

Researching the urban reflexively: Feminist methodological issues¹

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Abstract

This article offers a critically reflexive approach to conducting feminist geographical research on and with feminist activists and activism in Milan. It addresses embodied methodologies in geographical research and draws on reflexivity as a specifically feminist methodology for explaining the kind of relation which exists among the “objects” of research. Researching reflexively means acknowledging that the bodily presence of the researcher, her/his subjectivity, identity and knowledges influence, interact with and modify the field of study, helping discard the notion of “objective research.” It is well known that women have been depicted as the “other,” trapped in their bodily experience, by mainstream scientific knowledge. Feminist epistemologies, such as politics of location, embodied knowledges and positionality, put forward a way to reappropriate the body as a primary tool of inquiry in order to conduct reflexive research. In Italian feminism, separatist practices and consciousness raising have been a poignant example of the use of the body as a vector of knowledge. The materiality of researching using intercorporeal embodied methodologies is addressed by drawing on both methods and objects of research that use embodied methodologies in order to mobilize knowledge when researching feminist spatial practices in Milan.

Introduction: Accessing the field in Milan

When I first arrived in Milan to carry out the fieldwork for my Ph.D, it was after four years of absence from the city in which I used to live, study, work and participate actively as a citizen. The first day of fieldwork was April 30, 2006,

and I noted, in a fieldwork diary, these mixed feelings about being back and the difficulty with reconnecting to my past Milanese practices, such as attending the Mayday demonstration the day after. I spent a solitary, sunny afternoon in Porta Venezia Gardens trying to think through how my experiences of living and researching in Berlin and in London had changed me and my perspectives on Milan, and on the feminist movement in particular.

Among the thoughts that crossed my mind was that, before relating to feminist activists, be they 1970s activists, recent ones or both, I had to focus on the theoretical origins of the Italian movement and the ways in which feminist knowledges are situated in the specific context I wanted to explore. For instance, there is the whole issue of the disjunction between sex and gender, typical of the Anglo-Saxon debate, that the Italian (and French) debates only partially address. When studying Italian feminism, it is important to keep in mind that sexuality is a simultaneously material and symbolic foundation and that the question to ask is not whether and how sex and gender differ from each other, but how gendered identity relates to subjectivity, as Braidotti (1991) recalls.

The spatial frame of the body is the starting point from which I, as a feminist geographer, can be critical of the modality of power implicit in all theoretical discourse, including my own. This is because feminism, as a self-reflexive mode of analysis, uses the body as a starting point; its standpoint is necessarily a sexed position, rather than disembodied. It is only through the recognition of the partiality and finitude of my subjective bodily location that I can try to make sense of the feminist spaces in Milan.

This article offers a critically reflexive approach to conducting feminist geographical research on and with feminist activists and activism in Milan. It addresses embodied methodologies in geographical research and draws on reflexivity as a specifically feminist methodology for explaining the kind of relation that exists among the “objects” of research. In order to do so, it discusses theories of positionality and politics of location as they developed during the 1990s (Harding, 1986, 1990; Haraway, 1995; Rich, 1986) and subsequently draws on embodiment and its implications for geographical research (Dyck, 2002; Johnston, 2009; Longhurst, 2009; Valentine, 2002). The article then provides contextual examples of reflexivity when researching in archives, conducting participant observation, interviewing and working with different levels of abstraction, where actual data, methods and methodologies are discussed in depth. The materiality of researching using intercorporeal embodied methodologies is addressed by drawing on both methods and objects of research that use embodied methodologies in order to mobilize knowledge when researching feminist spatial practices in Milan.

Insider and outsider to the field: Considering positionality and reflexivity

On the research findings

There are three thematic threads that run through the research, pulling together in a lateral way: (1) the relationship between feminist politics and spatial politics in contemporary Milan; (2) the changing spatial politics of Milanese feminism and how that has impacted institutional politics; and (3) the significance of women's collective action in contemporary Milan and how it has shaped a distinctive spatial politics. Although an in-depth discussion of the findings falls outside the remit of this paper, a summary of these findings is helpful in order to contextualize the research which took place between 2005 and 2008 in London, with fieldwork in Milan throughout 2006.

The study looked at the evolution of feminist political subjectivity over the last 40 years in Milan. Data was gathered to respond to two leading questions: how women in Milan have collectively appropriated the *polis* in recent times, and what kind of political practices influencing space are distinctive to the feminist movement in Milan. The research also asked how strategies of space appropriation have changed since the late 1960s. The methodological approach of the work drew on the politics of location and the idea that situated knowledges stem from a material positioning that involves narration and the body—according to an Arendtian definition of the political as public exposure in a collective arena.

In order to address the main research questions, the study looked at the shift from the domestic sphere (*atopia*) to the public sphere (*topia*) which occurred, for the majority of Italian women, during the 1970s, when feminists appropriated separatist sites that gave them visibility in the city and marked their collective access to the public sphere. The politics of the feminist movement in Milan was strictly intertwined with spatial practices such as separatism and consciousness raising. A second shift that the research took into account was from a centralized form of government to urban governance. This coincides with a change in spatial practices within the women's movement, which increasingly became horizontally networked, project-oriented and based on the "everyday of women's relationality," a legacy of the feminist movement's mobilization strategies.

