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A SPACE OF ONE'S OWN: QUEERING THE MAP, CHALLENGING THE BORDERS: THE PRODUCTION OF SAFE SPACES IN ITALIAN URBAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT:

In this essay, I analyse the development of Italian queer and feminist communities through the production of safe spaces, trying to understand how belonging and togetherness occur in the search of 'a space of one's own'. The dimension of space is taken into account as the environment in which the movements carry out their political activities and as a product of the community in itself. Furthermore, the contested notion of safety is challenging to understand the grassroots responses to violence and exclusion. These topics are crucial in order to understand contemporary sexual democracy and sexual citizenship from a southern perspective, and to shed light on the role new political actors such as queer people and feminists play in shaping cities, social networks and politics.

KEYWORDS: urban spaces, feminist and queer movements, safe spaces, feminist relationships, intersectionality

The search for “a room of one’s own” appears across Western women and queer people’s history, simultaneously as a literary, social and cultural fact.¹ However, this search also has a political meaning. Historically, feminist and queer movements have experienced worldwide the collective need for a space in which to get together, build networks of resistance and care, and also to imagine and produce another —possible— world.² These political spaces are intertwined in the patterns of the city and shape the structure of daily urban life.³

The forthcoming reflections are part of a project aimed at investigating the development of queer and feminist movements in Italian urban areas through the production of safe spaces. Here, I will present the first insights from a pilot study conducted through four in-depth interviews with activists of queer and feminist spaces in Italy. My work arises from several research questions: how does the process of opening and managing a space occurs for queer and feminist communities? What do “safe spaces” mean? Who are “the others” compared to “us”? Which nuances lie in the definition of safety?

These are few of the many questions that guide the research, crossing gender and feminist studies,⁴ sexual geography,⁵ political sociology⁶ and cultural studies.⁷ From an empirical and methodological point of view, I carry out a comparative study on several cities in Italy. In the first part of the study I have conducted four interviews with activists in different Italian cities, tracing the existing landscape of queer and feminist spatial experience.⁸ Afterwards, I will select two cities

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929). In the essay Woolf sets out the women’s need for a figurative and material room in order to emancipate themselves from the male cultural and social domination.

² Nancy Duncan, *Body Space. Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (New York, Routledge, 1996); Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellation. Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2004); David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Mapping Desires: Geographies of Sexualities* (New York, Routledge, 1995).

³ Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellation. Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2004); Rachele Borghi and Antonella Rondinone, *Geografie di Genere* (Milano: Unicopoli, 2009).

⁴ Verta Taylor, ‘Social Movement Continuity: the Women’s Movements in Abeyance’, *American Sociological Review* (1989), 13(3), 193-209; Chandra Mohanty, ‘Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience’, *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, (1995), 68-86; Susan Staggenborg and Verta Taylor, ‘Whatever Happened to The Women’s Movement?’, *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, (2005), Vol. 10 (1).

⁵ David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Mapping Desires: Geographies of Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Nancy Duncan, *Body Space. Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁶ Emanuela Lombardi and Johanna Kantola, *Gender and Political Analysis* (Political Analysis, 2018).

⁷ Gaia Giuliani, *Il Colore della Nazione* (Milano: Le Monnier Università, 2015); Miguel Mellino, *De-Provincializing Italy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁸ Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating, *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Liz Stanley, *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*, (London: Routledge, 1990); Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow ‘Knowledge and Women’s Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research’, *Sociological Inquiry*, (1992), 56(1), 2-29.

and the related spaces in which to conduct a period of participant observation, in order to understand the internal dynamics of coexistence, complicity and contention that shape the space in itself.⁹ The pilot study that I had already carried out was aimed at testing the track of the interview, and especially the use of a visual support, a tourist city map. I asked interviewees to point out spaces of activism, the connections on the map, as well as areas which they avoid or perceive as unsafe or uncomfortable. The main purpose was to visualize counter-maps of the city from the position of activists.

