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INTRODUCTION



Feminist responses to populist politics

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ABSTRACT

Given our situatedness as political subjects of knowledge — as activists and scholars from Southern Europe — we have mapped out in this issue some feminist responses to populism. This issue discusses diverse transfeminist and feminist political groups and ideas, and talks about feminisms as a constellation of accounts of politics, practices, knowledges, and experiences. Although it is beyond the scope of this issue to discuss the idea of populism, the plurality of definitions and their political implications, this collection of essays reflects our need to analyse modes of self-determination that, within feminism, are taking place in the name of the people and for the people. This Introduction sketches the situatedness of the essays in Southern Europe, the antifeminist backlash and the feminist responses that we have been witnessing in the past few years, and the appropriation of feminism by certain conservative groups.

KEYWORDS

Feminist activism; trans-inclusive feminism; transfeminism; intersectionality; academia; populism; Southern Europe

Academia and activism: *back and forth*

A feminist knows to what extent the legitimating tales of nationhood in the West have been constructed over the body of women, as well as in the crucible of imperial and colonial masculinity. The fact that these allegedly universal or all-encompassing ideas of ‘nation’ or ‘national identity’ are flawed and internally incoherent does not make them any less effective; nor does it prevent them from exercising hegemonic power. (Braidotti and Griffin 2002, 232).

The three guest editors of this issue share an academic background in the Humanities. We have all experienced the precarious conditions of working in Academia, but also the privilege of having the opportunity to pursue our research interest. The three of us have also faced gender discrimination in our workplaces. As researchers, we share an interest in feminist studies; and, as activists, we believe that a feminist political practice entails participation rather than identification, and an inclusiveness of everyone’s vulnerabilities and social interdependencies. Moreover, we strongly believe that feminist groups must be inclusive of trans

people, not in the name of generic recognition, but in order to enhance each member's demand for self-determination. Both in the USA and in some parts of Europe, e.g. in Austria and Germany, the "cancel culture" target is often cunningly used to discredit post-colonial and gender activists. Nevertheless, in as much as in Academia just as in the rest of the social realm we must always be held accountable for our theories and actions, sometimes the risk is the opposite one, namely a trend that fosters practices of ostracism. Still, the severity of the problem of the naming alerts us to the point that despite this, there can be no place for an *uncancel culture* in Academia or anywhere in the social realm, where we must always be held accountable for our theories and actions (*Merriam-Webster Online* retrieved 25 May 2021). All of us come from southern European countries – from Croatia, Spain, and Italy, respectively – all nations where hospitality towards migrants has been on the agenda for almost ten years now, primarily through a lack of solidarity or a joint European perspective (UNHCR/IOM Press Release 2021).

In an exercise of intellectual response-ability (Haraway 2016), and to be able to cultivate collective ways of doing and knowing, we disclose our situatedness as political subjects of knowledge. Coined by Donna Haraway in 1988, 'situated knowledges' highlight specific historically situated socio-cultural structures in which forms of knowledge arise and the inequalities these structures give rise to. Situated knowledges call for a practice of attending to power relations that are at play in the process of knowledge production. They offer "a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions" (Haraway 1988, 579). In this sense, we position ourselves as South-European, "feminist-minded, anti-racist, post- and de-colonial thinkers and practitioners" (Braidotti 2019, 86).

Given our situatedness as political subjects of knowledge, we have mapped out the feminist responses to populism that are relevant to us, aware that it is impossible to capture the full scope of feminist responses that are taking place globally. Our understanding of populism and of feminist responses to populism is also a situated one. Aware of the fact that it is extremely hard to offer a definition of 'the people' or of 'populism', together with Judith Butler we are nonetheless certain that it is crucial to analyse modes of self-determination that, within feminism, are taking place in the name of the people and for the people. Butler rightly recalls us: "In Latin America, populism has generally had a left-wing connotation. But that history is regularly forgotten – or remains unknown – within some European debates", thus situating the knowledge on populism on the verges of these contested grounds (Filippi and Monacelli 2019). Ultimately, this issue aims at being a modest contribution to that vast, plural, and multi-layered analysis which bring on the surface generally wicked relations between different categories of argumentation regarding contextual appellations and formally established definitions.

