

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

SITE: ITALY

**Transcript of Valeria Roberti
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Valeria Roberti was born in 1984 and has been an activist for the rights of LGBTQI+ people for years. She is the facilitator of the *Centro Risorse LGBTI*, an organization that promotes the full equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, and intersex people. She works to promote *Education about Differences* with adolescents and teachers through non-formal education techniques and has collaborated with various organizations already active in this field. In 2017 she completed the course for professional development on “Gender Perspectives in Teaching Pedagogy” at the University of Bologna. She is the coauthor of the book “Una scuola arcobaleno. Dati e strumenti contro l’omotransfobia in classe,” published by Settenove Edizioni in 2021.

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).

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Lauren Duncan: I would like to start with a conversation about your childhood, and first of all, with your family. What does/did your parents do?

Valeria Roberti: My parents have a bit of an interesting history, in the sense that—fitting for what we’re talking about today—both worked in politics. My mom worked for the Communist Party¹ in the province of Pesaro,² because I hail from the province of Pesaro, and she was on the provincial board and handled women’s rights. She worked for this for several years, then she moved on to the farmers’ union. In the meantime, my father always worked for the CGIL, [*Italian General Confederation of Labor*]³ which is a union. At a certain point in their life, they decided to abandon office work and bought a house in the country and opened an agritourism⁴ farm. So from, so to say, officials/office workers they became farmers and innkeepers, so to say, hosts of people. I grew up in that context there, so I remember very little about my early childhood years when they worked in offices—when we moved, I was 6 or 7 years old—so for me, family life was country life: the time of the vegetable garden, the people who arrive and sleep in the bedrooms, maybe dinner that isn’t just family with the people who come through and ask you things. Then, in addition to innkeeping, they decided to also open a restaurant, so all of my adolescence was passed in the kitchen, between the kitchen and tables. A family business, which was a very mixed relationship in that period: us as a true and real family and, in contrast, work-related activity. Both of them retired some years ago and ended the restaurant business, they only do the innkeeping. In the meantime, my mom founded an association to do food-related activities, in the sense that they offer courses, cultural encounters, they talk about the origins of spices and how to make bread, how it used to be done, how it’s done today. They are two very creative “characters,” I would say.

Bruno Grazioli: Sisters/brothers?

VR: Only child.

BG: What did you learn growing up in this context in contact with people? What values did you learn directly from your parents?

¹ The Italian Communist Party was a political party that emerged from a split with the Italian Socialist Party in 1921, and dissolved in 1991, relaunching as the Democratic Party of the Left, its official successor party. “Italian Communist Party.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_Communist_Party. (Accessed 22 December, 2023).

² Pesaro and Urbino is a province in Italy’s Marche region; its capital is the city of Pesaro. “Province of Pesaro and Urbino.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Province_of_Pesaro_and_Urbino. (Accessed 22 December, 2023).

³ The Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL) is a collective of Italian trade unions. It was born out of the “Pact of Rome” in 1944, involving the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Italian Socialist Party (PSI), and Christian Democracy (DC). “Italian General Confederation of Labor.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_General_Confederation_of_Labour. (Accessed 22 December, 2023).

⁴ Agritourism, the industry of entertainment and educational activities relating to and based in agricultural settings, is regulated and overseen in Italy by the Ministry of Agriculture. “Agritourism.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agritourism>. (Accessed 22 December, 2023).

VR: Look, having so many people around in adolescence surely helped me in the spirit of communication: being among people, not being afraid to talk to whomever, also having a smile on your face; the classic life of those who work in a restaurant. Knowing how to smile, going beyond problems that you'd better face at another time (not saying that you hide them, because that's not it, but that it's not the moment for addressing the most important issues). When there are people, you smile, then there's another moment. On the other hand, it was positive in the sense of talking without worrying about it, so a very open way of discussion. I certainly learned from them that politics is a bit of everything; if for them it was a way of life, in fact a party job and a union job, so for them it was work in a strict sense, that mentality was then brought into our life every day. It's normal for me to discuss at the table—I don't know—a party that takes an unclear position or a social movement that takes to the streets; it was very normal that we discussed these themes every day, then in adolescence (there is always a bit of conflict) we had nice dense discussions, and I enjoyed them. There has never been a "it's like this or it will be like this" but rather "I think it's like this or I think it will be like this." This is perhaps a value that's not very common in Italian families.

BG: And how is your relationship with your parents?

VR: Good. It took a while to get out of that working dynamic, which had also pervaded all of our dynamics: my mom was in the kitchen, I helped her; my father served the tables, I helped him. You know, when you work together it's complicated. But considering that I came to Bologna⁵ 16 years ago now, slowly we have distanced ourselves from that and now our relationship is just more human, in the sense of adult people who talk about things. It took some time, but it has never been difficult or very discordant, but I find that now we have actually reached a very good balance, I am happy.

BG: Are there other people in this family?

VR: Yes, there are two aunts, two sisters of my mom: one lived with us when I was little, for a series of family reasons, so we have remained very close even though we don't see each other often but there is a strong internal connection; another [aunt] who has essentially lived with my parents for the last few years, she's also a "big character." Here, she is really a point of reference for me in the sense that, if I look at myself in the photos, it seems to me that I look more like her than my mom, even in terms of style: she is a bit of a tomboy, a super independent person who has travelled a lot, she's someone who's a bit out of the

⁵ Bologna is the capital city of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region. "Bologna." Britannica. <https://www-britannica-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/place/Bologna-Italy>. (Accessed 22 December, 2023).

ordinary; now she's reached a certain age so you see that she isn't able to do everything that she'd like to anymore, so she has to slow down, but she's a truly very sweet and independent person (the right word to define her). "I go, I do it, someone come with me, good; nobody comes, it's all right anyway."

BG: Do you identify with her as much as she identifies with you?

VR: Yes, actually there's a certain affinity, yes, absolutely. Among other things there is a particularity in that many years ago she contracted HIV,⁶ so she fell ill with AIDS because she didn't follow the treatment adequately. There was a period where she was hospitalized here in Bologna, and I went to visit her practically every day. At that moment the bond that was created as very strong. You understand that in that case it was a very powerful coming out to all of the family; with some she'd already done it, regarding her condition, with others no. I was there and so there was a very strong affinity, also including my coming out. That point in life was very similar in some way, even though the issues were completely different, but you bring out something about yourself that maybe you don't know, not even how to deal with it. There we became very close. Then, yes, the situation was a bit tragic because she was hospitalized, she wasn't very well, but now she's recovered, so things are resolved.

LD: What type of messages did you receive about gender and sexuality?

VR: A lot... Now, my mom—like I was telling you—she worked for the Communist Party, so I always had a feminist education, I would put it this way, in the sense that these issues were always present in the house; my mom used the words "feminist" and "feminism," etc. It wasn't like, "I don't know, what is it?" Nor did I learn about it in books. My mom was making speeches in favor of abortion in the eighties so, in short, it was an ever-present subtext. It's obvious that, and it is normal that it's like this, in the dynamic between my father and my mother there is still a bit of the classic man-woman dynamic in an Italian family, here, but let's say that surely the approach is much more open compared to people my parents' age, than their cohort; I also see from my friends' families who talk about how their family lives were, surely in my case it was a little more open. With regard to sexuality, I have to say that I think this was always a very, very open discussion at its base, in the sense that I never heard one negative thing said in discussions about homosexuality but never, it was just never something they alluded to; some jokes from some relatives maybe

⁶ HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a viral infection impacting immune function, which sometimes progresses into AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), a more serious illness. HIV/AIDS has no cure but treatments have advanced, lowering their fatality rates. "What Is HIV?" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics/whatishiv.html>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

yes, but I was always like “What?” Because for me, that wasn’t the base of the discussion, especially about gender stereotypes, maybe that.

My parents were always super-open about gender stereotypes, completely, I remember really well that when I was little, I wanted to play with the boys, that was something that happens often to people who later discover they’re homosexual because I fit better in that model of playing, of culture, of representation of the self. My parents never batted an eye about this, not at all. Rather, when they teased me at school they would say, “Ah, but you’re a girl, you mustn’t play with the boys,” and I would return home angry and they would say, “No, you play with who you want.” I remember really well, though, a distant aunt who made a joke, “But no, it’s not good to always play with the boys, don’t do it, girls don’t do it.” I felt really bad. For me, gender wasn’t a normal thing, so from this point of view super open. On sexuality, even more so, I had positive role models because this aunt I told you about, a bit nutty, has some gay female friends, female friends and male friends, who have always come to my house, so I saw couples made up of two men or two women, maybe it’s obvious, they didn’t kiss, but it was clear that they were in love, in any case, it went without saying. This helped me a lot because actually it was an easy process of recognition, “Ah, okay, it’s like this, all right.” About this, I have to say, super comfortable terrain.