The city is the stage where numerous social processes take place.¹⁰ It is a field of domination, resistance, contention—an environment strongly crossed by lines of gender, sexuality, race, religion, and so on.¹¹ As a field of violence but also potential liberation, it has been singled out by feminist and queer movements over time.¹² Public demonstrations, sit-ins, creative parades, squatted centres: through these forms of protest, unexpected bodies have started changing the city.¹³ Improper bodies, “excessive” sexualities, scandalous practices: even a kiss can become a political fact in the space of the city.¹⁴

Gradually, counter maps of the city emerged, made up of streets and neighbourhoods, of squatted and rented spaces, of intimate spots, redrawing the cartography of the city, and impressing the active involvement and the lives of people usually excluded from the normative patterns of the city.

Nonetheless, the city is a contested field which is still built up of boundaries, sometimes visible, sometimes intangible.¹⁵ Those boundaries define who is allowed to walk, to speak, to exist, and which kind of human being can comfortably inhabit the city. The role of queer and feminist movements in smashing or reproducing those boundaries is still under-researched, especially in

⁹ Michael Burawoy, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson and Kathryn, J. Fox, *Ethnography Unbound. Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); Rossella Ciccio, ‘Qualitative Comparative Analysis as a Tool for Concept Clarification, Typology Building and Contextualized Comparisons in Gender and Feminist Research’, *Gender and Politics* 12 (2016), 2-7; Shulamit Reinahrz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City. New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹¹ Rachele Borghi and Antonella Rondinone, *Geografie di Genere* (Milano: Unicopoli, 2009); Chiara Bellingardi and Federica Castelli, *Città. Politiche dello Spazio Urbano* (Roma: Iaph Italia, 2017); Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, ‘Sex in Public’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24, (1998) 547-566.

¹² Cha Prieur, *Penser les Lieux Queers: Entre Domination, Violence et Bienveillance. Étude à la Lumière des Milieux Parisiens et Montréalais*. (Paris 4, Doctoral Dissertation, 2015); Anna Rita Calabrò and Laura Grasso, *Dal Movimento Femminista al Femminismo Diffuso: Storie e Percorsi a Milano dagli Anni '60 agli Anni '80*, (Milano : FrancoAngeli, 2004).

¹³ Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta femminile, 1974).

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, ‘Sex in Public’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (1998), 547-566.

¹⁵ Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983).

countries such as Italy, where rising right-wing forces and populisms are changing the political landscape.¹⁶

In this article, I will firstly present a general overview of the Italian context, specifically on the Southern characteristics of the country, and the contemporary social and political setting which queer and feminist movements are dealing with. Then, I will focus on two main topics: the role of space as a political and emotional dimension for queer and feminist activists as well as the contested definition of safety. These three puzzling topics will be presented by mixing the existing literature and the first results of the pilot study. The pilot study has been conducted with three activists of queer and feminist spaces, aged twenty-four to forty, coming from Pisa, Vicenza and Rome. All of them have chosen a nickname since the interviews are anonymous. Finally, I will list several concluding remarks and potential prospects for the research to come.

The Italian Case

For a certain period after the explosion of the financial crisis in 2007, international commentators and academics on the European economic situation have been referring to Italy with the acronym PIGS (which also include Portugal, Greece and Spain).¹⁷ This definition, afterwards addressed as racist and violent because of the derogatory and devaluation meaning of the term referred to southern countries,¹⁸ sums up several of the main stereotypes (and undeniable facts) about the Italian case.

First, the PIGS definition deals with the common stereotype associated with the South and especially the Mediterranean area: the laziness, backwardness and cultural, social and economic underdevelopment.¹⁹ Then, this definition addresses the neoliberal setting and the imperative of meritocracy, which Italy seems to fail systematically.²⁰

The institutional and political responses have to a certain extent embraced this image about Italy as common sense. On the one hand, a response has been the neoliberal restriction on austerity and Europeanness.²¹ On the other hand, there is a growing front of populisms and right-

¹⁶ Manuela Caiani, Donatella Della Porta and Claudius Wagemann, *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Roberto Biorcio, *The Rebirth of Populism in Italy and France*, *Telos*, 90, 1991, 43-56.