The texts collected in this issue reflect several choices that we have endeavoured to make about debates concerning populism and feminism. Firstly, this issue discusses diverse transfeminist and feminist political groups and ideas, and talks about *feminisms* as a constellation of accounts of politics, practices, knowledges, and experiences. While we understand that transfeminism could also be spelled ‘trans feminism’, by honouring US activists Emi Koyama and Diana Courant who introduced transfeminism at around 1992, our wish is effectively to follow different activist milieus where this nomination is used. Feminist movements are complex and pluralistic; they have been since the beginning. We have selected contributions that provide a clear description of the feminist politics the author(s) address(es) and explain and substantiate their choices. We did not prioritise any account of feminism over any other one. Yet we did not select any account that focus on feminist practices rather than theories. It becomes clear on the basis of their writings that some or maybe all of the authors are both researchers and activists. As a form of feminist practice, the authors undoubtedly express the activist perspective and position from which they write.

Secondly, five out of six papers we have selected here focus on the Southern European area, and the authors of these papers come from these places. From the 1990s onward, the research production of feminists from Southern Europe has devoted special attention to affective economies, emotions, and passions. This is particularly relevant if one considers the history of these countries and their geopolitical context, which is full of tensions and marked by centuries of inter-ethnic wars. From a theoretical perspective, poststructuralist approaches – which broadly resonated within the United States among gender theorists and political scientists – have attempted to explain the connection between the “proliferation of gender positions, on the one hand, and the decline of democracy, on the other” (Braidotti and Griffin 2002, 232).

We selected the essays published here on the basis of the quality of the writing and because we consider them thought-provoking. After the initial selection, we decided to focus on the geopolitical contexts of the Mediterranean area consistently. One of the reasons is that, being familiar with these contexts, we could effectively engage with the authors in a productive exchange about their texts and hope that this exchange has been as fruitful to them as it has been for us. The other reason is that we believe that recent scholarly work has not yet produced an extensive analysis of recent feminist mobilisations against “anti-gender” politics and rhetoric in Southern Europe. Nor has it comprehensively pointed out the challenges that these groups are facing in their local areas.¹ These challenges are juridical, especially in the case of conservative or populist policies often fostered by far-right wing parties; and they are political, as demonstrated by the repeatedly perpetrated attacks against the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ persons. As a reaction to these challenges, and bridging divides, inclusive feminist and transfeminist

groups have mobilised people and fostered alliances as a response to authoritative discourses aimed at creating isolation and division.

Thirdly, we consider that it is beyond the scope of this issue to discuss the idea of populism and the plurality of definitions and political implications of this notion in detail. A lot has been written about the key role played by nationalist, heteronormative, and racist discourses in enforcing right wing populisms (Bordo 2003; Braidotti and Griffin 2002), likewise, on the possibility of a left-wing populism (Laclau 2005; Fraser 2017; Mouffe 2018; García Agustín 2020), or a feminist populism (Fraser 2016; Emejulu 2011, 2017; Caravantes 2019; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Sanger 2019). Nonetheless, this theoretical debate is not part of our focus. Instead, our collection retraces the way in which different feminist discourses and practices have addressed populist politics.

The analysis of the different examples of potentially populist feminist practices that this collection of texts concentrates on have some crucial elements in common. What do a feminist interpretation of populism and a practice of activism specifically entail? From a theoretical perspective, they primarily require a shift away from an individualistic model of subjectivity and the masculine image of the “sovereign subject”, which has characterised Western political thought from Thomas Hobbes and the social contract tradition onwards (Pateman 1988). Instead, a different account of subjectivity needs to be adopted, one which Adriana Cavarero has interpreted on the basis of a *relational* model, as including “the various theoretical perspectives that, in the panorama of philosophy today, concentrate on the category of relation to rethink a subjectivity marked by exposure, vulnerability, and dependence” (Cavarero 2016, 11).

Vulnerability is a key notion in feminist theory that has recently become prominent in discussions of the consequences of the pandemic emergency and in the awareness of the common and harsh precariousness of all human lives. The notion is also a crucial resource for interpreting the radical claims of the recent political mobilisations against racism and police brutality that have spread throughout the United States and in other countries after George Floyd’s assassination in Minneapolis, on May 25th, 2020 (Levine 2020). It is indispensable in Migration Studies, which are very often aligned with Feminist Studies. An awareness of vulnerability is also a part of efforts of interpretation that have been put in place in Spain, Italy, and Croatia in nongovernmental settings, which is to consider the endless migratory crisis and the Mediterranean’s having become the largest migrant grave (UHCR report April 2021). Further, the complementarity between vulnerability and precarity that Judith Butler draws attention to becomes even more important in relation to this global political framework. In defining vulnerability as a shared bodily condition that characterises human life inasmuch as it is relational and interdependent, Butler stresses that each human life is more or less precarious due to its specific and varying social, cultural, ethnic, racial, economic, and gender