The qualitative research provided empirical evidence that spatial politics and feminist politics are strictly intertwined, while the ways in which contemporary women's organizations and activist domains use space has changed. The rise in information and communication technologies provides a new spatial dimension to space appropriation, although the relationship between territory and collective action remains unchanged (Vacchelli, Forthcoming). Spatial politics involving the use of space has evolved (Vacchelli, 2011), and separatist practices today do not exclude

men as long as women (or self-defined ones) are able to keep the exclusive leadership of their own initiatives. Moreover, separatism is an embedded practice in feminist activism and is still widely used, albeit more selectively than before. Finally, the study showed that, given the scarce presence of women in Italian political institutions, the joint action of civil society and social movements can certainly contribute to opening up innovative spaces for a reconfiguration of the political outside traditional paths of political representation and accountability.

Positionality

In order to understand the researcher's positionality in the research process, it is useful to consider feminist research perspectives, particularly those standpoint theories that draw on the importance of social location and identification of the researcher. The theoretical systematization of the criticism to objectivity of science from a feminist point of view was first undertaken by Sandra Harding (1986) in *The Science Question in Feminism*. Harding contends that androcentrism of science necessarily implies a sexist bias which is internal to scientific research procedures. In contrast, feminist standpoint theories take into account the gendered differentiated perspective as a privileged grounding for scientific inquiry. For Harding (1990), standpoint theory is a non-static position from which to analyze the static and essential positions that androcentrism assigns to women. It does so by locating the broad context and the historical conditions which determined it and also suggests ways to oppose it. Standpoint theories are about a call for dynamic feminist analysis and political practices against these forms of oppression (Harding, 1990).

Scholars like Braidotti (1991), Haraway (1995), Harding (1986, 1990) and Rich (1986) have been active in defining the central debate in feminist methodology, which resonates with Foucauldian theories of power/knowledge but comes from a different experience, the feminist one. Its struggles are aimed at re-signifying the symbolical order from the perspective of the "other" from transcendent objectivity. In *Patterns of Dissonance* (1991), Braidotti explains the clashes between feminism and a Cartesian idea of the subject with the effective statement, "I think therefore he is": the dichotomy between mind and body that Cartesianism suggests does not take into account the already embodied nature of the subject and creates a false dichotomy that necessarily excludes the female subject.

Donna Haraway's (1995) situated knowledges can be understood as opposed to "disembodied Cartesian epistemology." In *Simians, Cyborg and Women* (1990), Haraway wrote about "situated knowledges" in response to Harding (1986). According to Haraway, it is necessary to admit the relativity of any standpoint, not just as partial and situated within given discursive coordinates, but as mobile and connected to

many correlated factors. Applying the metaphor of vision, Haraway discusses a range of positionings, techniques and instruments to suggest that other theoretical models can coexist. The lesson that social science, and feminist geography within it, can learn from the standpoint critique and situated knowledges is to reject a reading of the world based on dominant positions. The challenge one has to take when undertaking feminist research is to actively relate to a world which itself is an active entity (Borghi, 2000). In the work of Braidotti (1991) and Haraway (1990, 1995), the world is seen as such an entity, seeking interaction, rather than a passive site waiting for the eye of the researcher to decode it; it is a material-semiotic actor (Braidotti, 1991), as the language used to represent it also plays an active role. Contrary to the humanist project, which is strongly biased in a male, white and Western sense, the post-human project is the image that Haraway uses to suggest an evolution. She pictures a rewriting of science in a feminist and anti-imperialist sense, according to new narratives, including both human and non-human actors in intelligent environments where communication is enhanced, cognitions are more sophisticated and development is based on a better coordination of structures (Borghi, 2000).

Feminist geographers from the 1990s onwards have enriched the debate on epistemology of science and argued for a phenomenological approach to embodiment. This was a response to the until then “disembodied” geographical discipline (Johnston, 2009). The body is the place where subjectivity and experience are located; it exists a priori to conscious reflection and knowledge and, as such, is caught up in collective experiences and power relations (Browne and Nash, 2010). The body is always situated in space and is performative (Butler, 1997), i.e., it does not have an ontological status per se or fixed characteristics; it is simultaneously material, imaginary, symbolic and real (Johnston, 2009). Moreover, it is constructed by emotions, as confirmed by the recent burgeoning of geographies of affect (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson, Bondi and Smith, 2005; McCormack, 2003; Thien, 2005; Thrift, 2004). Nast (1994) and Taylor and Wetherell (1999) argue that positionality is never a priori; it unfolds in the course of the encounter. Valentine (2002) defines the interview encounter as a “positional space” where both parties bring their individual situated knowledges and sees the interview itself as a “game of positionalities.” This is reflected in the role of the researcher in the interview process.