BG: So, what is your story?

VR: Of self-discovery?

BG: Yes, the whole story, give us the whole story!

VR: The whole story! For me, it has always been simple enough in the sense that at a certain point in my life I realized that my heart was beating for a woman, period. There’s not much more to say... Obviously, looking back, I realized, actually, what I was telling you a little while ago: maybe when you are younger it isn’t a question of feelings that you feel, so of a true and real sexual orientation that you can already talk about, but more of a model of reference that seems to be closer to your way of being. I felt much closer to the boys, I played boy games, these classic things here. Then essentially, when I felt this feeling, I said “Ah, right, okay, it’s something else here that we’re talking about.” Between me and myself, the thing was like, “Ah, all right, okay, it’s like this,” then of course saying it out loud is another matter. Initially, I tried to talk about it with the girls at school. It was the summer between the third year of middle school and the first year of high school that I understood that I am homosexual.

In the first year of high school, after leaving middle school, changing schools, so meeting new people, so when there was a moment of trust I tried to talk about it and yes, the first

two people were very, “But yes, okay,” also because I wasn’t—I’m not saying that I wasn’t sure, but it’s one thing to have a feeling and another to have an experience—I wanted to try to go by stages. It was like this for a few years, with some crushes here and there with various girls from school, with some I tried to talk about it, with others I didn’t, in any case everything was pretty casual, either “I keep it to myself, or I tell my closest female friends,” etc. But without shame, it’s not that I felt distressed; I was looking for a relationship, essentially. At a certain point it happened: a story with a girl from another school was born, a peer, and then boom, revolution! Personally, I mean. A world opens up, and with her, who was crazier than me at the time, we decided to not hide it, we began to go to school hand in hand, basically; it was a public coming out pah pam, without hesitation, and it was really strong, actually.

Also because in those contexts, the people—in my case—maybe hadn’t had the courage to come to say it to my face, but you understand that they begin to talk about you in some way. I heard rumors after some time, from other classmates. “Ah, you know what this one said, you know what that one said...” Then, you want to—in my case, indeed—it was a relationship, so it wasn’t just like, “Hi, I’m coming out, but I don’t have anyone close;” the fact of being coupled gave me great strength. At that point, what the others were saying wasn’t bothering me. At a certain point, telling the parents happened because her parents discovered it and they were rather unhappy. See, maybe a little, that they are more Catholic than my parents or maybe simply they didn’t expect it, I don’t know. Anyway, they didn’t react well then and there, also because they knew each other (you know neighboring towns, you know each other more or less) and they wanted to talk to each other. I had to tell my mom—I had already thought about doing it, maybe this was the push to doing it for real. Because of this, it was a very complicated relationship, anyway, her parents never accepted it. Those years were a bit complicated. In the end, my parents said, “All right, look, the relationship is yours, what can I do about it?”

BG: Did the relationship last a few years?

VR: Yes, I was in my fourth year of high school, she was in her third because she’s one year younger; it lasted until after the end of high school, so three years, almost three years. Basically, three years because of this situation with her parents, too, which brought us closer; I think that if our parents, hers especially, were more relaxed, maybe we would have been a little more relaxed too. Instead, the fact of being opposed made us closer, anyway, that’s how it is. Anyway, coming out was a bit like this, shaped by circumstances, but then it went rather well.

BG: Did your relationship with your parents change after that bad moment, bad beginning?

VR: Yes, at first it was a bit strange. I don't know if I would say it changed; it was only a bit... I don't know! I don't know if I am rewriting the past, I wouldn't like to say things that aren't true—in hindsight, basically, I think maybe right then and there it wouldn't have been expected, but more the fact that I had started a relationship, more than being homosexual; that is, I think it is more a question of age and of having a relationship with another person. I think if it had been a boy, it would have been the same, "Ah, our daughter, she's having a relationship!" I think it was more that, I have to say, than my homosexuality. The most difficult thing in the relationship with my parents and my sexual identity was the words to say it. Even after, I noticed that many times they didn't know very well what to call the girls I was with: "Your girlfriend/partner/friend." I saw a language difficulty in how to deal with these people, because I've had more or less long relationships, too, the majority of the time, so they've met many people by my side, each time it was a bit of "okay, it's really fine, there isn't a problem... What do we call this person?" I really saw this difficulty here over the years; then, more recently, they are completely relaxed; my mom is really enthusiastic, etc. But the first two relationships, basically, were a bit like this. Even the rest of the family eventually, we told them, or they came to know it, etc. And also, they, you could see a bit of "how do we talk about it?" Those who tried to talk about it, they said, "Listen, how's it going with... So, well, anyway... Love, how's your love life?" But the terrain was always rather peaceful.

LD: Would you like to talk more about the messages that you received in your family about politics and how to resolve political problems?

VR: Mh, difficult. Actually, also because my parents lived politics directly, they place a lot of faith in politics. This is a message that always came to me and in fact, I see them as terribly lost, maybe more than me, in this moment where the parties have completely changed, the approach of the political electorate has completely changed. I think that for them politics is still very party-based, that is it is a spokesperson that brings forth the demands and makes changes in the laws, etc. My experience taught me a bit that, actually, at this point, the parties aren't so much political anymore: there is so much more politics in so many other things, in so many other movements, in so many other gestures. I realize that lately we have very different ideas about this. There was a discussion, in any case, a conversation, some years ago exactly on this issue of political representation; I realized that we have—yes, anyway, we are distanced from each other, it's normal, in the sense that it happens. But I see them as really sad, that is, I find my father truly sad because he's a person who had so much faith in political changes, handing it over to the parties as representation; now he doesn't feel represented by anyone. This is dangerous, in fact you see what happens. When I think of him as a person who started by organizing factory strikes and who doesn't know where to turn today, it's really disheartening.

LD: In your opinion, the party system isn't able to change in the fight for the rights of social groups?

VR: I don't have the competence to understand the political processes as a whole but, looking at today, I realize that a series of social problems don't find answers in progressive politics, let's say "progressives" or "leftist" as you want. Salvini⁷ or other parties of this kind have trenchant answers, pam! And the people find in that a sensible answer to a real problem, that they then use in an exaggerated way, if you want, about the migrant question too the numbers aren't absolutely true, okay, but they give an immediate answer. This has appeal to a person who has a real problem, the answer is real. All of that there on the left has slipped away in the past few years, I don't know how to explain it, but the concrete answers are really missing. My feeling is a bit like this: even the people like my father, who is used to finding a concrete answer and, in some representatives, he can't find it anymore. This distances people, so even the most leftist groups, which maybe are those that I see as closer to my way of thinking, even they anyway have truly very limited answers; they aren't able to put together a thought that is, I think, really forward-looking. Someone who gives you an immediate response in a rough way like this, sharp, negative, I think you must have a forward-looking approach. Today we can answer A which will bring us to B, where B is the long-term solution. This perspective is completely missing from the current party scene.

BG: Okay... You arrived here, but how did you arrive here? From the province of Pesaro, how did you come to arrive and to be you, politicized and committed?

VR: Let's say that during high school I had a lot of fun doing minor political things. I was a representative of the institution so the idea of doing something for others had also started there. That historical moment was very nice, I have to say very empowering, that is really strong because from a little person who isn't anybody in the corridors of a school to, I don't know, 500 people, trying to advance the voices of others and this was really very nice. Arriving in Bologna the situation was a bit more complex because in any case it is a big city and the activism of the university groups didn't convince me, I didn't feel like doing it, so I went to Cassero⁸ which is an important institution in the city—you can't deny it. I had already read about Cassero from home on my computer, looking for information. When I came to Bologna to study, as soon as I found a place to live, the second thing I did (the first

⁷ Matteo Salvini is a politician who began serving as Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Transport in 2022. He's supported neo-nationalism and strict immigration policies.

"Matteo Salvini." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matteo_Salvini. (Accessed 22 December, 2023).

