this type we know that we use a language that is closer to the American one compared to people who don't participate. And the story is a very personal one, it is the narrative of a creation story and that you own, and you decide autonomously when, how to manage it and share it with others. This doesn't seem to us to be very well represented yet in the Italian culture. But what is your story?

AL: Regarding "coming out," I do it continually, always, therefore, and the fact that to express this part of me is an intimate part of me, that is I cannot NOT share this aspect. Over time I have refined the ways in which I express it, in the sense that maybe the first few times it was just "I am a lesbian" and now it is more of a more natural conversation in

which I express the things that I do, inevitably I talk about other lesbians or women, of my partner, so in some way the coming out happens all the time. It has happened that I have chosen to not talk about this aspect in some contexts, specifically in work contexts because they are the most dangerous contexts. In a context that doesn't put my survival at risk, as can be for a job that sustains me economically, there aren't problems; in a work context it is still a bit difficult. Usually I do it, but a couple of times it so happened that I was basically afraid to express this aspect.

BG: I took for granted that you work for the association, but you don't. What do you do?

AL: I am a 3D graphic designer, but I also work for la Casa delle Donne ⁴, which is the anti-violence center in Bologna, I'm also a part of a lesbian group, where the membership is voluntary, but it is a job, it isn't paid but it is a job, in the sense that every day I work some hours for the association. Actually, in Italy, very few associations are able to pay their activists. Il Cassero⁵ has some paid people, but it is really big; my association is smaller, so we are not in a position to pay anyone. In any case, the coming out story is part of the politics. Over time, these two things have overlapped a little: from an individual, personal need to not lie but to live fully as the person I am, so it is important to express some aspects intimately; it also has become a real choice, that is awareness that it is a political action and which is also encouraged collectively among us, without forcing anyone, clearly, but it is a political objective: visibility, to say "I am a lesbian, I am gay, I am here, I am there, I am trans." I don't know if I responded to your question, but related to coming out—

BG: Yes, go ahead.

AL: I came out to my parents, they were the first people I came out to, not really wanting to, in the sense that I was 18 years old and given that I come from a small town I didn't know any other lesbians, I didn't know anyone, so a very effective tool at that time, it was the 2000s, was the computer, the Internet, so I met other people through forums, blogs, that were there. I met this girl from Genoa⁶, a city that is rather far from my house; she came to my town and we essentially got together. We slept outside one night, in the woods, because

⁴ La Casa delle Donne (Women's House) is an organization in Bologna, Italy that was founded in 1990. The organization supports women who have experienced abuse by offering shelter and counseling. ("Who we are." Donne. <https://www.casadonne.it/chi-siamo/centre-for-women-against-violence-in-bologna-italy/>. Accessed 18 March 2022.)

⁵ The Cassero LGBTI+ Center of Bologna was founded in 1982 with the aim to raise awareness for social and political rights of LGBTI+ individuals in Italy while additionally outlining and tackling national and international discrimination against LGBTI+ individuals. ("Cassero." Cassero LGBTI+ Center. <https://www.cassero.it/chi-siamo/il-cassero/>. Accessed 5 April 2022.)

⁶ Genoa is the capital city of the Italy of the region Liguria in northwestern Italy. ("Genoa." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Genoa-Italy>. Accessed 10 March 2022.)

my house is surrounded by mountains; except that my mother, who is a walker, took a walk in the woods that morning—I swear, the woods are endless, I live in the mountains—I don't know how she managed to climb that hill, but she encountered us. She left us a note saying, "happy awakening." So I woke up terrified because I said "Shoot, they discovered me," I returned home and all three of them (my sister, my father, and my mother) were waiting for me on the couch, like this (*arms folded*). Actually, they were angry because I had lied, I had said that I was sleeping over with a friend, but I had gone into the woods instead. They hadn't thought that she was my girlfriend, really, but I was thinking that that was the point, so they were expecting an explanation regarding the fact that I had told a lie but instead I told them "I am a lesbian." They weren't expecting that at all, it wasn't in their mind. My father turned white. Then it was a little bit of a process, in the sense that the girl was waiting outside the house, and they told me "Let her in," so we hosted her for a week at our house, so my parents were great; they started to deal with this thing.

BG/LD: It's a nice story, yes!

AL: Yes, it's a funny story too. I still have the post-it.

BG: And your mom, so cute...