Among other Western feminisms, Italian feminism has struggled to unmask the assumptions hiding behind the transcendence of objective science and to reconquer the terrain of scientific knowledge, reclaiming the value of multiple standpoints which are not absolute but located in the body and its everyday practices and encounters. Standpoint represents the initial epistemological position, providing the opportunity for feminists to formulate counter-hegemonic ideas around the contested notion of objectivity. The feminist as a critical thinker who is able to criticize power and its

modalities presupposes that the theoretical discourse she is trying to unveil includes her own. During my fieldwork in Milan, participants provided a precise account of where they stood politically during the interview, situating their perspectives and knowledges in a specific theoretical tradition within Milanese feminism. In this way, not just the participants' political positioning, but also their identity was performatively negotiated during the interview. This particular aspect of adopting embodied methodologies highlights that politics of location was not just one of the research objects *per se*, but became an embodied experience when carrying out fieldwork in Milan.

Reflexivity

The reflexive approach offers in general, and to my work, three kinds of advantages. Firstly, reflexivity helps to understand how the identity of both the researcher and the researched are mutually built during the research process. The locations of both researcher and participants are important, as are their shifts in relation to the interactive context. Secondly, when locating the researcher politically and in relation to the researched, reflexivity helps to clarify the process and to avoid intimidating disparities and hierarchies between the subject and the object of research. Thirdly, by helping to share power with the participant, the reflexive approach validates the informant fully as a knower; it has an empowering effect on her, as the participant feels the depositary of the knowledge s/he is sharing (Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002). Reflexivity alludes, in both everyday language and in academic discourse, to the act of reflecting upon oneself and one's experiences and giving a full account of the research process by explaining the position of researcher in relation to the position of the researched (Al-Hindi and Kawabata, 2002). Longhurst (2009) defines reflexivity as the practice of examining one's own embodied subjectivity in order to gain new insights into research.

Thinking reflexively on research practice and communication modes with the participants meant acknowledging that my position as an Italian feminist researcher coming from the UK positioned me as a peer when interviewing activists who were often academics themselves. Apart from activists, ex-activists and academics, other participants were heads of women's organizations (34 participants in total). The interviewees' specific language alluding to the rhetoric of the movement, such as "relationality among women," "sexual difference," "consciousness raising" and "feminist practices" were all taken for granted, as was the more specialized language used to communicate institutional politics, such as "gender mainstreaming," "affirmative action" and "equal opportunities." The boundary between researcher and informant, however, is highly dynamic and unstable, and interviewee and researcher might successfully understand each other across difference or fail to connect through

sameness (Rose, 1997; Valentine, 2002). Gillian Rose (1997) suggests to always take into consideration what kind of power hierarchies are in place when conducting research in the field. Given the context of my fieldwork in Milan with activists and heads of women's organizations, the alleged disparity between the all-knowing researcher and the potentially disempowered researched did not take place, but the level of connectedness with the interviewees varied from case to case.

My position as Italian researcher based abroad situated me both as an outsider to the movement and as an insider, given my previous involvement in activist *milieux* in Milan, where I was part of a local collective for about two years before leaving Italy. Valentine (2002) warns against the dualism of insider/outsider that, like most dualisms, suggests hidden hierarchies. Moreover, the positions of insider and outsider are highly variable according to the context of the encounter; there are also other elements that contribute to shape the positionality of the researcher in the field, such as those who we know and the performance of self during meetings, encounters and interviews.

The fact that I was perceived as "external" to the local relational dynamics required some "adjustments" to my approach. My reflexive approach toward the wide range of people I met in Milan during fieldwork at feminist meetings, in archives and libraries, as well as during informal conversations and interviews, was to try not to emphasize my position as a researcher based abroad and to show my genuine interest and knowledge of the issues at stake in Italian and Milanese feminism. My emotions of empathy and solidarity with the interviewees were easily mobilized by the fact that I, as an Italian woman, share the same genealogy of feminist thought notwithstanding the different positions within the movement. While my identification with their positions facilitated communication, their perception of me as an "outsider" made it easier for the participants to expose the conflicts within the moment with regard to certain controversial issues.

In addition to being perceived as an outsider, I was given privileged access to the field as an insider would. Because of my age (mid-30s at the time), ethnic origin (white Italian) and political position (a feminist whose political ideas were forged in the Milanese experience of *centri sociali*), I was immediately identified as discursively belonging to the "young" or the so-called third wave of feminism (see *Feminist Review*, 2007, Vol. 87, entirely dedicated to contemporary Italian feminism).

Researching city and gender: Observations from the field

Ontology

When entering the field in Milan, my research questions were the structuring device and the lens through which I interpreted the reality of my research encounters and engagements. I asked: In which ways have feminist politics and space been mutually

constitutive? Considering that the socially constructed idea of domesticity kept women away from the *polis*, how did Milanese women reappropriate that space? In what ways have the dominant definitions of public and private been influential in this process?

From the literature, the interviews and the archives, it emerged that, in the 1970s, the separatist appropriation of city spaces such as cafes, shelters and bookshops had a double function. Internally, it aimed at a definition of their political subjectivity to be discussed in isolation from men, to overcome their oppression and previous segregation in the private sphere. This separation also had a strong anti-institutional undertone and, in fact, radical feminists were firm separatists, as opposed to double militancy feminists who chose to struggle in mixed contexts to challenge institutions from within (and were nonetheless anti-institutional but more flexible on separatist issues). Externally, separatist practices had the function of setting political boundaries in the attempt to appropriate, at the very least, the domains which were more strictly connected to women's issues, such as reproductive health, family-related issues and violence against women. Separatist practices also represent an attempt to collectively enter a terrain, that of politics, which feminists felt estranged from.