⁸ Cassero LGBTQIA+ Center is a queer community hub and resource center located in Bologna. "Who We Are." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/chi-siamo/>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

was to find a house) I opened the door to Cassero and I said, “Hi, need a hand, can I do something?” I started volunteering in various groups, then you talked to other people from Cassero, so I’m not going to dwell on what it does, and they involved me in a very nice thing: they asked me to participate in a TV program where they wanted to interview some people who identified as homosexual about their relationship with the family, etc.

I had just arrived, I was 19 years old, so perfect to play the part of the youngest of the group; a very pleasant thing, and so there my activism essentially started, I would say, then I did thousands of things at Cassero. Let’s say that one of the most interesting turning points from the point of view of personal politicization were the first actions on the street: various flash-mobs⁹ that we organized, etc. At first, I only took part as a volunteer in the group; then there was a good turning point some years ago, when we decided to organize a kiss-in¹⁰ and to send the video to a European entity, now I don’t even remember what its name is. Essentially, they had asked various associations in many European countries to organize a kiss-in and then they would have made a video to publicize on social media, anyway, “Love is love” (the usual things). It was 2010, something like that, one of the first things I organized and really liked, then I had my big debut when we created PeopAll,¹¹ the Cassero group you talked to.

BG: Are you one of the founders?

VR: Yes, I created PeopAll; the name PeopAll is my idea. We created it in 2012 because Bologna hosted National Pride in 2012, so we needed a group of determined volunteers, determined to do everything, and that year we organized a—what do you call it? —a frozen kiss-in, in the sense the claim that we had decided was “love denied, frozen rights.” Debates about the civil union bill¹² or similar things had begun and so the idea was just.. Valentine’s Day! It was the Valentine’s Day kiss-in, and for some years we continued to do it on Valentine’s Day, just to talk about the rights denied to homosexual couples. There it was—just boom, my beginning. That year and for some years was a very nice period, I remember it really with a lot of pleasure: the meetings, deciding what protests to organize, how to take to the streets, what to say, etc. More or less the same year, I would say, I joined the board of Cassero as vice president, yes, I think that it was that year.

⁹ Flash-mobs are public, sudden group actions/performances which typically disperse quickly. “Flash-mob.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_mob. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

¹⁰ Kiss-ins are a form of peaceful protest traditionally used by LGBTQ+ people to combat homophobia by gathering and kissing same-sex partners. “Protesting.” LGBT+ Cultural Heritage. <https://www.lgbtculturalheritage.com/protesting>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

¹¹ PeopAll is a group within Cassero aiming to mobilize activists and political minds to better organize around LGBTQ+ issues. “PeopAll.” Cassero. <https://cassero.it/peopall/>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

¹² Since 2016, civil unions are recognized in Italy as a same-sex alternative to traditional marriage. “Recognition of same-sex unions in Italy.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recognition_of_same-sex_unions_in_Italy. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

BG: Are you still on the Board?

VR: No, I left Cassero four years ago now.

BG: Why?

VR: Well, there were two parallel thoughts: on the one hand, the fact that we did Buon Vento—I don't know if others have already told you about Buon Vento; it was a truly powerful moment in the life of the association. In summary, for a few years—and in 2012 it was already like this, but even before—the boards were made up of people who represented the various interests of the association. Some came from the entertainment or discotheque¹³ environment, others came from the social environment, and others from the cultural environment, to try to have on the board a representative of all the interests of the association. That board there was a very difficult board in terms of balance, so often it discussed if it should give more weight to social issues or evening entertainment, etc. There was a crisis, let's say, within the group where some people asked for the resignation of the president, devaluing the work done over the years by Vincenzo, who is now about to resign, but by his choice.

At that point it created this huge crisis, this big discussion, it opened up the discussions within the association, because the resignation of a president isn't just a foolish mistake for one of the most important associations in Italy, so you couldn't like, "Ah yes, all right, okay, let's change president from one day to the next and let's go on," so it opened up the assemblies to the members too, and a huge fracture was created. We made the board fall, that is four of us resigned, which was the minimum for (forfeiture) and for going to elections, so we had to create a new group. For us there was this beautiful period where the others (obviously) and I—Alice, who you'll meet; she was also among the advocates—we asked for the intervention of whomever wanted to say how they wanted to change the association. We had so many meetings, really, we looked far and wide to get as many opinions as possible, for thinking about a different Cassero, where these issues weren't in opposition, entertainment and sociality had to be combined—how to do it in a way so that they could be combined. It was the first time after so many years that a candidacy did not come from an individual decision, but instead we worked first on the platform, we worked so much on the goals, on the ideas, on the proposals; then we went to choose the people who would advance these ideas and that group was called Buon Vento and when we went to vote we succeeded in bringing so many, many, many people to vote, so many supporters

¹³ Discotheques (or discos) are nightclubs with recorded music, dancing, and often lighting effects. "Discotheque." Collins Dictionary. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/discotheque>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

from other associations from the territory too, both LGBT and not, who said, “But yes, this is a nice perspective, the association needs to be updated, this is a nice perspective.” That beautiful path, super-satisfying... I decided to not run for office for a series of reasons, personal ones, so with all due respect to those who came forward.

Apart from being really demanding, because it was really so, emotionally costly, after that phase, we began to work according to these ideas and they asked me to take on a new role, now it's called Core, that also had to do with the entertainment part, in the sense of keeping it aligned with what had been said, that was truly unnerving for me, it wasn't a role I wanted, that is, I wanted it, but I didn't believe that it was so complicated, so it destabilized me emotionally, it was really, really exhausting and after a few months I said, “Guys, look, I don't feel like doing this thing here, it isn't me, here it is,” and moreover, it was consistent with a personal reason, so I felt I had given everything that I could possibly give, there were new people who had done things together with me and so in some way I was certain they would advance the things that I cared for, in their way, but that's all right. It's all right if things change, the important thing is that they continue to move forward. And I felt that I could give other things, somewhere else, so there I decided to leave and I joined another association called LGBTI Resource Center.¹⁴

BG: That isn't attached to Cassero.

VR: No. From a certain point of view it satisfies me a lot, because we have a very wide purview, on a national base. The basic idea of the Resource Center is to support the Italian LGBTI movement, so ours isn't a community association, we don't have social meetings, etc., but we work behind the scenes. This is very fascinating too because doing it like this is being disconnected from other local dynamics, we can do what we want a bit more. On the other hand, I miss the political tasks, that is taking to the streets, going to protests, organizing them...

BG: What do you do?

VR: Research.

BG: For example?

VR: For example, now we are launching a campaign to monitor hate crimes against LGBTI people in the Italian territory, ultimately gathering data and pushing for a law...

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BG: Is it a national association?

VR: Yes, but we are a small group. The scope is national, in the sense that I am in Bologna, and I am strengthening the Bolognese group, but the association was born in Turin.¹⁵

BG: So there are branches in other cities.

VR: Yes, let's say it's like this; actually, it is a very virtual job, essentially. Now in Turin there're no longer members, we are a bit like this, and it is also a bit of a difficult life, to tell the truth. Always working online with today's technology is very feasible, but there are those times in which you'd like to peacefully go out and drink a beer with the girls you just worked with; we can't do it, because one is in Cagliari¹⁶ now, one is in Milan¹⁷ and things like this. But for me it is a very, very interesting opportunity, a completely different but very interesting approach.

BG: On this path, did you have your aunt as a role model before coming to Bologna? It's been sixteen years that you've been here...?

VR: Yes, I arrived when I was 19 years old, now I'm almost 35, yes.

BG: In these sixteen years have there been role models, people, or other centers or even literature?

VR: Yes, in these years.

BG: What did you study at university, is there a connection with what you do now?

VR: Absolutely not. I did oriental studies, so something else, but I am very happy to have done it; it was a course of study that opened up my mind, I have to say, from this point of view I am very happy. Regarding role models, at Cassero there are many, to tell the truth. And then over the years you get to know a person better, and you realize that they aren't the mentor that you thought, but there is. In short, you meet many and you live a lot. I have to say that there was an ex-president whom I was very close to who gave me so much and he was among the first people to trust me. He was what was called the Health and Well-

¹⁵ The city of Turin is the capital of both the Piedmont region and the Metropolitan City of Turin. "Turin." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turin>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

¹⁶ The municipality of Cagliari is the capital of Sardinia, an island which forms an autonomous region of Italy. "Cagliari." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cagliari>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

¹⁷ The city of Milan is the capital of Italy's Lombardy region. "Milan." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Milan>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

being representative, he decided to move away from Bologna, he took this chance and in hindsight, I have to say, he was truly clever. He was doing different things and realized that they were growing, not being able to adequately do them as they grew, so when he went away not thinking of a one to one substitution, but he unpacked the activities and asked different people to be representatives—each representing one thing.