conditions (Butler 2004, 2009), and that “the capacity of living human creatures to affect one another can be a matter of life and death” (Butler 2021). In line with these insights, feminist theorists have pointed to the importance of how a bodily political performance is narrated and acted out in public discourse (Ferrarese 2017; Gilson 2014) as well as the urgency of new strategic ways to communicate in order to foster a radical change in language (Verson 2011). Significantly, some theorists and activists have stressed that understanding the relationships and possible alliances between bodies and technologies is a decisive political wager (Cossutta et al. 2018).

Why discuss feminist responses to populist politics?

From the vantage point of mid-2021, human rights politics are being scrutinised from both authoritarian and ultra-liberal perspectives in Europe, yet are united by the invisible threads of a shared normative vocabulary, set of rhetorical arguments, and calls to civility (Bejan 2017). Given this, the proposal for a special issue of EJES, “Feminist responses to populist politics”, appears almost naïve and filled with hope of change. Guided by the idea that left or right populisms often function as a bogeyman in various kinds of political arguments, we have held steadfast to the conviction that populisms of all stripes remain only a potential threat to politics as usual, even if there are sure signs that the world is, yet again, out of joint. Reluctantly we have put forth the claim that populisms fill in the cracks and fissures that have been lain open for only, as we had hoped, a short period of (historical) time that coincides with decades of sustained feminist efforts to change the world for the better. Despite feminist gains, much of what had been achieved has now been brought to a halt, and it would seem that populisms have played a role in this stoppage. We thought that it was possible to isolate and deconstruct femonationalism, also known as feminationalism, as an amalgam of nationalist ideology and isolated feminist ideas that has been fed on a diet of xenophobic motivation (Farris 2017). Feminisms are constantly being marginalised. Nonetheless, one witnesses how feminisms’ tolerance for diverse viewpoints has allowed for the appearance of intermittent fractions and radical feminist byways, as manifested by TERF,² and how these positions have spilled over into the murky shallows of ideologies that repurpose emancipatory politics as tools, if not weapons, to their own ends.

Yet, if innocence is a state of wonder and lofty questions, we wondered whether we could, in theory, in practice, and in activism, find answers to resist, in a sovereign and stable manner, the destructive framework of discouragement that forecloses change for the better, and to do so through meticulous argumentation. We explored the existence and manifestation of feminist visions of politics that offer a different answer to populisms’ challenges. And in order to accomplish this, we returned to the notions of feminist resistance and

resilience – notions that put stress on agency, change, and hope in the face of the gravely difficult challenges that we are faced with around the world.

Moreover, in the year and a half since we made the call for papers for this issue in 2019, there has been an even larger, more steady degradation of all forms of human rights, which has been made worse still by the pandemic. With all that has happened in such a short period of time, it is illuminating to note the exchange of opinions about how to characterise and name the global interruption of financial and political networks. What was recognised as a pandemic has really had a much broader scope, firstly and foremost among the experts. From our point of view, this was exemplified by the medical journal, the *Lancet*, so much so that in the Introduction to the September 2020 issue, Richard Horton, the *Lancet* editor-in-chief, argued that the process the world is undergoing, seems to be syndemic rather than pandemic. Lest we forget, coined in late 1990s by a medical anthropologist Merrill Singer, syndemics in fact describe development of several health disparities (obesity, undernutrition or malnutrition, hypertension and diabetes all very much interconnected), which can – caused by poverty, stress, or structural violence – bring into light much clearer vision of public health, community health and the effects of social conditions on health. Less than two months later, Emily Mendenhall³ introduced the importance of context to a consideration of the difference between pandemics and syndemics, and she brought in feminist perspectives, citing New Zealand's political leadership, as an example. Indeed, syndemics allow us to recognise how political and social factors drive, perpetuate, and worsen the emergence and clustering of disease, and do so in a systemic manner that is rationally applicable and bears responsibility for a global event, but also determines the direction of its resolution to a great degree.