Today's activist field in Milan consists of numerous meetings and the coordinated activity of an array of more or less formalized organizations, most of the time no longer in strictly separatist domains. These activities range from exhibitions about the increasing presence of migrant women in Milan to participating as feminists in more global mobilizations, such as the national march in solidarity with Palestine on February 18, 2006. In mid-January 2006, about fifty out of the hundred women's organizations in Milan gathered under the catchphrase *Usciamo dal silenzio* (Let's break silence) and promoted a demonstration against the revisions of Italian law regulating abortion rights (Law 194/1998) in anticipation of the national referendum on reproductive rights in June 2006. The sheer scale of the demonstration (200,000 participants) suggests a heightened sensitivity toward women's issues and the opposition of joint civil society actors against the interference of the Vatican into secular matters, such as reproductive rights and the female body. During demonstrations, the space of the *polis* offers itself for a temporary appropriation where boundaries between what is conceived as "public" and issues which were, up to the 1970s, a domain of the "private," such as reproduction and the female body, are constantly reworked.

Epistemology

Epistemological processes in research are unfolded through methodological choices. While method is a technique consisting of all the actions involved in the gathering and analysis of data, such as listening, watching and examining documents, methodology concerns choices about how to use these methods, for instance, which questions to

pose, which evidence to prioritize and how to analyze the collected data (Sprague, 2005). Participant observation, archive research and interviewing are some of the methods I used to collect qualitative data during my fieldwork in Milan in order to analyze how the use of urban space by the feminist movement had changed since the late 1960s.

In geography, as in other disciplines, feminists have pushed the limits of what counts as data, using a range of different sources, such as photographs, diaries, letters, songs and artwork, as in the majority of the cases few other sources were available for capturing their voices. As Meghan Cope (2002; see also Rose, 1997; Norwood and Monk, 1987) argues, the use of diverse sources assumes an importance given the hegemonic position of masculinist geography in the production of knowledge privileging some data over others. Beyond participant observation and communication with key actors, I also worked in archives during the fieldwork in order to get a sense of the spaces of the Milanese feminist movement which were not mapped in published sources (Calabrò and Grasso, 2004). Following typically feminist anti-Cartesian methods of social research, I used a mix of inputs to build rigor in my work. I used pictures, political flyers, political statements and communications of groups, addresses of collectives retrieved in archives, unpublished sources, private archives and conversations with activists and experts to make sense of the core of my research. As Cope (2002) observes, it is often about how the data is collected which determines the epistemological basis of research. The choice of whom to interview and the questions asked, as well as the nature and place of the interview, are all important factors in the construction of the research process, as they create conditions that exclude others, and this inclusion/exclusion of methods has epistemological implications for what we consider as limits and validity of knowledge.

Archive work

Secondary data, mainly from English, Italian and German literature, research in libraries and the archives of the feminist movement in Milan (particularly the Fondazione Badaracco archive), participant observation and semi-structured interviews (which will be dealt with later separately) constituted the main bulk of methods of this research. During my week-long work in the Fondazione Badaracco archive, I negotiated access to primary data with the archivist. Thanks to an introduction by other activists, I was able to open the files of the Milanese *Centro Studi sulla Storia del Movimento delle Donne in Italia* (Research Center on the History of the Women's Movement in Italy), with which I tried to make sense of the spaces in which feminist gatherings used to take place, collected hints of locations and noted addresses and the activities of these groups. The temporalities involved in the experience of some groups

within the movement in Milan were sometimes short. For instance, the Architecture Collective did not last long, but these women tried to conceptualize Milan as a city from a women's perspective, raising similar questions to the ones which, for example, other feminist groups were asking in Western Germany (*Arch+*, 1981; *Bauwelt*, 1979; Dörhöfer, 1980).

While researching in the archives, I explored the ways in which I could build a relation between the different temporalities involved in my research, the groundbreaking activities and the spaces that the feminist movement were gradually appropriating in Milan. This happened through political manifestos for some groups, in which they attempted to define their identities as a group through specific political agendas and explanations of political strategies. During my work in the archives of Milanese feminism, I could also access pictures and documents of the movement to make sense of its evolution after the 1970s.

As Gillian Rose (2000) makes clear when addressing archive work, cataloguing and archives have to be thought through carefully as devices used to frame and discipline material. Each document is classified under a specific name, made coherent under specific collections. The act of archiving material transforms the meaning of the object, document and picture which is attributed and, at the same time, invested with a new meaning. In this sense, the archive needs to be seen as an area where knowledge is organized arbitrarily, taking into account the risks that such disciplining of knowledge implies. As Crang argues, drawing on Rose (2000), "the presence of the researcher with her specific questions, background and knowledge might disrupt the neat categories" (Crang, 2003:133). Therefore, the reflexive practice of archive work results in a combination of three sets of orders: that of the archive itself (in my case, Fondazione Badaracco); the visual, documentary and spatial resources of its contents, such as flyers, political agendas and other documents; and my own desires and imperatives to trace a connection between feminist politics and the urban spaces in Milan. As Rose (2000) argues, the meaning that we gain from material in an archive exceeds its classifications.