In that case I was representative of the Gruppo Giovani,¹⁸ [*Youth Group*] there was a boy representative of Progetto Scuola,¹⁹ [*School Project*] there was a representative of the Telefono Amico,²⁰ [*Telephone Hotline*] another of Salute,²¹ [*Health*] and another of Liberamente,²² which was a social group, and this basically allowed all these subgroups to grow that were just underneath [*the larger group*] and that's how they opened up. He was the first person who basically had faith in me. "Join this group, you're its representative." After a couple of years, the other groups asked me to be in charge of all of them, so it was a bit of growth from that point of view. Then the groups were united for a period, but now they're all separate groups, and because of that I say that his thinking was truly visionary and allowed other similar groups to be born. La Gilda,²³ [*the Guild*] for example was born thanks to Buon Vento, [*Good Wind*] in the sense that the people who were passionate about role-playing games and didn't have a space for doing it in that moment emerged and said, "Excuse me, why aren't we drawing out these issues too?" And it was heard, but the terrain was fertile because in the meantime these groups, which for a certain period had all been under one umbrella, slowly showed that it was also possible to be unified within their independence, it gives them strength, anyway.

His name is Emanuele Pullega and, basically, he was a very important person in this journey. Then at Cassero I also shared this path with two women with whom I was with, with whom I had a long history and basically the fact of sharing this path does a lot. Luckily, it's over, because it becomes complicated after a little while, but in those years it was very nice to share with Giada, who was the first person I shared this journey with because we

¹⁸ Cassero's Giovani program is an informal social group for people aged 16-30 in Bologna. "Giovani." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/giovani/>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

¹⁹ Cassero's Scuola e Formazione program is an educational volunteer force and encouraging dialogue about gender, sexuality, and related topics. "Scuola e Formazione." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/scuola-e-formazione/>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

²⁰ Telefono Amico Cassero is a support hotline serving all but in particular the LGBTQ+ community. "Telefono Amico Cassero." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/telefono-amico-cassero/>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

²¹ Salut is a group run by Cassero which focuses on health and education, especially sexual wellbeing and HIV advocacy and education. "Salut." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/salute/>. (Accessed 7 January, 2024).

²² Liberamente is a discussion group run by Cassero which creates spaces for intellectual exchange and dialogue about culture and politics with a focus on LGBTQ+ issues. "Liberamente." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/liberamente/>. (Accessed 7 January, 2024).

²³ La Guilda is a game-playing and social group run by Cassero. It meets biweekly and holds monthly events, creating a space for all types of games (video, board, role-playing) with a focus on LGBTQ+ inclusion. "La Guilda." Cassero. <https://cassero.it/la-gilda/>. (Accessed 29 December, 2023).

gave each other strength to take the next steps, in the next goals, and then also with Ambra, the girl I was with after and we shared a period together, it was really nice. They aren't role models on a pedestal, but basically, they represent very interesting journeys. I'm happy now to see the development of the boys and girls who I shared these journeys with. For example, Giuseppe Seminario, the current vice president, a guy who I wouldn't say started with me but almost, we are really, really close, there is respect, so I'm really happy to see that he's grown, he took his journey within the association; also Irene Pasini, another girl that I have a really nice mutual relationship with. Regarding the others, books, and ideas, etc. Oh God, there would be so many, I don't know now if something comes to mind immediately.

Certainly, in the early years I was very interested in theater. When I arrived in Bologna, I was very passionate about theater, I lost it a little over time, that's right, in short life intervenes; but there, discovering the theater of Pasolini²⁴ was very powerful, I still remember it today, one of the first things that I did, going to the library to look for theater texts at Cassero's documentation center, I mean. I think that the meetings also did a lot, even though they were sporadic, ultimately Cassero is a full place, really full, too much at times; too many stimuli, I mean, so that I wasn't able to follow it all. Gender Bender²⁵ is surely one of the super stimulating things, for years participating in the shows, in the films, and also in the meetings was really very very nice. Now in Gender Bender I follow with particular attention Teatro Arcobaleno,²⁶ [*Rainbow Theater*] the theatrical show for children that talks about sexual identity, I try not to miss those shows because they are truly touching.

BG: As a spectator?

VR: Yes, as a spectator, in any case, they're super compelling. I still remember some years ago there was a presentation of *La bella Rosaspina addormentata*,²⁷ [*The Sleeping Beauty*]

²⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) was an Italian author, poet, and director whose work focused on critiques of wealth inequality, social and political systems, and religious and mythological symbolism. "Pier Paolo Pasolini." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pier-Paolo-Pasolini>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

²⁵ Gender Bender is an annual arts and culture festival held in Bologna, with a focus on representations and interpretations of gender, sexuality, and the body. "About the Festival." Gender Bender. <https://genderbender.it/en/about-il-festival/>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

²⁶ Teatro Arcobaleno is a prominent theater located in Rome. "Home." Teatro Arcobaleno. <https://www.teatroarcobaleno.it/>. (Accessed 7 January, 2024).

²⁷ *La Bella Addormentata* (*Sleeping Beauty* in English) is a European fairytale which has been adapted into numerous theater and cinema productions. "La Bella Addormentata." Wikipedia. https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_bella_addormentata. (Accessed 8 January, 2023).

which is a children's show directed by Emma Dante,²⁸ a very important director, where in the end the prince that wakes up the beauty is a princess. Outside the theater there was a small protest of the Manif pour tous...²⁹

BG: Of the...?

VR: Manif pour tous, an international association, in sum, those of no-gender, so children have to grow up with a father and a mother, the male role and the female role are profoundly different and shouldn't be confused; those who support the LGBTI associations want to "homosexualize" society, the schools and society, they are our biggest enemies from the point of view of education about differences advanced by the schools. They are a big problem, in the sense of having given information to parents, teachers and school directors, so the director who would like, however, is afraid that the parents will force them to reconsider, and many schools have put the brakes on this type of educational path. Not so much in the city of Bologna, but in the province, there were truly tragic situations. For example, in the Castel Maggiore³⁰ zone there is an association that deals with these issues, not LGBTI but gender violence prevention, so they talk about gender stereotypes, right, things that we know; they, themselves are teachers, they suffered different threats in their schools. For example, there was another show and it was a subject of controversy, Fa'afafine,³¹ that talks about a boy who doesn't give a definition but questions his gender identity at a young age, in short, he's a boy [*the actor*] who will be over 20 years old but plays the part of a pre-adolescent who says, "I am neither male nor female." In short, he questions himself, it's normal—it's normal to me that a person does it—but you see that for some it mustn't be so. However, a really sweet show because he is very good and very, very delicate in the treatment of some issues. A performance in Casalecchio³² went smoothly; another—I don't remember where, maybe in San Giorgio di Piano—"No, you mustn't do it, it is corrupting our children." In any case, they suspended it, in short. These are ugly things,

²⁸ Emma Dante is an Italian playwright, actress, whose 20+ plays have been performed throughout Europe by her company, Sud Costa Occidentale. "Emma Dante." Festival d'Avignon. <https://festival-avignon.com/en/artists/emma-dante-1087>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

²⁹ La Manif Pour Tous is a French political group which vocally opposes same-sex marriage. "La Manif Pour Tous." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Manif_pour_tous. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

³⁰ Castel Maggiore is a commune in the Metropolitan City of Bologna with a population of approx. 18,300 (as of 2017). The commune has existed in some form since at least the 10th C. "Castel Maggiore." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castel_Maggiore. (Accessed 7 January, 2024).

³¹ This play's title, Fa'afafine, is a word used in Samoa describing people understood to be biologically male at birth but who occupy the social role of women. "Fa'afafine." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fa%CA%BBafafine>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

³² Casalecchio di Reno is a commune in the Metropolitan City of Bologna with a population of approx. 36,500. The area's roots can be traced back to early Celtic settlers who began occupying the land around 400 BC. "Casalecchio di Reno." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casalecchio_di_Reno. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

they are things that leave a bit of a mark in this context that instead—Bologna for so many years was, and is still one of the cities most attentive to LGBTI issues. It's a bit absurd.

BG: (...)

VR: Exactly.