AL: "Happy awakening." Yes, I always tell the new girls who come to the association this story, it's very funny; they laugh a lot. It's an important practice to exchange coming out stories.

BG: This is the question, why is it important?

AL: First of all—let's say this—we have experienced that there is a positive consequence: the girls come out, the girls/boys, I talk about women because I relate to the lesbian/bisexual group, but it also applies to the boys. Listening to other stories from other people basically gives you courage, so when we share our coming out stories then it always happens that, maybe after a month, two months or two weeks, someone says "I told my mom that I'm a lesbian." It always happens, always, not with everyone, but it always happens; we have experienced that it is effectively a tool, an effective tool for sharing that offers strength, gets rid of the fear; because they all have a lot of fear, that is everyone is afraid, they are terrified of the idea of saying, of telling, most of all to the family, the fact that they are lesbian or bisexual or something.

LD: How do you think that your childhood and your relationships with your family influenced the person you are today? In particular with regard to your political activity.

AL: Strongly. I think that in any case it played a fundamental role in my history in the sense that they didn't work actively for the changes that they could have made, but they gave me—let's say—theoretical support, a series of horizons to shoot for. I, even out of necessity—I am the only lesbian in my small family—so probably my concrete need had to translate into practical actions, a system that maybe could have stayed on the intellectual level; also the need to defend myself, at times, gave me an active outlet, practical, concrete to a system that there was anyway, it is my family, so yes, it had a very significant role, very important, it's not disconnected at all. Yes, exactly, maybe the difference is that they didn't have to confront in a specific way some difficulty the step between discussing the questions that they believed were right or wrong—"How the world should be"—it didn't have to be done, realized in practice... The fact that they created around me a certain type of world, of conditions, exists in a very strong way, yes.

BG: How did you get involved in politics and how did you come to be involved in association activities?

AL: I got involved because I was desperately looking for it for years, I wanted it, because I just, coming from a tiny town, I impatiently awaited the age of majority to be able to go to look for the things that I wanted. I didn't want just to hang out with other LGBT people, I really wanted to participate in community life. I studied in Ferrara, another city,⁷ and when I arrived at university, I looked for LGBT groups: I don't remember any at the university, but there were associations outside the university, and I went there. It didn't go well, in the sense that on the one hand I wanted to participate but on the other—at that time my family was falling apart—I wasn't in a position to give to other people. Activism is an individual path for oneself, but it is also something that one does for other people, together with other people. In a moment of my suffering, of my disequilibrium, I wasn't able to express myself in an adequate way in an activist context, so I wasn't able to live with it serenely in any case. The true moment of activism was when I came to Bologna, I was a bit older, I had faced other difficult moments that I had resolved in some way; at that time I looked again to LGBT associations and it went well, I essentially haven't stopped since, I haven't left the group, then I became a member of this lesbian group and then I became secretary of the board and I'm still on the board, for three years now, from the elections, a mandate, before I was an activist.

⁷ Ferrara is a city located in northern Italy. ("Ferrara." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferrara>. Accessed 21 June 2022.)

BG: Is there in this path, from Veneto to Ferrara to Bologna, something that guided you, books, people, outside of the family, that influenced you in the sense that they helped get you where you are now?

AL: Yes, I read some books before, but they weren't very significant. The most important thing was that I perceived a very profound need to bring myself closer to these contexts, that was the engine, and as I met people, that is as I was able to get closer to LGBT contexts, the more I interacted with people, the more I wanted to continue to know the context I was entering. Yes, there were people who pushed me, but I felt a very strong internal need, very autonomous, separate from the fact that I read a book or saw a film; yes, I was looking for books, looking for films, but they always were to go in that direction, they always were in reality, research toward sharing. Seeing a film that talked about lesbians or reading a book that talked about sexual orientations was a means or a tool to always bring me closer to contexts of this type. It is that, more specifically, more than people or books or something else. Then every step led to the next, a castle was being built one brick at a time.

BG: Turning to what you were saying earlier about Ferrera, that it wasn't the right moment for you, within the university there weren't LGBT groups, there were some outside, did you distance yourself from them?