Researching at the Fondazione Badaracco archive represented my chance to enter into a direct dialogue with the original material produced by Milanese feminists in the 1970s and allowed me to access the kind of esthetics, the semantic approach and the ways of communicating expressed by the groups studied. The experience of researching at the archive added to my fieldwork a range of spatial detail about the groups and helped me to frame visually and spatially the primary sources and documents of early feminism in Milan. The process of looking, evaluating and selecting material when researching at the archive was guided by my research questions and was no doubt helpful to enter into dialogue with the material and make sense of the unorganized, fragmentary traces that are left by that particular experience. The archive's attempt to

reorganize fragmentary traces by cataloguing material such as posters, slogan, leaflets and pictures left by Milanese early feminism has been helpful in giving my search a sense of direction and selectively guiding my investigation of primary sources.

Thanks to the friendship I developed with Gisella Bassanini, who started to engage with my research, I could also access the private archive of Vanda, a group of feminist architects in which Gisella was an active member. This group, within the Architecture Faculty at the Milan Politecnico, produced degree theses and doctoral dissertations on the topic of city and gender throughout the 1980s. In particular, the dissertation of Rosaria Fichera (1996), “Sotto il vulcano. Percorsi spaziali e politici delle donne a Catania (At the feet of the volcano: Spatial and political path of women in Catania),” was a great inspiration for thinking the city as gendered and for identifying the issues at stake in connecting the politics of feminism and its spatialities.

Participant observation

The women I came across during my fieldwork have been a precious resource of new contacts, information, access to the personal collections of key movement publications, advice, directions and suggestions which had a snowball effect in the proliferation of data to gather. They also welcomed me and integrated me in their debates and meetings, demonstrating a great availability and enthusiasm in sharing their experiences. This favorable circumstance facilitated my access to the meetings at the Milan Women Bookshop Collective as an observing participant. Hammersley (1990) distinguishes observation from a distance to participant observation: the latter implies that the researcher is given the possibility to actively learn through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day routine activity of participants in the research setting. As I did in Milan, in several meetings and book presentations of the Milan Women Bookstore Collective and others, participation refers to presence in and interaction with a site when an activity or event is occurring. While my more or less active participation in Milanese feminist events and meetings can be seen as observation from a distance, the personal conversations with activists and the fact of actually being caught up in the relational network of ongoing discussions, life stories and contacts and being welcomed and perceived as part of the relational flow made me a participant observer. Again, my action was informed by research questions and the bulk of theory focused on the interrelations between space and feminist politics.

Interviewing

In my experience of conducting fieldwork in Milan, researching is never a straightforward process, and even the questions guiding the research can unpredictably change and need some degree of negotiation according to the context. Direct

experience, as it progresses, generates an increased knowledge of the participants and therefore more data is fed into the project. The risk of designing the interview questions in advance can be that they become inappropriate to the situation of the interview or to the specific activity of the research participant. Another risk is that the actual questions which the researcher might want to ask change according to shifts and various readjustments of the research questions informing fieldwork and the whole process in the grounding of the research.

During my stay in Milan, I tried to obviate these potential risks by attempting to stay flexible and alert to the slippery terrain created by the temporal differences between planning the fieldwork and actually carrying it out. When arranging the interviewing schedule, in order to present myself and my research, I emailed the interviewees a list of questions in advance once they had agreed to meet me. Given the level of impersonality of the Internet, which does not deliver the sense of reassurance of face-to-face encounters, the email helped them to situate me and my work. Moreover, it gave them time to think about the questions and to elicit some insightful thoughts, thereby making the interviewing process smoother. The email contact also facilitated logistical details about where to conduct the interview. Interviews took place at participants' private homes or at their workplaces.

I conducted a total of 34 semi-structured interviews. Participants in the research project were key informants on the broadly conceived Milanese women's movement with recognized expertise and experience in my topic of interest. In some cases the members or heads of women's organizations did not carry out specific feminist political action, but they are important social actors in the mobilization of women-specific policies in Milan. The women interviewed in Milan over a year, in five separate visits lasting two weeks each, ranged from feminists who were active in the appropriation of urban space during the 1970s, to contemporary activists, stakeholders and academics. Because of the background of the respondents, the vast majority were assertive and familiar with the interview setting. My initial idea of showing the 1970s activists a map of feminist spaces which I had previously drawn did not work: they looked at it briefly but nobody felt inclined to comment on it or draw connections among different groups on the map. This is probably because they concentrated on what they wanted to say and also because the task I was asking them to perform (drawing and commenting on a map) was not particularly appropriate to the kind of role and expertise they were performing at the time of the interview.