New Zealand has a Prime Minister who is so clear in her views that she could demonstrate that solutions existed within a particular form of feminism at the beginning of the pandemic crisis. These views then entered mainstream politics and policies in autonomous forms, without hiding behind muddled and distorted national, nationalist, and reactionary politics. Amongst the myriad manifestations of feminism, a viewpoint that actively influences change to the structure of political thought, like that of Jacinda Ardern, can certainly be found, despite constant warnings that “we face a crisis of civility, a veritable war of words that distorts our public discourse, threatens our democracy, and penetrates the deepest reaches our private lives” (Bejan 2017, Introduction).

This special issue is not complete, nor does it purport to be exhaustive and have all the answers. The selected essays represent, instead, an attempt to tackle feminist responses to populisms from particular points of view and contexts. They all tap into specific traits of what populism is, engage with how feminisms interact with populist politics and claims, and explore how recent feminist mobilisations have reacted to populist politics. This ‘assemblage’ is very helpful in many ways. First of all, the collection of texts maps feminist

movements and initiatives locally and especially in the European South. It contextualises feminist endeavours that counterattack populist claims, specifically, or that oppose populist politics in particular communities. Some of these contributions call into question the ways in which the media often foster populist interpretations of politics. Some of them share sources that are located at the intersection of feminist and postcolonial theories, the social sciences and political theory, cultural studies and contemporary history.

But why do we still insist on feminism?

We are witnessing a global backlash against feminist praxis and theory. At the same time, feminism is trying to respond to populist movements worldwide. We are then situated in a complex political scenario, which is comprised of feminist movements and reactionary countermovements; conservative movements and feminist countermovements. Antifeminist groups and individuals antagonise feminist efforts to creating a more just and equal world by holding feminism responsible for several social problems.

Susan Faludi conceptualises backlash as a “perpetual viral condition in our culture” that appears when feminist movements move forward and make tangible progress (1991, 10). For Sylvia Walby, backlash is an attempt to slow down the progress of feminism (1997). When a backlash against feminism occurs, patriarchal forces are in play that try to stand their ground and maintain the status quo. Mansbridge and Shames (2008) point out that antifeminist backlash represents an attempt to regain lost power. Considering all of these perspectives, backlash can then be characterised as a response to feminist movements that are effectively making changes to create a more egalitarian and just society. It is for this reason that antifeminist backlash needs to stop (Butler 2019a): it aims at slowing down, if not stopping, the feminist movement altogether. The fight for gender equality and sexual freedom is trying to alleviate the pain that many women, LGBTQIA+ people, and non-binary people are suffering under, and to redress injustices done to them.

Antifeminist backlash crystallises, for example, in men’s rights groups that fight against the perceived advantages of women (Jordan 2016), in attempts to push back against women’s rights in the United Nations (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020), in physical and virtual attacks on women, in boycotts of feminist actions and activist groups, and in the creation of narratives that corrupt the meaning of feminism. With the current rise of conservative measures in Europe, LGBTQIA+ people frequently face violent attacks that go unpunished. LGBTQIA+ activists are therefore demanding more justice and safety, amid a political system that fosters a hostile environment.

In Poland, a citizen initiative proposing to outlaw an abortion in the case of foetal abnormalities was put to a vote on 15th of April 2020 in a parliamentary session. Feminist groups organised themselves in great numbers amid the COVID-19 pandemic to defend their reproductive rights. (Gutowska 2020;

Graff 2020). In Hungary, in 2013, Viktor Orban introduced a constitutional reform that enshrines the idea of the family as the foundation of the nation in the Basic Law. In 2018, Gender Studies were banned at universities (Pető 2018). On 28 May 2020, Hungary's Parliament signed a bill into law that ends the legal recognition for trans people. To confront a dark political scenario in which academic freedom, women's rights and LGBTQIA+ rights are being attacked, female politicians and protesters are offering an alternative to Orban's macho politics (Walker 2018; Béres-Deák 2020; Pető 2021).

In March 2021, feminists rose up in Turkey over the country's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention after Erdogan issued a decree annulling Turkey's ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women. Women's rights activists, lawyers, and opposition politicians have denounced Erdogan's decree, insisting that he cannot legally take Turkey out of an international convention that was ratified by the parliament. These protests are connected to those at Gezi Park in 2013 (Kilicoglu 2021), and to a very active feminist movement in the country, which has for decades been fighting for gender equality and freedom.⁴