AL: Yes, I distanced myself from them. Also, it wasn't a very political group, so this influenced me too, in the sense that the group focused on socializing, more than the political—socializing is a political point—so alright, but anyway I was also looking for a context that created political awareness, not only of “I am with you because you are another lesbian” only because of that, but “I am with you because you are an activist.” I wanted activists, I wanted people who could possibly offer me subjects to talk about, a way to figure things out, a history, some goals, an embeddedness in another kind of politics, with other realities; in that context the need to meet others was very strong, to find oneself, to talk with each other, more than taking one step toward the world, so toward the outside. It was important because in any case I hadn't met other lesbians, so it was important just to see them—“Other lesbians exist in the world, fantastic” —but this happiness was fleeting, it almost immediately created the need to share a little more widely, that it was more than simply being together; so yes, I left it. I didn't do it anymore; I took a break from this.

BG: For three years?

AL: For three years, yes. With regret, actually with sorrow, in the sense that I—for as long as I can remember—I always looked for a context, also because the world I grew up in was a heterosexual world; I needed to participate with other people in something that I couldn't even share, I couldn't even talk about, that is I talked about it with my straight female

friends, who were very welcoming, but I didn't feel like they were able to feel something that was important to me, so I felt alone, that is one feels alone, and if there isn't any person you can talk to about certain things and there isn't anyone that is able to understand in a way where you don't need to explain to them the things that you are feeling: I am telling you and you immediately understand what I am experiencing. When I stopped being with this group in Ferrara, I felt alone again but it wasn't the right moment; in any case the relationships with other activist people is a path, it happens by degrees. My path was also the separation, a momentary break, then when the right moment occurred for me to return to act in a certain way, it just came, naturally, with joy, with happiness.

BG: What did you study at university?

AL: Philosophy.

BG: Then you went into graphics?

AL: I did a bachelor's degree in philosophy, then I went to a digital art school, and now I am doing a master's degree in philosophy at Bologna—we are still studying.

LD: This is my central question: there are other people who have had experiences similar to you, but they didn't become activists—there are lesbians that aren't political—why are you?

AL: It's a big question! Also, it's a question that we in the association often ask ourselves because many more people come to our association—many women, many girls—some stay and become activists, others spend some time and don't come back, so it's a big question. Actually, I don't know the answer. What I see, from my experience, from the experiences of other activists like me, is that there are some points in common. So, the people I do activism with all have a strong history of suffering—not that those who don't do activism don't necessarily, but the people who do activism with me have had to or have wanted to transform this earlier suffering into a ferocious rage—in any case, they are people who have gone through this rage and in some cases this passage turned into a need for change, to want or have to escape the depression of this passage, and then to do something.

Another thing that we have in common, when we talk about our reasons that we do politics, all of us talk about a very long-standing desire. I don't want to say that it is a vocation—like nuns, no—but it takes the form of a journey; maybe also for people who meet or grow in this activist path it's okay, but before joining these meetings everyone wanted to do this, even going way back in our memories, saying “since I was a child, since I was little.” I don't know if it is a personal characteristic that some people have and others don't which is

influenced by experiences but we also talk about it as something that we feel intimately like a mysterious force—I don't know how else to express it—a very deep need that, when it comes to doing activism, and maybe look back at your own story, you think: all of these little steps could do nothing but bring me here. They are all people who can't be indifferent despite the circumstances. With a slightly odd expression, as if it was stronger than me; I just can't stop this thing, and neither can my companions with whom I share these reflections.

BG: Among these common characteristics that you find, in addition to suffering or original difficulties, are there also similarities among the family or socioeconomic or educational contexts or not?

AL: We are all different, yes, we are all different. So in the small sample of my association, none of us are very well-to-do, not very wealthy; some are, naturally, but the majority are people who also share economic difficulty. The activists who I hang out with—not all, but those that I hang out with—are all people who study a lot, read a lot, always try to learn things, so the cultural level is high—economically it's low, but the intellectual level... Anyway, at least the desire to know, maybe we are ignorant in the sense that we don't know so many things but the need to perfect ourselves, to improve ourselves compared to what other people said before, what other people who we admire say—women who talk and share, men who talk and share—it is important. Basically, the people who find it more difficult to relate to us as activists maybe participate only for the social aspect, they are never very interested in participating in study meetings or conferences, a seminar, a film; these things bore them, so there is this aspect—actually, yes, is important. As to the rest, the family histories are diverse. There are people who are activists whose families have been very unsupportive; they have thwarted them a lot, even beyond their activism, they created difficulty for their daughters/sons, so there is also a vexing reaction (difficult families that the person opposes), not in my case but for many girls, instead—yes, they have terrible families.