In-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews are a useful device when interviewing experts. This method allows the speaker to explore the topic in detail and to deepen the interviewer's knowledge of the topic (Hammersley, 1990). In semi-structured interviews, there is no correct answer, and open-ended refers to the fact that the interviewer is open to all relevant responses, leaving the flow of communication

to take the direction that the interviewees feel they want to take in a way that is not constrained by the interviewer. This particularly suited my research, as it gave the speakers more room for maneuver in describing the specificities of their work. As no limit was set to the length of the response, the interviewees were free to offer personal insights to their answers. In this way the interviewee is expected to reply to questions with some depth and the researcher is free to ask for more details. This approach was particularly fruitful, as it helped me to address issues of space when the interviewees were side-stepping this aspect. Semi-structured refers to the fact that there is a list of unspecific questions, set out as broad topics that the researcher would like the participant to address during the interview. Therefore a structure is given to the interview without constraining or forcing the speakers in a direction they do not want to go. This last aspect of in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews was particularly successful in providing a loose structure which allowed the narrative to unfold and to cover all aspects of the research questions.

Interviews were an effective method to expand my knowledge of areas, practices and specific aspects of a topic about which little was known. Even when some facts of the Milanese feminist movement are well known, the particular emphasis on space induced by my questions generated in the interviewees new perspectives and insights on the same facts. The pitfalls of using semi-structured interviews were, however, that sometimes the interviewees felt they had to follow a suggested trajectory, precluding in this way the infinite range of other possibilities of asking (other) questions on the same topic. Moreover, the questionnaire was standard for all the interviewees and, for instance, the questions about public/private and other movement-specific issues were probably too customized for one kind of interviewee (the activists). More specific questionnaires, according to the role of the interviewee, would have probably optimized the results. This would have raised, however, other kinds of problems in the data analysis phase: a non-standardized questionnaire would make cross-sectional data analysis impossible and would raise questions about the generalizability of interview results.

Three levels of abstraction

Working with translations

As an Italian doing fieldwork in Milan, I obviously collected all my interviews and data in Italian, which was also the language in which I carried out research on secondary sources to integrate the framework previously constructed from English-language literature. As a researcher based in a UK institution, I took up the challenge of writing the thesis in English and this, of course, opens up some translation issues

from Italian to English in the phase of data analysis. I translated all the quotes that I decided to use in the case studies selected for the empirical chapters in a way that could deliver the full sense of the interview, and the translations of certain rhetoric or Italian phrases resulted in a conversion which was not always literal but had to be circumvented and expressed differently. Where I was not sure, I asked a friend, who is English, speaks Italian and is familiar with social movement literature; but obviously the fact of translating from one language to another opens up some linguistic mediation questions (Bassnett, 1980). Although I believe I have been able to provide an accurate translation of the sense produced in Italian by the interviewees, this language-to-language mediation raised a methodological restriction that, for instance, excludes the possibility to use conversation analysis and other discourse-based methodologies.

Working with different temporalities

Another level of abstraction in my work concerns working with different temporalities. The work was thought of diachronically, that is, the focus was on two different moments in time, the 1970s and early 2000s, in the same place, Milan. Although what happens in between these two periods is significant for understanding the important changes which occurred over space, the time simplification is useful to address transformations in the ways of organizing the women's movement, policies and mobilization in Milan. While the work aimed to provide a clear genealogy of what happened between the 1970s and the early 2000s, the diachronic choice was able to offer an in-depth perspective on the context of ideas and the political, social and urban circumstances, such as the first appropriation of city spaces by women's groups. A spotlight on the contemporary situation allowed me to identify the changes in a straightforward way that took into account the evolutions involved in the shift from feminist movement to a diffused form of feminism and the spatialities involved in these shifts.

The shift to a more diffused form of feminism that eventually accessed institutions and professions occurred between the late 1970s and the late 1980s, while the burgeoning of women's organizations in Milan occurred from the early 1990s onwards. The importance of the comparative approach between the 1970s and today lies in the fact that the differences are relevant even though there are elements of continuity. During the 1970s in Italy, as in other Western countries, the feminist movement laid the basis for a future transformation of urban space contributing to the creation of public, women-oriented infrastructures. In this way urban space became gendered in the political debate and, through the political actions of women activists and the gendered construction of space, became a key element in new radical urban debates including neo-Marxian approaches. The 1970s as a period is

therefore significant because of the influence feminist movements had on the way the city is perceived and used today. Feminist politics constitute, in this context, a relevant analytical tool to capture the main political and social changes over the last 40 years.

Another important difference between the 1970s and contemporary forms of women's collective action is that in the 1970s, subversive ideas advocated by feminists were radical and transversally cut across every social class. Therefore, the access to feminist politics and to different sorts of urban spaces appropriated by the feminist movement was possible for a large number of activists. Feminism became a mass phenomenon that assumed different forms: street demonstrations, occupations and experimental ways of living. In contrast, current access to feminist politics is less inclusive and is limited to a smaller number of experts, academics and women with a higher level of education and specialization (Vacchelli, 2011). These shifts have an impact on the ways in which urban space in Milan is appropriated and used. While the nuances within different categories are helpful to fully understand the specific context of Milan and its peculiarities, the broad lines of abstractions are helpful for the process of understanding the nature of the transformation involved, both subjective and political, and offer a generalization that can be useful for other contexts of analysis.