BG: Connecting this question to one that you talked about earlier on language, which didn't surprise me, since people don't necessarily understand the jargon. It is the responsibility of education to teach, to furnish the tools to interpret. We here, it's the situation in the past two days, actually we speak a common language, with those necessary differences: one because she is American and we are Italian, one because I am half American, but we understand each other. This language outside wouldn't be *[understood]*. Tell us what you think about it, about the difficulties, if you have first-person experience, of the difficulty in speaking a common language with people who don't know you or understand you, also in reference to what Lauren said about pronouns, where the Italian language doesn't help even if it changes (-u, *, -x).³³ We have met two people who have different opinions regarding it, what do you think about it?

VR: I would try to give you some different examples because I think the fundamental point in this discourse is the time that passes and ultimately, the changes that have happened in the meantime. If I think about a few years ago, when I began my activism—a good bit of time ago, oh my goodness—I remember really well one time on the train, returning to Bologna from Pesaro, you know how you talk to your neighbors on the train, the discussion moved to touch on marriage: “I would do it like this, I would do it like that.” And I—my early activism was a bit provocative—“So I can't get married,” and the others, “But how, in what sense?” And I, “I'm lesbian, it's not legal, I can't get married even if I want to,” and they, “But come on, but here, but there,” and already, if you think about it, it's strange to come out like that on the train, pam! The same thing in the educational courses in the schools, which I started to do with Cassero from the start, one of the first things that they had me do, I was 19, I immediately began as soon as I arrived in Bologna, I told my story to people who were almost my cohort, because those who took these courses often were in their last two years, so 17-18-19, like me.

³³ To address the built-in gender-specific suffixes attached to many Italian words and phrases, some have proposed the use of suffixes like “u,” “*,” and “x” as gender-neutral alternatives. “Gender Neutrality In Italian: Does it Exist?” Amino Apps. https://aminoapps.com/c/language-exchange/page/blog/gender-neutrality-in-italian-does-it-exist/z6eP_NKGFxu0Y6b7KJdLXDZxGnRwQrnEjxX. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

The fact of coming into a class and saying, “I am lesbian and my story is this” would provoke a moment of silence, quite often, that is especially in the institute’s assemblies where you had a lot of people, many didn’t want to listen—they could care less about it—in that moment using words like this, you would hear “ssch”—“Eh yes, it’s my story, blah blah blah.” Then we would start to talk about their own business, but those were unusual words, that to say them already did something, was already changing the situation a bit. Over time these words have become a tad more common, in the sense that slowly even in the schools coming out wasn’t the main point any more, because most likely they had a friend (boy or girl) who had already done so, but they always were increasingly interested in other ideas like: LGBT parenting; the parent-child relationship, that is gay children with gay parents, or presumed to be; transsexualism, that is something more complex than “I like people of my same sex or gender, go on like this.” Recently, I am profoundly convinced that the civil union law has given a strong push to this thing. As an activist I think that it is a very limited law, but even I used it—I got married a month ago.

BG/LD: Congratulations!

VR: Yeah, we have a law, let’s use it! But right then, when they approved it, it was truly a debacle, because the fact that there is no recognition of the children of homosexual couples is simply a defeat from the point of view of activism, but it has shifted the limit, that is it’s happened that hearing people who have absolutely no relationship with the LGBT world, so who wouldn’t ever use this language, who make an effort to use it, for example going to look for a present, “Ah, you know, I have to buy a present, one of my colleagues, well, yes, oh no, he’s marrying his [*male*] partner ” or “Yes, I was invited to a civil union,” so, in a way, it has forced people to use the words. This was a step forward culturally speaking, well, it effectively begins to make progress. Obviously, in a city like Bologna it has a certain effect, maybe in smaller towns another, but in a way, it begins to change things up.

It isn’t always easy to use these words, for example, this winter, I ended up being invited to Urbania³⁴—the town where my parents live, in the province, a small town of 5000, so rather small—to talk about homosexuality. Being sparsely populated, often they do things at the provincial level, so even when initiatives are organized by bigger towns, they often then bring them to the smaller towns. One of the—I don’t really remember what role it has at the provincial level—anyway, an official decided to propose some initiatives on the theme of women: “Let’s also include the theme of homosexuality!” In short, ultimately, they came to call me too: “Come on, let’s do it in Urbania, you come too!” They called me and another guy from Urbania—both of us went away to study, so our activism is mostly in

³⁴ Urbania (a commune) is located in the Pesaro e Urbino province within Italy’s Marche region. Its population (as of 2022) is approx. 6.800 and has existed since at least the Middle Ages. “Urbania.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbania>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

other cities—then another guy, a local activist, to discuss homosexuality, parent-child relationships, acceptance. Very sweet, it was, they are things that pushed things a little further. Minimal participation, but even this is good.

At the level of language, the funny thing was that, both the person who presented the meeting and the representative who had promoted it, they didn't know how to say the word homosexuality, that is: "We are here this evening, it is a very interesting meeting, the issue is very important..." "Subject," "topic," "question." There was the will because they organized the meeting, they devoted themselves and they were there, but the words are important. To say "gay," to say "lesbian," to say "trans" carries weight. There's still a need to push a bit on this, I think. This isn't very easy. Returning to my mother and her language, in the last few years she was super enthusiastic in saying "my daughter and her girlfriend," having found her comfort zone, now I think that she'll start saying "her wife" since now it's official. Actually, having a term helps, in the sense that it really simplifies your life. Going instead to the discourse "the neutral in the Italian language," I am a strong supporter of the "-u"—I love it deeply.

BG: Really!

VR: Yes, yes, I find that it's a formula... In the sense that, as long as I write the asterisk can work too, because I write; if I speak the asterisk truncates the words, it bothers me, instead putting a vowel at the end, however different it is from what's usually used, it really cheers me up, so it's the most comfortable solution for me, it's just a comfortable choice. This issue still isn't so accepted within the community itself; I think it's very, very difficult to think about this. The people who define themselves as non-binary or anyway gender non-conforming are still few in number, that is they try to use a different language to talk about themselves. I, for my part, would also define myself as non-binary in the sense that I'm not interested what you think of my gender, but I realize that if I talk about myself, I use the feminine, but it's habit and if they talk about me as feminine it doesn't bother me. In international contexts where people are a bit more used to using different pronouns, I tried to say, "Use the pronoun that comes to you," and once a guy used the masculine and I said, "Well, yes, okay." It isn't so strange; it can be done.

It's obvious that my path is one of a cisgender person basically, so I care about misgendering up to a certain point, I have to be honest, I am not bothered because I am a content person. If the neutral was the norm, I would be very happy to use the neutral. I realize that the neutral in Italian is just difficult, just really difficult. On my part, I tried for a time in a very urgent way, now a bit less, to construct sentences in a way that were neutral, that is looking to not end the sentences with the obligatory masculine or feminine declension, maybe turning toward the -u, but [not] trying to change the meaning of the

sentence. You're changing a language, that is if you really do it, you completely change the structure of the language and I'm not a linguist; I don't feel able to say that it's the perfect way to do it. For me, when I tried to use it, this way of speaking, actually I found myself very much at ease, but requiring a very, very structured thought, that is needing a whole lot of time to formulate the thought. It's exhausting.

When we founded PeopAll, for example, that was a period in which I was really thinking a lot about formulating sentences in a different way, just so as to not end it in a gendered way and I have to say that it was really exhausting. Recently at Cassero, we organized, I say "we" because I've also been involved in this work group at the Resource Center because actually it's an issue that I would like to advance a bit, seeing as in international contexts it's advanced in a powerful way—and not yet in Italy—we organized a meeting asking a linguist and a transfeminist³⁵ translator to talk about what they were thinking about it and how things were proceeding. It was a very interesting meeting. The linguist claims that the Italian language can't do it, but I don't give up. I think that, rather, we can do it. Regarding the language outside the LGBT context, even things are changing there, in the sense that recently I happened to notice that—I'm not talking about huge businesses or large corporations, but the small organizations which have been stimulated a bit about these issues by a person, a representative of the LGBT community or someone who simply asked a question—they are starting to use asterisks, underscores, etc. There is a bit, it begins a little, maybe not in a totally correct way. Yesterday I received an email for a job I'm doing, that talked about "gli altr-" [*"the others" written with a masculine article and a dashi for a gender-neutral noun*] but there's an attempt, there are those who are starting to understand that this is something to keep in mind. You can't think about stopping anymore.

BG: Who did this email come from?

VR: From a cooperative that deals with training, let's put it that way.

BG: They are subjects, that is groups of people that are already positively attuned.