BG: So it seems to me that the relationships with your colleagues are difficult to define because it is clear that it isn't a work environment, it isn't a work relationship, but an environment where your lives intersect and relationships naturally become close.

AL: Yes, yes, in fact we call ourselves “comrades”⁸ — it doesn't have a political meaning in terms of communism but the need to identify a term, which is this right now but that I think isn't able to explain fully the type of relationship that we create among us, it isn't the

⁸ Translator's Note: in Italian, the word can also mean 'romantic partner' or 'classmate'

perfect word but we use it because it is a type of relationship that isn't just friendship, it isn't just work, it isn't even familial in terms of the original unit or of kinship, but it is an alternative type of relationship, very significant, very strong, very important, which is just another type of relationship, that we express with the term "comrade" but it is almost reductive. Clearly, we share a lot of aspects of our lives, from the political struggle to mutual support, from the economic to the psychological to the emotional to the material. Some people say that it is a second family, but it isn't a second family, it is something different altogether, one of the possible relationships that human beings can construct: political sharing, collective participation.

BG: And it is this, that, turning to something you said at the beginning, that your father now understands, that he struggled to understand?

AL: Yes, I believe that my parents are a bit envious of this, in the sense that I think they lived with suffering, like a threat—I don't know how to say it—with a little fear of this type of relationship, because they understand that it isn't a relationship where you go to chat with a friend but it is a very deep relationship, that of activism, which of course isn't a threat (they are different things, they aren't hierarchical) but I understand that maybe they have lived with the fear that I was so connected to other people even in aspects that traditionally are linked to the family, for example economically (we help each other in this way) or housing (we hosted each other many times) which one thinks that only families should do because the bond is very strong, but it isn't. With my comrades I share very strong experiences; we can no longer overlook this type of connection, it's ongoing, it is certainly modified but it is a very strong social unit.

LD: It is a relationship of choice, not of obligation. How do you perceive the relationship between the LGBTQ movement, the party system, and movements for the rights of other groups in society?

AL: A big question! Actually, I have less experience with LGBT in other countries, but when I was in Berlin recently, I learned that the LGBT movement there is much more linked to the parties than it is in Italy, in Italy it isn't very close to the parties. Certainly, there are some parties that are probably interlocutors⁹ in some way, but it isn't a big custom, for example, of subsidizing LGBT groups by the parties, so there isn't this mutual bond. It is clear that the Italian LGBT movement is a hodgepodge of incredible stuff, in the sense that there are almost institutional associations like for example Arcigay¹⁰, which is national,

⁹ Translator's Note: people you talk to

¹⁰ Arcigay is the largest LGBT nonprofit organization in Italy. Arcigay fights against stereotypes and for equality and self-determination. ("Who we are." Arcigay. <https://www.arcigay.it/en/chi-siamo/#.YiqbQi-B1mA>. Accessed 10 March 2022.)

very big, very strong; but there are also collectives, that even reject a relationship with the institutions; there are smaller associations, that sometimes associate with the local government but maybe, like Pride in Bologna, don't ask for the sponsorship of the local government (for Pride) and it is a political choice because at the base there is the idea that "I don't have to ask you for recognition, there is this, we are here, we exist;" you don't tell me "Okay, you can exist" so they don't ask for government sponsorship; other Prides have sponsors like Coca-Cola. Let's say that the landscape is very varied. In general nobody, not even Arcigay, I think, has a very close relationship with the parties, beyond of course having alliances, I think the political recognition of the parties is important too, but it doesn't seem to me that it is something like this. For one thing, all the people in the movement don't do it, not all the groups, and anyway it isn't...

In Berlin, I was amazed by the fact that the party financed, annually gave money to the LGBT associations in the city, at least, that they had their center and they were financed by the State.¹¹ Of course it has its pros and cons, in the sense that on the one hand you are obligated to stay within certain standards: keeping financial records, offering almost a justification of the fact that you deserve that money, and this is maybe a negative aspect; the positive aspect is that you are inside the *res publica*¹² of the society, you are recognized from that point of view, you are part of the collective life. In Italy it is not strong like this, also because in Italy there aren't leftist parties, at least in my opinion.

LD: More than in the United States.