Working with maps

During my fieldwork, with the aid of secondary data, archives and recollected spatial memories, I mapped onto the Milanese territory the centers appropriated by the 1970s feminist movement. For practical reasons, it has only been possible to map the more explicitly public gathering spaces of the first feminist groups in Milan, as the private houses which activists offered for feminist meetings changed too often and the memories about them are fragmented and hence difficult to reconstruct rigorously. Despite the major role played by private houses as temporary public spaces during the years of Milanese feminism, the deliberate choice in my work has been to map only the visible public spaces for the role they played in inscribing Milanese women's renewed role in the urban territory. These include women's cafes and restaurants, collectives in the workplaces, women's bookshops, autonomous nurseries and anti-violence shelters.

Initially, the map of feminist spaces had a double function, as I thought I would use it during the interviews, but as explained above, this did not work out. Ultimately, the sole function of the map was the visualization of the presence of the first feminist groups in Milan and their symbolical and material appropriation of urban space. Being an original map which situates feminist centers in the Milan territory, it

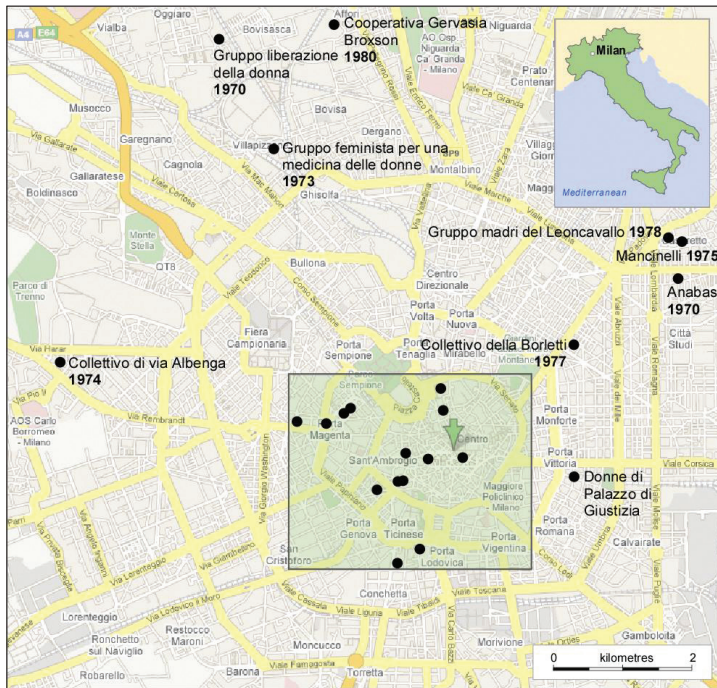


Figure 1: Feminist groups in 1970s Milan

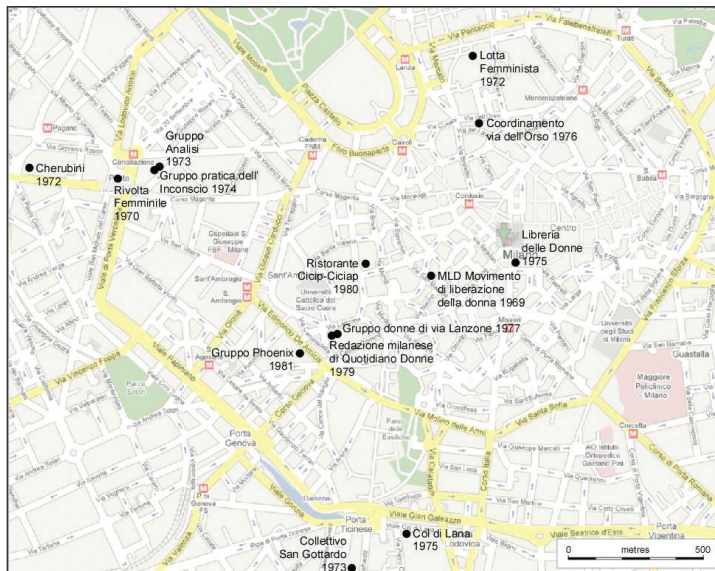


Figure 2: Feminist groups in 1970s Milan's city center

proved particularly useful for evaluating the positions of the groups in relation to the categories of center and periphery (see Figures 1 and 2).

A third map (Figure 3) shows contemporary centers, organizations and the whole sphere of women-oriented civil society actors in Milan today. This map, also an original map on the topic, has been realized in a more straightforward way, following the addresses reported in an updated (2007) Milan Council list of women associations. The map offers a visualization of the positions of the centers in the city whose main areas are illustrated and prompts reflection on the way the associations are situated in contemporary Milan.