VR: Yes, but when I met them months ago, maybe a year, they weren't so attentive to this issue. I made them understand that I thought they had to pay attention to language. I told them regarding the in person meetings, because they do training and I attended a couple of courses, that they tended to use the masculine and didn't use the feminine much and to give some examples that could have been even more sensitive for some people, for example, "This idea that you are about to give birth," for as much as it is banal, in any case there are

³⁵ Transfeminism focuses on the ways patriarchy and transphobia intersect and manifest as transmisogyny and the policing of gender identity and expression. "Transfeminism." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfeminism>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

people who are sensitive about motherhood, with childbirth, so I told them, “It’s commonplace, it’s true, you use it to do so but try a bit to pay attention because some people could be hurt by the argument that we’re talking about or by the way in which you’re speaking” and I noted on their part an attempt to—if earlier they hadn’t ever thought about a stimulus anyway, they now said, “Okay, let’s try it, we’ll see if something useful comes up.” In my opinion, this also is the power of activism, even this is activism, this is politics for me, in the sense that simply I make you deal with a theme that you haven’t ever thought about, not for me so much as a person but as a representative of a small social group that’s often not considered, then you understand, “Ah, you aren’t talking about you, Valeria, that you felt offended, but because in general it’s a topic that should be taken into consideration.” This is a bit of a long answer but...

LD: Okay. Let’s return to my central question: there are other people who have had experiences similar to yours, but they didn’t become activists. In your opinion, what are the factors—personality, experiences, etc. —that distinguish you from them?

VR: Mh, oh my, this is the central question, you’re right! I don’t know, I would say that there are two ways, I think on the one hand, a propensity, that could be the education that you had, it could be character, the studies that you did, so something that starts right from your belly, and this is my case in the sense that I have always felt like this, that I couldn’t ignore the problems of the world and things, for me it was always like this. I remember really well as an adolescent, scholastic activism like I told you about earlier, who says to you, “What are we going to do at the demonstration, as a matter of fact, nothing will change.” No, we do it anyway, that is this fact of taking a step forward, I take this step; then over the years it was transformed in so many ways into doing activism. The other, I think, is a personal experience, maybe negative. I suffered, I suffered, I lived badly, etc. I don’t want that to happen to other people, so I take my step forward. It isn’t my case, but I think some start there, I don’t know, “They discriminated against me, my father said all sorts of things to me,” whatever it is, then I decide to take a step forward.

Visibility and activism are complicated because I think when you are LGBTI, even just coming out is an activist gesture, still today in Italy, in some contexts more, in others less, but it is. To say it is to bring it into the light, that is you can just say it and that’s all, it doesn’t change much but at least you bring it into the light, you say—I don’t know—to your employer, “Look, I’m coming out to you because I feel okay doing it,” but maybe not doing it with other people in the group, etc. Even that is a form of activism, that is, there are so many small ways. Also, there are those who don’t desire, who aren’t interested, don’t think that it helps. Okay, but maybe explain to them the reason for a demonstration and they come. Much works through, in my opinion, the human relationship, my experience is really of human relationships, that is beyond the Facebook event, what counts more is picking up

the telephone and saying, “friend/friend, [*masculine/feminine*] come, we need people, people, numbers.” That does, it still does a lot. In the last two years, in my opinion, the approach of the allied groups has changed a bit, this yes, this is actually starting to feel good.

I see Arci,³⁶ [*Italian recreational network association, since 1957*] which is a group that has tended to always be open to themes of women’s and LGBTI inclusion; in the last two years they are there, and their presence is important—I think that it’s one of the largest associations in Italy. It’s important that an association that doesn’t concern itself with these issues in a primary way, says, “I take to the streets with you, we would miss something.” What moves people varies. Ah, another very interesting thing, then you will meet Elisa Dal Molin,³⁷ so... The stories of the Famiglie Arcobaleno³⁸ [*Association of parents with children from previous other-sex relationships or within their same-sex relationship, since 2005*] that I have heard are almost identical for the activists themselves; theirs is a parental activism, they tell you clearly, “As a homosexual person, I have never felt the need to take that step forward; I came out, I lived my life peacefully—okay, very good, it isn’t my judgement—when I had children and I began to have to say that I was in a couple with a person of my same gender, my activism began.” It is a completely different introduction, even that makes a lot of sense, so there are many ways to get there. In my opinion, everyone has to find their space, simply, that is, understanding what their space is and staying there, making decisions according to their situation.

BG: How important is the relationship with other activists [*he uses the **] (I won’t say *altru attivistu*)?

VR: Within the LGBTI context or other issues?

LD: In the context of movements in general.

VR: In my opinion, it’s fundamental, but it’s the thing that’s done least. From this point of view, I’ve been thinking about it for some time, for me this is maybe one of the great flaws of today. In contemporary society, where there are a lot of problems, few economic resources; in Italy there are numerous associations, each one has its specific perspective, if we don’t get together, nothing will ever change, that is things won’t really change. I think

³⁶ Arci Bologna is an LGBTQ+ advocacy network providing educational, social, and entertainment events and activities for the local community. “Chi Siamo.” Arci Bologna. <https://arcibologna.it/chi-siamo/>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

³⁷ Elisa Dal Molin was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms Program’s Italy site page.

³⁸ Famiglie Arcobaleno is an association of parents in the LGBTQ+ community. It aims to foster community between members and advocate for the rights and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ parents and their children. “Chi Siamo.” Famiglie Arcobaleno. <https://www.famigliearcobaleno.org/chi-siamo/>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

this came out lately with the migrant question in a very strong way, and it is very fair because when there are people on a ship at risk of death, beyond whatever political or religious belief, there is little to talk about, but I think this started to teach us a little that we have to work together. We talk about the intersectionality of the struggles, but I think it's still just so many words and few actions, and I have a very clear vision about this. For me, for me personally, I find it very difficult to broadcast it, that is for me the fact that you do activism for the rights of LGBTI people also means that you do activism for eco sustainability, so you should get around by bicycle, you should this and you should that, meaning that you want the protection of the rights of people in the world of work, etc.

Instead, in the past few years, in all the various environments there are various things: washing, that is, rainbow-washing, for LGBTI people, pink-washing for women's issues, green-washing for environmental issues, and many people are seduced, in my opinion. Coca-Cola makes an ad in favor of LGBTI people, "Oh, fabulous!" Yes, but it destroyed the Amazon³⁹, guys! Maybe now it's giving you money, maybe it's even working with its LGBTI employees to make sure they are well, I don't doubt this, but I can't forget that it destroyed half of the Amazon. I don't know! How do you look toward the world in its entirety? Then it is really difficult, I realize it, and it is an issue that you struggle to work through, just the same people, first as consumers, then as activists, and then as groups. These are the issues that I want to think about a lot in the future, dealing with other activists [*she uses the -u*] is really, really important and even here we return to something that is typically Italian, I don't know if it's the same in other countries, but in Italy if it isn't like this it isn't: personal connections. This year Arci Bologna, it had already done it in other years but this year a lot, it supported Pride because a girl who works for Arci Bologna has been one of my friends for 15 years. You pick up the phone, "Hi, listen, we are organizing Pride, is there any way you can give us a hand to find a space to have a party, an event?" We sat down at a table and found relationships. Then the relationships are established and move forward, but that first contact is always, always human. If it isn't there and you write an email or call the office, they would say, "Mah, yes, I don't know, I don't know, we'll see." Much more difficult, much more difficult.

BG: Are you good at this?

VR: I do my best.

³⁹ Coca Cola and numerous other companies continue to contribute to deforestation despite stating their intentions to improve practices. "Hundreds of Companies Promised to Help Protect Forests. Did They?" New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/climate/companies-net-zero-deforestation.html>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

BG: In this you find a connection to growing up with your family running a guesthouse where you are constantly—

VR: Absolutely. You know, after spending so many years in a city like Bologna and having been part of Cassero, which is a very relevant association, and having done courses in schools and having done activism like PeopAll and having been on the board...

BG: You know everyone.

VR: You know many people, not everyone, but many people. This girl from Arci, for example, I met her the first year that I did a school workshop with Cassero. Over the years, we always kept up with each other, good or bad, then you find out that she works there, I work here... “Oh, let’s do something together.” Essentially yes, your life path counts, counts a lot. There are people who do the same thing, but they do it from a more formal, more official perspective, maybe. Then, after me there will be other people who will have other relationships and will activate other channels, maybe because they went to university with Tizio or Caio.