AL: I don't know. For example, we are an association, so officially registered, we are inside of an institutional process so we must stay within the regulations, so we recognize the importance of relationships with public entities, with public life, but at the same time there is also the attention to this relationship because we aren't a party and we won't ever want to be a party, we don't do that type of politics, we do another. There is this tension—on the one hand there is a need for it and on the other it is necessary not to trade our freedom for support.

LD: Is there a relationship between the LGBTQ movement and the feminist movement in Italy?

AL: Yes, my specific association is a strong meeting point because we are feminists, we are lesbians, and we are feminists. Our association is feminist, specifically lesbian feminist, so it's a lesbian feminism. In fact, we feel like we have a dual nature because on the one hand

¹¹ Berlin is a city and state in Germany. The city is the country's capital. (Erb, Hubert Joseph. "Berlin." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Berlin>. Accessed 21 June 2022.)

¹² Translator's Note: the state

we live in the LGBTQ+ movement and we live in this world, and we are part of this world; on the other we are part of the feminist world; we interact with both associations. I have to say, in Bologna, there is a relationship between these two worlds; not always the best, not everywhere, but a mutual recognition exists, also because in Bologna many feminists are also lesbians. For me, indeed, lesbians represent in general, even beyond my association, a meeting point between these two worlds because they bring many feminist proposals to the LGBT movement, in contrast to the feminist world where many straight women are homophobic or lesbophobic, so it is a moment of sharing, difficult in both cases because one part of the gay movement is misogynistic, so it is difficult to have the existence of the women recognized in the LGBT movement and vice versa. It is work that we are doing a lot. We have two souls or it's the same—I don't know—it's the same.

BG: Since you talked about “LGBTQ+” let's look further: what is the current state of rights in Italy, what is missing?

AL: Well, in my opinion, in some respects there are openings toward new things, also in political horizons of the movement, in other cases very strong stagnation, in the sense that I think it should be recognized that after the civil unions legislation, which was a goal that the movement pursued for many years, so it was the engine that drove many battles, when it was approved there was a bit of a collapse of the movement which suddenly had to ask itself “And now what do we do?” So there is a part of the movement that doesn't say much any more about rising up and above all in another part of the movement a strong criticism is being made that the LGBT movement risks being represented by gay men, all right, but white, cisgender, wealthy, so therefore they focus on their children, their families, so in some way a reproduction of the traditional model in LGBT fashion. This aspect is criticized, so it is also a time of adjustment, I think, in which the movement has to come to terms with so many new things, like for example the feminist world: feminist lesbians are working a lot right now both within the associations, which are already more structured, but in general within the movement, maybe criticizing those same associations because there is a need to reshape the positions, right?

The proposal for a long time was this, and also it was right that it was “We want to marry and have children,” it isn't completely shared in all parts of the movement, it isn't any longer or it has never been if not for one part, and anyway it is reemerging in a very strong way; they are not proposals that everyone wants to achieve, there is more than that, and so right now these different tensions are arising within the movement, right? I think that it is a moment of transition in the movement where it has to restructure itself and collectively confront a series of issues that collectively have to become the order of the day. Now, beyond the feminist-LGBT meeting, there also are other issues, for example migrants or people with disabilities, and all of these issues together are pressing a lot to be included in

the overall struggle of an LGBT movement that has to bring them to the forefront together, they can no longer exist in separate groups, so right now there also is this dialogue between various groups in the LGBT world that try to express the necessity of bringing these issues to the forefront.

BG: Are you talking about intersectionality?

AL: Yes, absolutely, in my context it is very shared, it is part of our mission, actually, and also that of many others, but it isn't so everywhere. During the last two Prides, a lot of space was given to the subjectivity of LGBT migrants; many people who participated in Pride criticized this choice and left or shouted racist comments, for example, so within the movement there are people on the right, there are racist people, there are disability-phobic people, misogynists, this thing here is important because you can't take it anymore, when we fight for LGBTQ people, we aren't talking about lesbians and gay men, we can no longer speak of cis people, there are also trans people, who may be disabled, who may be migrants, who aren't white, who are very poor, so these pressures are emerging very strongly in the movement, something that creates a lot of conflict, too.

LD: Yes, even in the United States.

AL: I see, it makes sense. It's important.

BG: Out of curiosity, does it seem to you that this conversation, which takes place in the feminist lesbian world also happens in the gay world, or maybe you don't know, maybe it doesn't happen?