These feminist responses find their transatlantic counterparts in the massive feminist movements that have been organised in the last years in South America. After years of protests, activism, encounters in the streets, and assemblies that have all constituted the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Free and Safe Abortion in Argentina (Daby and Moseley 2021), the abortion law was finally approved in December 2020. During the intense campaign for this law, the triangle green scarf became a transnational symbol of reproductive rights and feminist sisterhood (Vacarezza 2021). Mexico, Argentina, Chile have been witnessing a powerful organisation of feminist movements against femicide. The most well-known action to date is possibly Las Tesis' performance of "Un violador en tu camino", which has performed again and again in various countries, by activists all around the world (Cadena and Ortiz 2021; Martin and Shaw 2021). Before Las Tesis did their first performance on 20 November 2019, feminist activism against femicide had clustered around other movements that became massive and took on a transnational magnitude: "Vivas nos Queremos" in Mexico, and "Ni Una Menos", created in Argentina but rapidly replicated in many other countries such as Brazil, Chile, Spain, Italy, and Austria.

Within the context of backlashes against feminist theory and praxis, one of the most worrying conservative narratives that feminism currently has to face is the accusation of its having developed and spread a so-called 'gender ideology'. 'Gender ideology' is a term that was coined to stigmatise feminist struggles that was introduced by Joseph Ratzinger in 1997, before he became Pope Benedict XVI, and which was popularised in 2010 by Jorge Scala's book, *Gender Ideology or Tender as a Tool of Power*, which was published by Sekotia, a small conservative publishing house that promotes anti-choice and anti-feminist content and books that argue against climate change and revisionist histories

of Francoism in Spain (Scala 2010). According to these texts, gender ideology is a diabolical ideology that poses a threat to the institution of the family (Von Redecker 2016; Butler 2019b). Supposedly, gender ideology purports that anyone can adopt any gender they want and that there are no differences between the genders or natural laws; gender ideology accordingly seeks to destroy the scientific and biblical basis for differences between the sexes.

Accusations of gender ideology, which have spread rapidly through Latin-America (Careaga-Pérez 2016) and Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) are anti-feminist and anti-trans in their intentions. They are also homophobic and nationalistic; they seek to maintain traditional values based on an unquestioned gender binarism, the compulsory heterosexual family, the oppression of women and other non-hegemonic genders, and the denial of sexual and reproductive rights. They resemble forms of neo-fascism that we are witnessing in different parts of the world, which should make us worry about the state of our democracies (Zappino 2016).

Accusations against so-called gender ideology are unfortunately reproduced within feminism, as in groups such as self-proclaimed TERFs, or FERTs,⁵ who accuse trans-inclusive feminisms of diluting male and female identities (Jeffreys 1997, 2014; Miyares 2017; Valcárcel 2019) or portray trans women as violent male subjects who seek to infiltrate women's spaces and appropriate women's bodies (Raymond 1979). Given the alliances that are being formed between trans-exclusionary radical feminisms and right-wing, conservative groups and discourses, a recent trend has emerged on social media to rename people who share these ideas as "feminism appropriating reactionary transphobes". In any case, this dissolution is understood by trans-exclusionary radical feminism as a way of denying the existence of women, which they consider to be the political subject of feminism. In this sense, these feminists reject the work of scholars such as Butler (1990), who have problematised the universality of 'woman' or 'women' as the political subject of feminism. Thus, inclusive feminisms such as transfeminism and queer feminisms are considered by some to be anti-feminist movements. This is a complete misunderstanding and misuse of various forms of inclusive feminist theories thus weaponised in a political and theoretical message.

Some, e.g., "a community of people who question the medicalization of gender-atypical youth" also conflate queer theory with so-called "gender ideology" and refer to a "postmodern influenced gender ideology, a subset of 'queer theory,'" which they also call "genderism" or "gender theory" (See 4thWaveNow 2019, retrieved on June 12th). In this sense, "these terms have become empty signifiers, flexible synonyms for demoralization, abortion, non-normative sexuality, and sex confusion" (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 799).