BG: And in the relationships with political institutions and so, in this case Bologna, with politics with a capital P...?

VR: Bologna in the sense of the municipal government?

BG: Yes, the institutions...

VR: Well, look, Bologna as a municipal government has changed a lot over the years. A relationship that has always been, how to say it, evolving. In recent years I feel very comfortable with the office of the Department of Equal Opportunities⁴⁰: they are people who work very hard and who have actually learned a lot; really when they started, they knew almost nothing and now they’re super-energetic, they do a bunch of initiatives, so it’s really good. The municipal government, in my opinion, has some flaws, but it’s a question of the Council, the mayor, the Council, the political powers that lie beneath us. The XM⁴¹ issue,

⁴⁰ The Department for Equal Opportunities is a unit within Italy’s Council of Minister’s. It addresses issues related to gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights. “Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità.” Italian Government. <https://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/it/>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

⁴¹ XM24 is a self-managed social space in Bologna, which began in 2000 as an abandoned warehouse’s occupation by the anticapitalist/antifascist Contrapiani network protesting the city’s impending OECD convention and its inattention to social and environmental issues. After an eviction by the city, XM24 moved to an old vegetable market building where it continues to foster liberatory and countercultural movements. “XM24: Survival and Inspiration Against All Odds.” ROAR Mag. <https://roarmag.org/essays/xm24-social-center-bologna/>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

[XM24, self-managed social space] I don't know! The eviction of Atlantide,⁴² a few years ago, madness!

BG: Was it a social center?

VR: Yes, Atlantide was a social center but managed by queer people, the only queer one ever evicted in Bologna. That was just a political case. They, that group was paying for a shifting political balance. The motivation was an expired and non-renewed agreement, the usual formal things; there wasn't the will to find a solution because the involved council member then wasn't/isn't a party person, not a politician, who had been put in the role of councilor for culture because he could give new life-blood to the city, he still dealt with this kind of thing; the political games were changing a bit, the balance must have been a more political and less local thread... He was not reconfirmed, and the agreement blew up, in a nutshell. This makes you understand that it's not something that works here. Politics with a capital P, if I think on the national level, I don't know. I am really, very... Prrr!

When they were voting on the civil union law there was a sit-in in front of the Senate, I think it was under discussion at that time, where there was a group, not very large, from Rome, even though we were in Rome,⁴³ a rather large group from Naples⁴⁴ and a rather large group from Bologna. That was one of the nicest things that we ever did in my opinion because I believe the strongest flaw of the LGBTI movement is that we aren't angry enough, we don't raise our voices enough, we are always too politically correct, too worried about ruining positive institutional relationships, where they are positive. In that case, however, since they were discussing our life, we got a little pissed and we forced the blockade a bit, no guerillas, mind you, but that minimum of "you know what? We are really angry right now!" With rather provocative slogans, I really liked that. It was a really strong exploit, that is, being there and saying, "Enough of treating us like people who don't exist, we are here in front of you and it is fair that you respond to us in some way." This is really nice. We should do it again, that is we should do things more like this, here.

BG: In Rome?

⁴² Atlantide was a self-managed social space in Bologna with a focus on queer and feminist causes and movements. It began in 1998 and was evicted by city government in 2015. "Self-managed social spaces in Italy." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-managed_social_centres_in_Italy. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

⁴³ Rome is the capital city of the country of Italy, and within that the region of Lazio and the province of Roma. The city has incredible historical significance as the site of myriad landmark events in politics, religion, art, and culture. "Rome." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

⁴⁴ Naples is the capital city of Italy's Campania region. "Naples." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Naples-Italy>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

VR: But also in Bologna. I don't know, I don't know if actually being in the capital... Yes, about some things, it changes, you have institutions in front of you, of course, when you have to talk with the Senate, you have to go before the Senate to give validity, but also on the local level you can insist in a pretty strong way.

LD: Returning to personal relationships: for you, how important are personal relationships with other activists to sustain activism?

VR: On a human level?

LD: Yes.

VR: Fundamental, actually I think just that thanks to discussions with people who are on your level you can grow, and you can also find new objectives. I always return to PeopAll because maybe it's the most "field" experience. The people from the early days are my dearest friends now, so this is an absolutely fundamental thing, I see that it's continuing to be so after years, and it makes me very happy. I'm sorry that maybe now, being a group that—like I told you—tends to have a bit of a behind the scenes perspective, I lost this more friendly aspect, which I try to take care of anyway, but it isn't very easy. Fundamental also because thanks to human relationships you can activate synergies with other groups and the same is true within the same community. If I hadn't ever met a trans person, if I hadn't talked to him nor known his story, it would have been really difficult for me to exert myself for his rights or his priorities; instead, if I find myself among friends, if I find myself dealing with it, if I form relationships, maybe I use a pronoun badly when I talk, I learn from experience that I am making an error. It isn't a manual but a human relationship, that is fundamental.

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

VR: This is tough, of my goodness! One point/moment in particular—it comes to my mind all the times when we're protesting—here it is, I have it! It was Valentine's Day some years ago, 2014 I would say—PeopAll was a really strong group. Our classic Valentine's Day flash-mob meant to be a "let's talk about couples, let's talk about relationships, let's talk about the invisibility of our couples, etc." flash mob and that year we invented something called "It's our turn." We chose four different places: we chose the post office, a

supermarket, the Piazza Maggiore,⁴⁵ and—think how crazy—the hospital waiting room. Each one of us was there, we had activated various couples who went and all together at the same time, at 4 pm; the spokesperson had a sign with “it’s our turn” written on it and a roll of tickets like the ones you use when waiting in line at the supermarket and each couple took a number and kissed in front of everyone. Simple, something that actually—if you want—is trivial, but it was a really beautiful thing because [it required] organization. “You go there, how many people did you scare up, how many couples did you scare up, you? Come one, let’s make the number!”

Here and there, up and down. I was on the streets of course. My girlfriend, who’s now my wife, was working, so I was by myself, even being alone with the sign was nice, then one of my female friends arrived and we embraced. It was really nice to see one of my dearest male friends who had recently been left, who came by himself with his number, from the series “visibility is mine even as a single person,” it isn’t obligatory to be in a couple to ask for rights. This moment was truly nice, really nice, the fact that immediately afterwards we all found each other, and told each other, “How did it go? That one gave us a bad look, you know? This other one was shocked!” The moment of collectivity where everyone had his little piece, but it is a collective design that you wrote and are writing, this was really a very, very strong thing; the fact of being able to work together, being an idea that we nurtured together, everyone put a piece into it, “Let’s go here, let’s go there, let’s do this, let’s do that.” Really, very nice, really super nice, it was touching.

BG: Does this sum up a bit your sense of activism?

VR: It is one of the many sides, possibly one of the most striking: you’re in the streets, doing something, you get noticed, you end up in the newspapers, etc. But I am of the mind that activism is every day, in every little thing you do, in every little gesture that you make, in the fact that you don’t say “with a female friend” but you say “with my girlfriend, my wife” or whatever it is, even this is activism when you don’t exist in the eyes of others. Every time you have to affirm your existence, that’s activism in my opinion.

LD: But you like the more collective moments?

VR: Yes, of course, I like them a lot!

LD: It’s obvious.

⁴⁵ Piazza Maggiore is the well-known central square of Bologna, a central feature of the city since the 15th C. “Piazza Maggiore.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piazza_Maggiore. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

VR: Obvious! Another thing regarding the earlier question, then we moved on to Italian non-LGBTI activists, something that the Italian movement lacks a lot in comparison with the non-Italian LGBTI movements—

BG: My next question!

VR: Great!

BG: Do you follow what happens in other non-Italian cultural contexts, maybe American/United States, as a model to follow? Try to tell us something about where we are, where they have already arrived...

VR: Well, apart from the fact that the contexts are completely different, I put forth a small premise. I've been participating in international meetings for seven-eight years now; European, basically, so I go to the ILGA-Europe⁴⁶ meetings, which is the European association of LGBTI groups, an annual conference (I've been going since 2011). That for me has always been an extremely educational context because, just the human relationship... We are in the same room, then there are more workshop-like activities or plenary discussions, but it's an occasion to get to know other contexts and nourish oneself with other experiences and you learn a lot, absolutely, even just to understand what they are doing elsewhere, beyond the "works/doesn't work" because each context is different and it's really difficult to take it as it is and to do it somewhere else, but to make it develop, to be stimulated by comparison, by the reasoning, is always very useful. Regarding the United States context, on the other hand, I believe that there is a really strong cultural influence in so many ways, not only about the LGBTI movement, even just on the culture, especially in the media, uh! TV series, films, oh my goodness, that is exaggerated stuff, I say it in the true sense, in the sense that we tend to see what comes from the U.S. as a cultural and social product, "Wow, marvelous!"