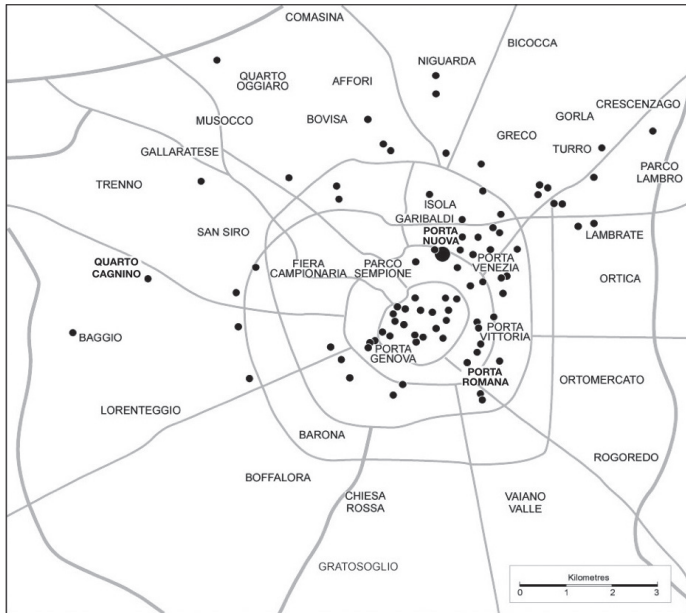


Figure 3: Contemporary women's organizations and centers in Milan

It is worth noting that the maps gave me the opportunity to visualize the groups in Milan in a comparative and diachronic manner. This informed the choice of avoiding an unnecessary focus on the gentrification process with regard to the expulsion of women's spaces away from the city center. Although some groups had to move from central to more peripheral locations (as happened, for instance, to the Milan Women Bookstore Collective), by looking at the position of women's center in contemporary Milan, it is clear that they are located in fairly central positions or in otherwise homogeneously distributed positions within Milanese territory.

Data analysis and writing up

The accumulation of material such as field notes, audio files and transcripts, flyers, presentation leaflets, publications and studies by organizations, statistics, copied documents and pictures provide a sense of materialization of the work accomplished during fieldwork. The sense of satisfaction that this vision could give is, in Crang's (2003) words, "the lull before the storm," as the mass of material has to be transformed into research findings. To better describe this disenchantment, for instance, it is sufficient to recall that the audio files themselves are not really data until they are transcribed and the systematization of the material only becomes data when is ready to be used and the sense of it is allocated a position in the analysis. Analysis is not simply an issue of developing an idea and writing it up. Rather, it is a kind of critical thinking by writing that tends to reveal the flaws, the contradictions in our ideas, forcing us to look, to analyze in different ways and rethink (Crang, 2003). In other words, writing is a constitutive act, as new meanings are created and systematized while writing and the generative power of writing also has the potential to build theory.

The phase of analyzing and writing up creates levels of abstraction that Raghuram and Madge (2008) summarize as scale, temporality (consisting of genealogy and history) and the ability to move between levels of abstraction holding meaning in different contexts—in other words, generalizability. The challenge of producing good research is identified in finding the subtle balance that is able to provide a contextually rich understanding of historical and spatial formations and can move between levels of abstraction, holding on to the specificity—generalization dimension of research. What I have accomplished in my work is the result of a series of choices about what to include and what to exclude in the final product, choosing elements that were more significant to my particular research framework. As Raghuram and Madge remind us, the series of choices and therefore the process of abstraction is always a social, cultural, political and emotional process (2008:223), and it constitutes the core operation intrinsic to every theorization; it is fundamental to academic work to be aware of the very scope of abstraction. The findings in my research, including histories and genealogies of the women's movement in Milan, are sufficiently contextual and viable for generalizations about urban space appropriations by women and feminist movements in the West.

Conclusions

This paper has dealt with the methodological and epistemological engagements of feminist work. Reflexive practices while conducting fieldwork request that the researcher takes into account her/his active presence and that positionality inevitably

shapes the research outcome. The making of the epistemological approach in most research projects implies a set of methodological choices of what to include and what to exclude, how to craft and modify, tailor, adapt, rework and sometimes make complex decisions as, for instance, in the choice of which data to select as case studies. If reflexivity involves negotiating positions and knowledges between researcher and researched, it is perhaps in writing up that these negotiations become most pressing and most difficult to resolve.

Data are not simply transmitted. They are involved in various layers of interpretation and construction. The research process itself, what one learns while researching, can inform the methods and methodology, as happened in the case of my fieldwork in Milan when the objects of my research influenced, informed and inspired the epistemological approach of the study. In Italian feminism, spatial practices such as separatism and consciousness raising have been a poignant example of the use of the body as a vector of knowledge. The bodily presence of the activists in a collective space made it possible for personal narratives to unfold, and this very material and embodied act assumed a political meaning. In a similar way, during the interview process not just knowledges, but emotions and intellectual engagements were created and performed through the encounter of two individuals bearing elements of sameness and difference which were negotiated differently in each interview. The materiality of these encounters helped mobilize a kind of knowledge which is situated and presents a different range of challenges when working with translations, different temporalities and maps.

In conclusion, by drawing on reflexivity, this article has demonstrated that epistemological approach and object of study are often mutually constitutive; feminist geographies play a central role in showing that research is always an embodied process and the bodily presence of the researcher, her/his subjectivity, identity, emotions and knowledges influence, interact and modify the field of research, helping to discard the notion of “objective research.” Feminist epistemologies such as politics of location, positionality and embodiment represent a way to reappropriate the body as a tool of inquiry and are a central theoretical construct to keep in mind when producing academic work.

Note

- 1 I am grateful to the editors of this volume and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on this piece.

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