¹⁷ Beniamino Moro, 'Lessons from the European Economic and Financial Great Crisis: A Survey', *European Journal of Political Economy* 34 (2014), S9-S24.

¹⁸ Konstantin Büchel, 'Do Words Matter? The impact of Communication on the PIIGS' CDS and Bond Yield Spreads During Europe's Sovereign Debt Crisis', *European Journal of Political Economy* 32 (2013), 412-431.

¹⁹ Gaia Giuliani, Afterword: The Mediterranean as a Stage: Borders, Memories, Bodies. *Decolonising the Mediterranean: European Colonial Heritages in North Africa and the Middle East* (2016), 91-103.

²⁰ Cesare Di Feliciano, 'Subjectification in Times of Indebtedness and Neoliberal/Austerity Urbanism', *Antipode*, 48.5 (2016), 1206-1227.

²¹ Emmanuele Pavolini, et al, 'From Austerity to Permanent Strain? The EU and Welfare State Reform in Italy and Spain', *Comparative European Politics* 13.1 (2015), 56-76.

wing parties.²² However, one of the main turns regards the public discourse on migration and security, gradually associated to concerns around terrorism.²³

In the name of security new narratives on the protection of women and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people are built, joining the more general trend concerning homonationalism and homonormativity.²⁴ The consequences have been on the one hand the political use of women's issues (and their protection) against "the invasion" of dangerous "barbarians" from the outside,²⁵ and on the other hand the progressive involvement of LGBT people in the production of the national community and the —white, male, able, Western — citizenship.²⁶ Broadly, this means a racist and xenophobic backlash,²⁷ a persistent problem of homo/lesbo/transphobia,²⁸ and gender-based violence,²⁹ that still affects the area. Italy has often been analysed as a postcolonial country both because of the colonial past—too frequently removed from the collective memory—and because of the Italian historical unification process,³⁰ analysed by some as a process of internal colonization of the South by the North.³¹

²² Manuela Caiani, Donatella Della Porta and Claudius Wagemann, *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Maria Elisabetta Lanzone, 'The "Post-Modern" Populism in Italy: The Case of the Five Star Movement', *The Many Faces of Populism: Current Perspectives*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited (2014), 53-78; Mario Diani, 'Linking Mobilization Frames and Political Opportunities: Insights from Regional Populism in Italy', *American Sociological Review* (1996), 1053-1069.

²³ Cesare Di Feliciano, 'The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism and Austerity in an 'Exceptional Country': Italy', *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14.4 (2015), 1008-1031; Liz Fekete, 'Anti-Muslim Racism and the European Security State', *Race & Class* 46.1 (2004), 3-29.

²⁴ Jasbir K Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017); Duggan Lisa, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

²⁵ Iris Marion Young, 'The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29.1 (2003), 1-25; Christine Delphy, *Separate and Dominate: Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror* (London, Verso Books, 2015); Anna Simone, *Sessismo democratico. L'uso strumentale delle donne nel neoliberalismo* (Milano, Mimesis, 2012).

²⁶ Jasbir K. Puar and Rai Amit, 'Monster, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots', *Social Text* 20.3 (2002), 117-148; Phillip Ayoub and David Paternotte, *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: a Rainbow Europe?* (Berlin: Springer, 2014).

²⁷ Gaia Giuliani, *Il Colore della Nazione* (Milano, Le Monnier Università, 2015).