AL: It seems to me that this theme comes up less in the gay male world. It must be said, however, that in any case I interact more with lesbians and queer people than with gay men; actually, I am a bit more distant from their political reflection, I have to say. I have the impression that that part of the movement is the most reactionary. The people who focus on the most intersectional themes are almost always lesbians or trans people who are non-binary, non-white, and this type of political vision is expressed much less often by groups of gay men. Probably there are also groups that reflect on this. It is clear that the gay male movement should reflect more deeply on deconstructing the male role. This isn't done adequately because understandably, they say "I am gay, I suffer discrimination and violence, I am the victim," so the difficulty in recognizing privilege even in discrimination is more difficult for gay men than for those of different subjectivities. Among our discussions it is important to recognize that we are white, which is a privilege because our black lesbian comrades don't come with us to do politics, therefore we also need to do the hard work of recognizing this diversity because we are white or we are cis, we aren't trans or

right now we are not disabled. It is an important thing in the circles that I travel in, so lesbians and queer people, this thing is deeply felt, in the gay world a bit less, even though in Cassero, which is a context that we share with so many people, even men, there are also many guys who we do politics with and they share these things, it doesn't mean that nobody does this; as a movement, as national collective representation of the gay male world these aspects aren't very... This type of reasoning surely doesn't come from them. They should welcome it.

LD: Do you have a relationship with LGBT groups outside of Italy?

AL: Some contacts, yes, daily contacts, no, but yes in the sense that in any case we have had the opportunity to participate outside of Italy in various meetings of representatives of LGBT people from all over Europe, so there are these moments of sharing where it is also possible to understand how it's going in other countries, what types of situations there are. Last year a comrade and I went to Berlin because the theme was violence in LGBT relationships, so behavior by LGBT people, which was work that my association has been doing for a couple of years (also we have a telephone hotline for lesbians who are suffering from violence in their relationships) so the meeting was on the topic of "LGBT violence" in general, so both family behavior but also within couples, so on this occasion we met with associations from Berlin, Spain, Poland, so there were contacts. Actually, very diverse realities. We share things, naturally, because the difficulties are the same, but even the ways of development are different, so it is interesting, it is important. Then there is ILGA-Europe¹³ or other larger realities where some people that take part or had taken part in our association are representatives. I must say that we don't work enough on outside relationships, and this is a problem, but we are volunteers and so we can't do everything.

LD: If you had to choose an important point from your history, from which other people could learn, what would it be? Is there a message that you want other people to understand from your story?

AL: Yes. For me the important point was meeting LGBT people and it is something that, even when the girls and women come to us, it's important not to remain alone, that is sharing your own experience, because in any case, it is true that a path of growth or improvement is individual because it is the individual history of each one, but none of my comrades became an activist alone, for example, and all the people that entered our group, in our context, whether a month or a week or ten years benefited from sharing with other people. I still see the solitude of LGBT people is a very strong thing, many people don't join

¹³ ILGA-Europe is a non-governmental umbrella organization that consists of over 600 different organizations in 54 different countries. Their mission is to ensure all human rights regardless of sexual orientation or identity. ("About Us." ILGA-Europe. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/about-us/>. Accessed 21 June 2022.)

groups, though joining an LGBT group is something that changes your life radically. I suggest participating in LGBT contexts. I think this is the most important thing because I think that in any case my personal freedom consists of the participation, it's not doing what you want but sharing things with other people and with other people changing things that aren't going well, for example, or simply being better—"Change yourself, not the world"—which can actually work. Changing oneself also changes the rest of the world. If I had to state one message that I could transmit it is to go with other people, to share politics or life with other people, to not stay alone, to not stay in isolation. One will never grow in the same way alone as one will in a collective context, even for a short while (it isn't entering a cult, it is just participation). This, in my opinion, is the important thing.

BG: It's clear that you identify yourself as an activist, a term that you used a lot. What intrigued me in what you said is that, talking about your human and personal growth, you used the word in reference to adolescence or early adulthood, hence my questions:

1. Have you always had this awareness of being an activist? Did the concept of activism come early, or did it come later, maybe when you arrived in Bologna?
2. What is the definition of activism in the Italian language? In American culture activism has a very specific role (Americans grow up knowing what an activist is—there is almost a justification of this in the Constitution, in my opinion). Instead, if we run a Google search in Italian, we don't find activism as we are discussing it today, but rather Montessori's pedagogical approach, etc.¹⁴

We have spoken of activism, intersectionality, cis, and so on, and we understand—I, maybe in a limited way—we are sharing this language that you all used in seminars and conferences, but outside people don't talk like this, so is there a risk that you feel removed from reality because you walk a different path?