In Spain, there has been strong opposition to the so-called Trans Law, a new law that aims at protecting the rights of trans people, legalising the self-determination of gender and the de-pathologisation of being trans. The

opposition comes from both the right and from reactionary transphobes who appropriate feminism as a way to promote anti-trans, hateful agendas. Lidia Falcón, a well-known feminist icon and leader of the Feminist Party of Spain, has joined forces with VOX, an extreme right-wing, ultranationalist party that entered the Spanish Parliament in 2019 with an antifeminist political ideology that advocates traditional gender norms, opposes the gender violence law because it discriminates against one of the sexes, and boycotts feminist acts, while considering them to be “ideological burkas”.⁶ Similar to right-wing, feminism-appropriating groups attack trans people, foster trans antagonism, and deface feminist pieces of art in the name of the defence of biological sex.⁷

In Italy, the *Non Una Di Meno* movement is currently considered to be the point of reference for feminist mobilisations in the country. It has advocated trans-inclusion in feminist spaces ever since it was created in 2016 and has always acted accordingly.⁸ There is nonetheless a significant and undeniable discrepancy among Italian feminists, which seems impossible to resolve. For instance, the *ArciLesbica* association, which was created in 1996 with the aim to fight against all forms of discrimination against gay and lesbian people, has attacked trans feminist groups in the country from a political standpoint. Carlotta Cossutta’s essay in this issue provides readers with a detailed explanation of the critical opposition between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusive feminisms in Italy. In particular, the author remarks on the constant dissatisfaction of sexual difference feminists with the category of gender. This is not, however, just a theoretical difference; rather, it is a position that fosters reactionary political practices. Although groups and associations like *ArciLesbica*, *RadFem Italia*, and *Se Non Ora Quando* often refuse to be identified as being ‘trans-exclusionary’, they have not, in practice, supported political initiatives and proposals aimed at protecting people from discrimination based on sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. They claim that measures like these are based on the idea that the category of biological sex is obsolete and has to be replaced by that of gender identity. This is also the case with the current debate on the not-yet-approved Zan law, which would be Italy’s first law on hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ people.⁹ The name is based on its proponent, Alessandro Zan, a member of the Italian Chamber of Deputies for the Democratic party. The Italian feminist groups who strenuously claim the importance of sexual difference as *natural*, do not openly side with right-wing parties against the Zan law; nevertheless, they hinder the approval process by subtly insisting on the fact that it is necessary to change crucial definitions in the legal text, especially that of “gender identity”.

Given the tense situation created by a backlash against progressive feminist agendas, making alliances between feminist groups, trans activists, and scholars remains an urgent matter, as has been clear since for decades (Williams 2016). If we have learned anything from intersectional approaches to feminisms (Crenshaw 1989), it is that identifying with one trait of identity and creating

political movements based on that single trait is an exclusionary practise that does not help to combat systemic issues that are configured in an interlocking matrix of oppression (Collins 2002).

Emi Koyama defines transfeminism as “primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (2003, 244). For Koyama, transfeminism “stands up for trans and non-trans women alike, and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans-women in return”, thereby embracing feminist coalition politics (Yuval-Davis 1993; Grosz 2002). Trans-inclusive feminisms advocate for a society that respects the way we live, our corporeality, our sexuality, without fear of punishment and violence. But this does not mean that each and every person has to dislocate their own identity in order to generate new categories of identity, or to erase existing categories absolutely. This is one of the criticisms that the right wing (simplistically) makes of LGBTQIA+ movements, namely that their gay agenda wants all of us to become gay, a position that trans-exclusionary radical feminism replicates, when it insists that trans-inclusive feminisms pretend that everyone should become non-binary or trans or queer in some way. This is obviously not a strategy that is desired by trans-inclusive feminists. Rather, these feminists invite us to work towards flexibilizing gender norms so that these norms can accommodate the various desires and identities that exist and that are being thrown into a state of abjection.

Carla Panico’s and Carlotta Cossutta’s essays share a common focus on the Italian political context and on forms of local feminist activism. In particular, both authors refer to the Non Una Di Meno movement and address the role of nationalism within Italian right-wing populist discourses, and the significance of the traditional family model, based on a binary separation of sexes and roles, on the hierarchy between them, and the instrumentalisation of reproduction as a woman’s task. By examining conservative and populist discourses, the authors describe a historical and political process that has produced the model of a white, male, Catholic subject and an androcentric white Catholic people. We consider it useful to read these two essays in connection with Begonya Enguix Grau’s contribution “Rebel bodies: feminism as resistance”, which explores entanglements between nation and gender in right-wing populist discourses by focusing on the performances of *embodied* feminist resistance by the Catalan pro-independence radical left. The essay also correlates with Brigita Miloš’ analysis of public discourses and media languages in the Croatian political context, which focuses on a local #metoo, a.k.a. #spasime initiative.

In comparing the different accounts of “nation”, “people”, and “nationalism” discussed in these four texts, we note the performative effectiveness of public speech in each of the geopolitical contexts to which they speak. These key

concepts are employed to construct an ideological framework that determines the situatedness of each of the feminist strategies that the four authors describe.