Anyway, simply, maybe not discovering that—I don't know—in France, describing something much closer, there is the same thing done equally well, but it isn't so spontaneous/habitual to think that it is beautiful. At the activism level, it's a very different activism, really, really a lot. But I happened to see some things recently, both on my last trip—honeymoon—we were in California and then New York, and we had been in New York two years ago, so I happened to see a little of the reality of the region, I talked with a couple of people who worked in places there; it's a completely different context. We talked about companies sponsoring, well, there are many there, so many; I, like I was saying

⁴⁶ ILGA-Europe is an umbrella coalition of 700+ organizations in Europe and Central Asia working to advance the rights and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people. "About Us." ILGA-Europe. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/about-us/>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

earlier, I don't know if I am so inclined to this approach, for example. There's a question of welfare, of public affairs, which is completely different. In Italy, social service groups are still rewarded and supported by public entities, maybe not with money because maybe they don't have money, so they don't give you money because you create some get-togethers for gay youths, but maybe they give you a seat, but maybe they give you advertising. In the U.S. there is no such connection, that is an approach to social services that is completely independent, if I understood it well, in the U.S. an individual chooses what to attend themselves, not having the underlying connection with society, it applies to LGBTI groups as much as so many other issues.

With respect to the political battles, well, it's a completely different political system. I happened to hear at ILGA-Europe, at one of the conferences they invited the director of— Oh god, what was that campaign called?—Free & Equal,⁴⁷ the one that promoted egalitarian marriage, and this director made a speech on how they put it; really interesting, I listened to it with rapt attention, but the context is totally different, so different that it isn't possible to take it as an example, in my opinion; you can get inspired, that, yes, also because you just need things to stimulate a different thought, but I find that the proper way is another. For example, New York Pride, which we went to—it was World Pride this year—it affected me a lot, I would say, the cost disturbed me, the cost of the initiatives, the parties in the evening... For me, these are activism moments, community moments, it can't be an unattainable price for me, so then you ask yourself effectively, "Who are you turning to, are you really thinking of your community and so you do everything to support it? Or is that entertainment and so it's also okay if there are those who can afford it and those who can't?" You immediately saw the difference between the official events, different levels too, and the more community events. I chanced on an event, a party organized in a place mostly for women of color or gender non-conforming black women and it was clear from the price list. The women of color, they pay nothing... Gender non-conforming or trans but not black pay 'x,' everybody else pays 'y' (more). O.K. It is fine with me if I support a piece of my community that needs me most, because in the end I am white and cisgender, and there is a different approach to life, it's fine with me, let's make it clear. Here, I don't know if I answered your question, I digressed a bit.

BG: I don't remember the question anymore!

VR: *[laughs]*

LD: What does the word feminism mean?

⁴⁷ UN Free & Equal is a public information campaign started in 2013 by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which aims to support, decriminalize, and destigmatize the existence of LGBTQ+ people globally. "About." UN Free & Equal. <https://www.unfe.org/about-2/>. (Accessed 8 January, 2024).

VR: “What does the word feminism mean?” It depends on who you ask. *[laughs]* If you ask my mom—and here, for example, I realized that we should have a discussion sooner or later—my mom is still very tied to the “feminism of difference”⁴⁸ due to age issues. It so happened that one day when we were with another person and we started to talk about a series of authors she said, “Ah, yes, I read that text by—now I don’t remember—when I was young, it was so enlightening” and this other said, “Yes, it’s true, but it’s ‘feminism of difference,’ a bit outdated today.” That’s there, in the sense that feminism today is another thing, in my opinion, that is for younger people—let’s say around 30 and even less—it should be “empowerment” in my opinion, that is taking your position and realizing that one part of society is discriminated against from birth. This perspective you can understand, it’s not absolutely difficult to understand.

Taking that part, in my opinion, maybe passes from feminism to queerness in the sense that in my opinion “queer” is also a word that we are beginning to use in an improper way, I am deeply convinced of this; “queer” for me instead is a comparative perspective, what one cannot overlook according to feminism, and it is right—the fact that different genders exist—but the queer perspective says, “But if they didn’t exist, how would anybody deal with all of these mixups, these questions of power, of abuses of power, etc.? How would it change?” Having a queer perspective should somewhat obligate you to always take up the part of the most discriminated people in a given situation. It isn’t easy, but in my opinion, it goes beyond LGBTI issues and applies to everything a bit, both inside and outside the community. “Feminism” is also an overused word, too much, because—speaking of pink-washing which we talked about earlier—the “feminist” t-shirts at H&M crack me up when an underpaid woman sewed them⁴⁹. On the other hand, this recent abuse maybe has challenged the meanings like, “If you’re a feminist then you’re ugly, you don’t care, you’re a woman who doesn’t have a partner, who doesn’t have sex,” that is, somewhat insulting things—“you’re a half woman.” Rather, maybe a little even though it’s abused, it also gave more empowering meanings, like, “I say what I am, so you can’t tell me what I am.”

LD: That is one of the questions in all the Global Feminisms Archive interviews.

VR: Of course.

⁴⁸ Difference feminism is a feminist framework based on the idea that gender differences exist but that the characteristics of one gender are just as valuable as those of the other. “Difference Feminism.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Difference_feminism. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

⁴⁹ H&M, as well as many other brands, participate in the fast fashion market, a model involving rapid style turnover and large-scale production relying on underpaid garment workers, mostly in the Global South. “Fast Fashion.” Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/art/fast-fashion>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

BG: Do you have anything else to say?

VR: Maybe a couple of things. A lot has also been said about the intertwining relationships with other groups, which in my opinion is the next true frontier; two things. One: in my opinion, the Italian LGBTI movement “looks too much at its underwear” in the sense that it contemplates its own navel, always looking too far down, not looking up, also because for many years the principal groups have been like this with the parties [*she makes a gesture as if to say that the relationships between the groups and parties was too close*] and this hasn’t helped, in my opinion, or maybe yes, in some moments, but then it wasn’t able to separate itself in some degree from a terribly party-based approach, representative and anything else, that it didn’t succeed in including the perspective of the wider society in its battles, so it entrusted the battle to this representative or this other. In my opinion, it’s a completely wrong approach that hasn’t produced results and today we’re at this point where “what do we do?” There aren’t representatives anymore, we have a political force that would like to put us in the basements. It’s a question that we should ask ourselves and that we should answer rather quickly, on which perspective to have; in this the comparison with the outside/foreign is too little, and with the outside understood as “other social movements,” even that, too little.

I wish, I would like it to be a movement more able to learn and report, to feed on other experiences as well. Another of the interesting frontiers I find are intersex issues, which are also emerging in Italy—more at an international level, but also in Italy—and this I believe is one of those other aspects that the movement hasn’t yet developed consciousness, or awareness, of how to ask ourselves. The same Italian intersex people are completely split between those who argue that it makes sense to be within the LGBT movement because many issues are similar—self-determination, the ability to define myself by the body and identity that I have, the medical procedures, so the healthcare approach, that you would have to undergo, etc.—while others argue that no, it isn’t the same battle, it’s not the same terrain. “We don’t want to take the same path.” This is another one of those things where maybe in a few years we will return to talk about them more specifically, but now it’s emerging more on the international level: trans issues, so the trans-exclusionary or trans-inclusionary movements,⁵⁰ and intersex activism.⁵¹ That’s it.

⁵⁰ Many contemporary feminist movements include transgender people and recognize the contributions of trans activists, but others refuse to recognize trans and gender-nonconforming identities. The latter group are often called T.E.R.F.s (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) or gender critical feminists. “Feminist views on transgender topics.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_views_on_transgender_topics. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

⁵¹ Intersex activists resist the stigmatization and unnecessary medical intervention experienced by people whose anatomy doesn’t fit within a narrowly-constructed sexual binary, and support bodily autonomy for intersex people. “What’s the history behind the intersex movement?” Intersex Society of North America. <https://isna.org/faq/history/>. (Accessed 9 January, 2024).

BG: Thank you.

LD: Thanks a lot, very interesting.

VR: You're welcome. We talked a lot; I talked a lot!