AL: As to the first question, yes, like I've always been a lesbian, but I began to say "lesbian" from a certain point, in the same way I began to say "activist" from a certain point. It is true that one doesn't grow up thinking that activist people exist, I learned it in the context of activism, I borrowed this term, among other things, choosing it because one also uses "militant" and at least in our case "activist" was preferred because "militant" is militarizing. The choice of the term was deliberate. From the time that I began to hang out with groups of activist people, slowly, not immediately, I undertook the use of this word to describe something that I had always felt, I always did in a certain way, but clearly then it became more conscious and so you can tell yourself, I could tell myself it in this way. Maybe it is true that people don't understand what we are doing at times, and they also don't

¹⁴ Montessori education is a type of educational environment and philosophy created by Maria Montessori. The system has been adopted by many schools around the world. ("Montessori education." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montessori_education. Accessed 21 June 2022.)

understand what we are saying, they don't understand the words, which we have thought about, that is, the right way to communicate to the outside the things that we experience, we process, and also this is a way in which we do activism, that is finding a way to convey your passion, what we do. I don't perceive a ghettoization in this, actually.

On the one hand it is right to offer the tools to other people so that they can understand even not being inside a context, so it is an important topic; on the other, however, I would find it wrong to simplify our language, our process, just because other people cannot understand them, that is there has to be a double effort: I tell you in the simplest way possible, you have to listen to what I am saying. However, it must be said that entering a context where one speaks a certain language and they use certain terms is very liberating, that it isn't a burden because I am out of the world, but I take a breath of relief because I am out of the world. It is something that personally, as individuals, makes you feel good; as activists the need to express it emerges, certainly. We try, however, in the sense that when we create events that are open to other people, we simplify the type of language, that is I don't go to my grandmother or to a straight friend speaking of "cisgender" or "transgender" but maybe I use more words and I explain the concept rather than using the term. It is a practice that I am used to doing in the sense that I have always had to explain everything that I was experiencing, we are all a bit used to making a great effort to enable a person who isn't completely understanding what we are experiencing to understand us, far beyond the language that I use; you aren't understanding what I feel.

There are people that don't understand the fact that I like another woman; you want to explain what transgender means to them! Then we also have to confront another truth, which is that I can explain in a very simple way but there are people who truly don't listen and in any case their goal is not to understand but to destroy us, to destroy me. In that context it is no longer my problem. My problem is to prevent you from harming me, not involving a certain type of person anymore. The extreme right movements are not people we talk to, we never would. My grandmother, our families, some friendly non-LGBT contexts, yes, they could be people I talk to, in that case I can simplify my arguments. For example, with the deaf community, which doesn't have the word LGBT, because they hadn't ever heard the word LGBT, they don't have a way of translating into sign language as if that concept doesn't exist in their language. If I have to convey a concept like heteronormativity to a deaf person, I have to explain it to them. There are deaf people who ask us what transgender is, so it must be explained. In that case, the ghettoization¹⁵ is lacking, it is an exchange, but there has to be a reciprocal exchange; if it isn't, it doesn't make sense to

¹⁵ Ghettoization is a word that means isolating or placing into a ghetto; marginalizing. ("Ghettoize." dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ghettoization>. Accessed 10 March 2022.)

speak of ghettoization because I am defending myself, I am creating a safe space, it isn't that I am withdrawing.

BG: I'm asking you the very last question with regard to the language question: Italian doesn't help... And what about pronouns?

AL: On this point there are linguistic experiments taking place right now, in the sense that Italian doesn't have the neutral,¹⁶ so there are other ways: use "u" or "x" or "*", some people don't use endings (but it is less common). It is in process right now, in the sense that they are tricks to compensate for the failings of our language in the narration of certain experiences. We don't have adequate words to express certain subjectivities, so we try to adjust the language where we can. I think that maybe it is something that will change again, it isn't definitive, also because we need at least two things, in the sense that on the one hand it is necessary to find words like, for example, "sibling" in English (we have fewer words that are able to represent both men and women with "x" subjectivity, which is a problem). We also don't have words that can speak specifically of non-binary people, for example, which isn't "all genders together," I don't know if I have explained myself. When I say "tuttu"¹⁷ am I saying "tuttu" because you are a non-binary person and that is your gender identity, or am I saying "tuttu" because I want to include men, women, non-binary people? So, subtleties exist that are not yet structured in this sense, but there is a necessity to move in this direction that occurs, actually, with various and effortful tricks.