²⁸ Vittorio Lingiardi, Simona Falanga and Anthony R. D'augelli, 'The Evaluation of Homophobia in an Italian Sample', *Archives of sexual behavior* 34.1 (2005), 81-93; Luca Trappolin, 'Punishing the Bullies, Defending Heteronormativity. An Analysis of the Parliamentary Debate in Italy on Homophobic Violence', *Ragion Pratica* 2 (2015), 423-442; Luca Trappolin, Alessandro Gasparini, and Robert Wintemute, *Confronting Homophobia in Europe: Social and Legal Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

²⁹ Caterina Peroni, 'Gender Violence and Sexism in Italy. Norms, Control and Sexuality', *La Camera Blu. Rivista di Studi di Genere*, (2014) 10; Angela Maria Toffanin, 'Research on Violence Against Women. A Sociological Perspective', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies* 17.1 (2012) 15-30; Cristina Adami, Alberta Basaglia, Franca Bimbi and Vittoria Tola, *Libertà Femminile e Violenza sulle Donne* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2000).

³⁰ Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave and MacMillan, 2012); Miguel Mellino, *De-Provincializing Italy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Robert JC Young, *The Italian Postcolonial* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³¹ Alessia Acquistapace, Elisa A.G. Arfini, Barbara De Vivo, A. Antonia Ferrante & Goffredo Polizzi (2016). *Tempo di Essere Incivili. Una Riflessione Terrona sull'Omonazionalismo in Italia al Tempo dell'Austerità*. In:

Italian people have never been completely “developed”.³² Notably, the underdevelopment of Italy seems to pertain also to women’s conditions, which are still affected by high levels of structural violence (e.g. within families, workplaces and schools).³³ Furthermore, this concerns the condition of LGBT people, who are still marked by homo/lesbo/transphobic attacks and a structural lack of civil rights, only partially settled by the recent approval of the civil rights’ law.

Within this framework, a rising wave of feminist movements have taken place in Italy in the last few years. The renewed wave called *Non Una di Meno* (not one less)—which was formed after the South American example of *Ni Una Menos* that spread globally in 2016—has progressively gained a huge visibility, strength and legitimacy.³⁴ The Italian movement started growing after a woman, Sara di Pietrantonio, was brutally murdered in the periphery of Rome by her boyfriend, in May 2016. The case, just one of the hundred cases of femicide that happen in Italy every year, was the triggering event that prompted the mobilization. The network of different subjects, collectives, and organizations progressively grew, focusing on the role of structural violence experienced by women in different environments —e.g. the family, the workplace or the education and health system.

The radical change led by this movement, compared to traditional Italian feminisms, is an intersectional, queer and anti-racist approach rather than one based on feminism of difference. The subject of feminist politics (in Italy) seems to change. Not only gender, but also sexuality, race, age, dis/abilities, through assemblages and intersections, mark the position of subjects. Those assemblages define a wide range of claims: the contestation of borders for migrant’s rights to move freely, a broader definition of health respecting trans persons’ needs, as well as the right for sex workers to exercise their work with dignity.

Ultimately, the *Non Una di Meno* movement re-centred the role of women and queer, antifascist, antiracist, and intersectional spaces in the political discourse. First, it addresses the issue of public space, occupying streets and squares with demonstrations, assemblies, sit-ins, as a form of political claim on the role of the city for women. Moreover, the movement re-articulated the relevance of spaces managed by women and queer people’s groups, such as women’s shelters, feminist counselling, feminist squats, which became relevant due to the repressive turn against women’s spaces all over Italy (e.g. in Bologna, Rome, Florence, Milan). As reported in, ‘We Have a Plan: Feminist Plan Against Male and Gender Based Violence Against Women’ (a Plan written collectively by thousands of women involved in the movement):

Federico Zappino (a cura di) (2016). *Il Genere. Tra Neoliberalismo e Neofondamentalismo*. Verona: Ombre Corte.

³² Gaia Giuliani, *Il Colore della Nazione* (Milano, Le Monnier Università, 2015).

³³ Giuditta Creazzo, La Costruzione Sociale della Violenza Contro le Donne in Italia. *Studi sulla Questione Criminale*, 3.2 (2008), 15-30.