At the beginning of her essay “Transfeminist politics and populist counter-attacks in Italy”, Carlotta Cossutta stresses the specificity of Italy as a case study in populism. This is due to the fact that parties of various political orientation have used populist discourses to govern the country in various administrations during the past twenty-five years. The backlash against feminist and transfeminist groups by populist politicians and groups has now become an attack against the process of collective liberation. Cossutta retraces the discursive construction and reproduction of a symbolic order, based on hegemonic masculinity and traditional heteronormative family model, in recent Italian political history. According to the author, this rhetorical construct has a reactive function that is aimed at countering the creation of feminist and transfeminist alliances. Therefore, Carlotta Cossutta focuses on recent examples of transfeminist discourses and languages, pointing out that they deconstruct the solid and unitary, although clearly incoherent, image of a people that is produced within nationalist ideology, as well as the position of the subject itself. The author claims that this discursive elaboration is performative in that it fosters inaugural practices of liberation, like the ones enacted by Non Una Di Meno. By delving into archives to provide a detailed analysis of proudly Italian, hyper-virile, Catholic subjectivity, she is thus carefully decorticating the legislation promoted by conservative and far-right-wing parties.

Carla Panico’s essay “The re/production of a (White) people: facing Italian nationalistic populism as a gender and race issue” pays attention to nationalism as the glue that holds right-wing populisms together. With reference to the Italian context, the author retraces the historical and discursive pattern of the “construction of a people” as a precise “political operation” that depends on the “(re)production of gender and race identities”. Panico’s claim is that this process has never been completed and remains ongoing. The essay adopts an intersectional perspective, which combines feminist and postcolonial theory, addressing populism as an embodied history. The analysis focuses on Italian national history, adopting the methodology of Italian critical studies of Whiteness. In the first part of the text, the author addresses Ernesto Laclau’s account of populism, challenging it by referring to the so-called “affective turn”, an intersectional approach to the emotional aspects of nation building. The second part of the essay explains the role played by political discourses on race and gender within the history of the Italian national community. This aimed and still aims to construct an image of alleged homogeneity based on Whiteness. The third part focuses on the ongoing struggles to delegitimise the claim for homogeneity that subalternises entire groups of people. Carla Panico talks about feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist mobilisations in the country, which have created new alliances and fostered political experiences of community based on solidarity and on diversity rather than homogeneity.

As clearly expressed in the title, Begonya Enguix Grau's text "Rebel bodies: feminism as resistance in the Catalan pro-independence left" discusses the case of Catalanian "feminist nationalism" as a form of bodily resistance. The author takes an interest in the embodiment and the embeddedness of feminist practices on a global level that counters far-right populism as connected to nationalism and anti-genderism. Enguix Grau's case study includes two groups from the Catalan pro-independence movement, Esquerra Independentista (EI). They enact practices of resistance and, in particular, the Spanish far-right Vox party, which fosters "discourses and practices against gender justice, LGBTIQIA+ rights, plural families and racialised people and migrants". By claiming that rebel bodies constitute a site of political resistance, the author highlights a unique attempt to re-appropriate the body-gender-nation assemblage that prefigures the model of a *feminist nation*. This feminist nation necessitates a re-imagining of ideas of nation, people, and subject. Such a model is indeed based on a relational ontology that conceptualises the body as a node of relations and affects, which can be conflictual. The essay draws on the ethnographic fieldwork the author has conducted among EI activists, which includes interviews, participative observation into initiatives and mobilisations, and analysis of social media discourses.

The female body as *matter*, as something to re-appropriate as well as the site of embodied political struggles against neoliberal market strategies that consider the body as a mere commodity is also the focus of Beatriz Revelles Benavente's "Intra-mat-externality: Feminist resilience in contemporary literature". The essay takes into account feminist approaches to knowledge production and dissemination as a form of *resilience* against the radicalisation of oppressive discourses and practices. This resilient approach based on Feminist New Materialist theory aims at "understanding politics, society and knowledge as a continuum", by focusing on processes rather than on data and by connecting various disciplines and methodologies. The author introduces the concept of "intra-mat-textuality", which intersects Julia Kristeva's "intertextuality" and Karen Barad's "intra-action". It is a *diffractive* methodology that consists of "reading different texts, moments, and places together without assuming that there is an ontological separation between them". The essay focuses on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a "phenomenon" and considers connections between the novel, the TV series, and the political demonstrations that have been performed in many different countries that took their inspiration from events narrated in the novel and visual elements of the series.