We are still struggling to use the feminine in our language when we refer to women, it becomes science-fiction to imagine being able to talk about non-binary people. In our contexts it is now easy to speak this way, it is clear that then when you go leave it becomes a tragedy because the world outside of our bubbles is a masculine world, which recognizes males, that's enough, so all the other subjectivities aren't there, there aren't linguistically represented, and it is very annoying because when instead I talk with my female friends, maybe straight or people that aren't in my context, I don't remember to use different terms, that is I speak in the usual way and we can't understand each other anymore. It is very difficult, actually, even with my female friends it is tiring sometimes, or they tease me, or they make fun of this aspect or insist that it isn't important, so we can't drink a beer in peace! This is also activism, because every time I go out with people who are not in my context, I must explain why if we are all women I say "siamo tutte arrivate".¹⁸

BG: If we were all women here, I would use the feminine.

¹⁶ Translator's Note: Italian has gendered language, nouns, verbs, etc.

¹⁷ Translator's Note: "everyone," but as a gender-neutral term

¹⁸ Translator's Note: "we are all here," using the feminine verb endings

AL: Me too! But it isn't so obvious.

BG: No? I mean, I understand that maybe in this case I am the only man, so the masculine plural should be used, the majority... but I wouldn't want to presume to know what people identify with. So, better to get rid of the vowel.

AL: I usually use "tutte" (everyone, feminine) and "tutti" (everyone, masculine) or "tutte/i/u" (everyone, feminine/masculine/neutral) when I am not sure of the situation, so I stretch it out a bit [by using all three versions], but it is better to do that than to exclude some people. It bothers me when they talk to me using the masculine and I am not considered because they don't recognize the fact that I am there, so I imagine that for another person it can be very annoying. But there are also many women who, in female groups, say "state tutti bene".¹⁹

LD: Like in English we use "guys."

AL: Yes, in fact, it is annoying.

BG: The use of "guys" is contested?

LD: Yes, yes. I teach at Smith College, it is a university where they are all women and sometimes I use "guys;" it is in the culture, in the language.

AL: Even in my contexts, to indicate a courageous woman, many people say "a woman with balls" but it is such a deep reflection of culture, like guys, like so many things where you have to do your own work to deconstruct it because otherwise it doesn't work, it fails, so you have to think about it, but it's important, at least it's important to me.

LD: Is there anything else that you want to say?

AL: Ah, yes. In the questions you should have written "LGBT," not "gay."

LD: Yes, I changed it, I'm sorry.

BG: So there is no "gay woman?"

AL: There is in the sense that every person decides what to call themselves, there are some women who say "gay," so all right, it isn't a problem, but our type of activism is lesbian

¹⁹ Translator's Note: "we are fine," masculine

activism and so it consists of people who experience the word “lesbian” as important and they have this type of identity. So none of us says “gay” to define ourselves, and the type of politics that we do is oriented toward valuing this term that means that they are women who take part in a certain history. The women who define themselves as gay usually participate more in the gay community, that is they live more often with men comrades; even we do it, we aren’t separatists, we are in relation with all the other realities, but lesbian history and politics are different from gay politics and history. Some girls define themselves as gay, some girls define themselves as lesbian, and it is different. [next sentence eliminated on request of AL]

LD: It is different in the United States. I changed “gay” in the questions only because I wanted to include “T,” since in American English we use “gay” for men and women, but not trans.

AL: Even in Italy it is used as an umbrella term, but for many years now Pride calls itself “Pride” by political choice, not “Gay Pride” even if the newspapers continue to write “Gay Pride.” This is what I was saying earlier about conflicts: the gay male movement has been hegemonic in pursuing certain issues because they are seen primarily from the point of view of a gay man, okay; it’s right, important, but it’s not the only one. The issues of a gay man are not necessarily the same as a lesbian woman, of a trans woman or of a trans man or all the other subjectivities. They are not the same, they are different, they have to be together, not one above the other.