Atwood's novel has become a staple in feminist literature. Sara Polak and Dány Van Dam's essay "Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*", takes a different approach to the methodology proposed by Beatriz Revelles Benavente. The authors argue that the various adaptations of Atwood's novel work like a media franchise within the context of feminist politics and populism. The authors frame their topic by going back to the roots of the term "franchise", to argue that *The*

Handmaid's Tale franchise is more political and more complex than other fantasy franchises due to the concept of political enfranchisement having become a central concern in Europe and the United States. Specifically, they refer to the privilege of being able to vote or exert political influence otherwise. The essay demonstrates that *The Handmaid's Tale* franchise addresses both the commercial and the political meanings of the word. Polak and Van Dam argue that "the various media texts belong to the *Handmaid's Tale* conglomerate and evidently fraught franchise in both the commercial and the politically emancipatory meaning. While the franchise somewhat reluctantly "offers itself 'up'" for commercial exploitation, it also makes itself prominently available to feminist protest culture. "This becomes particularly visible in the main character of *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia, who ironically reflects on this enfranchisement through her wielding of authority and authorship".

Brigita Miloš's is a Croatian philologist as well as a gender and feminist scholar. Her "Strange tropes of salvation" presents detailed analyses of two rhetorical strategies that are present in contemporary Croatian public space. By exploring the "troubling linkage" between feminism and populism, the author contrasts politicians and an *ad hoc* civic initiative, #spasime which is aimed at supporting victims and survivors of violence against women. Her topic is approached in a manner that considers how the achievements of the #spasime feminist initiative correlate with the populist weaponisation of gender in Croatian society, which has witnessed a process of re-traditionalisation during the last few decades. As a new locus of feminist discourse, celebrity feminism in Croatia has created an initiative that deals primarily with child abuse instead of abuse against women. Perversely, this provoked the government to respond promptly and efficiently to activists' demands. Brigita Miloš locates the reasons for this reaction in the "inadequate systematic response to the growing problem of violence (against women and girls) in Croatian society", as well as in the popularity and public visibility of the main activist who is famous in celebrity culture. This analysis of Croatian feminist populism elucidates how a celebrity activist's broaching of feminist issues functions to deflect from the feminist achievements that simply do not earn enough visibility in public space.

Neither the selected texts for this special issue nor the reasons listed in the introduction can be said to exhaust the topic through which we sought to understand the current historical moment. Nor indeed could they cover the present plurality of feminist viewpoints, which offer a wide range of strong responses to populist phenomena. Although the shifted (deregulated) reality that we share continuously immobilises us, it also stokes the fires of myriad fictional scenarios. Can we establish with any certainty what the pandemic will bring forth, and what kind of conceptual tectonic shift we will face? Can we truly resist the dissolution of diversity and strategies of inclusive feminist practices? Our conviction is that vigorous academic endeavour, accountability-building activism, and putting forth inclusive feminist stances will always result in the

robust agency needed to resist negations and retreat from all forms of rights, including the rights of all living and non-living beings.

Notes

1. We can nonetheless find very helpful contributions on specific related topics. For instance, see Donà 2020; Ema 2018; Gatamaula 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Pavan 2019; Prearo 2019; Rodó-Zárate 2020; Zappino 2016.
2. TERF is an acronym for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism. It designates self-proclaimed gender-critical feminists, who argue that women's marginalisation is explicitly shaped by their biological sex and their status as physically different from men. The central belief is that biological sex is immutable and fixed and thus cannot be changed. See Smythe 2018; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020.
3. Horton (2020, 874); Mendenhall (2020, 1731).
4. See <https://en.catlakzemin.com/> for a website by a group of feminists from Turkey who have been involved in the feminist movement and activism for years.
5. The acronym FARTs stands for Feminism Appropriating Reactionary Transphobes started to be used on social media in late 2019. See: <https://twitter.com/sportisa/right/status/1038896015317901319?lang=en>.
6. www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/03/04/5e5ffaabfc6c836b058b456f.html.
7. www.losreplicantes.com/articulos/transfobas-terf-adelantan-vox-vandalizan-mural-feminista-madrid/.
8. As it is clearly stated in its general agenda: see Non Una Di Meno (2017).
9. See Pitch (2021).

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