³⁴ See <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com> for all documents, flyers, posters, and photos of the *Non Una di Meno* movement.

It is necessary to raise our voices all together, opening spaces in which we can start from ourselves, practicing forms of resistance and self-organization; it is necessary to open contexts in which to deconstruct power relationships and asymmetries; places where our anti-authoritarian practices and free from violence sociality models would have priority, where to experiment with new patterns of relationship and care.³⁵

A Space of One's Own

In this section, I will single out the historical role of space for women and queer people, which is especially linked to the dichotomy between private and public space. Subsequently, I will describe how space is framed by feminist and queer activists, beyond that private/public dichotomy. A final remark will be devoted to the aspect of spatiality for the research, through the concept of situated knowledge.

The issue of space has been an inherent part of women's and queer people's genealogies. The well-known split between private and public space has historically relegated women and other non-hegemonic subjects to the private space. This place of emotions, care, reproduction, bodies, desires, sexuality and domestic work stands in opposition to the public space as a male and rational field of action.

While the public sphere has been seen as the sphere of universal reason and transcendence of the disembodied, disinterested Cartesian observer, in fact this model observer can be shown to be implicitly a white, bourgeois able-bodied male, and, in fact (...) a heterosexual male.³⁶

Nonetheless, private spaces and the home are not necessarily places of oppression and dispossession. As black feminist scholars and activists have shown, home can be a site of resistance, especially when the world outside is strongly marked by violence and danger.³⁷ This is particularly relevant in the context of slavery on US plantations. Here, kitchens represented 'safe spaces' in which black men and women gathered at the end of the day to sing, take care of each other, and to find solidarity and support against the violence of slavery. In that sense, they were already political spaces, where black communities experienced the collective resistance and autonomous self-organization against colonial domination as well as gender oppression.

Within this framework, public space is not the only desirable purpose, even though this has been one of the main claims of Western feminisms since the 1970s. Especially for those subjects

³⁵ *Non Una di Meno*, 'Abbiamo Un piano, Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere', 22 novembre 2017 https://nonunadimeno.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf, p. 11:12. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

³⁶ Nancy Duncan, *Body Space. Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 2.

³⁷ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), p. 384; Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott; Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave. Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press at CUN, 1982).

systematically excluded by male, heterosexual, white, able public space, to claim inclusion would mean claiming a neutral, universal, impartial, objective idea of space that could not exist.

Those marked by differences deriving from their sex, skin colour, old age, sexuality, physical incapacities or other variations from the posited 'norm', do not qualify for full participation in the liberal democratic model. The materiality of our bodies is seen to exclude us from participating in an ideal of reason which 'knows no sex', no embodied differences.³⁸

Thus, the search for an emotional, political, cultural, social space materializes not as a public rather than a private one (or vice versa), but as a space of one's own.

The great work to do is the production of a feminist space, where me and my comrades can feel comfortable. A space where I can bring all of myself, in one piece, in that space that I know is safe. For sure it is a space of harsh discussion, but it is also a place where I am seen and recognized by everyone and where I recognize the others. Over there I find again the meaning of my struggle, because sharing some values allows me to go out and enjoy the city, bringing out the energies that I found in the group.³⁹

The borders of these dichotomies blurred, in favour of a nuanced definition of space which is shaped by the need of people rather than by inherent characteristics. Spaces are not clearly divided but are marked by meanings and values of people involved in their production. For this reason, spaces cannot be considered as merely political, institutional or private, but are condensed places of relation and exchange which might change their vocation depending on activities and people.

You should have a basis to get out, because in this city, as many other Italian cities in the North East, there is a conservative and catholic mindset, closer to the Northern League, and new stuff is seen as scary.⁴⁰ Here any different person "xe il foresto" (is considered as the stranger), I should be afraid of him.⁴¹ Things has [sic] always been done in the same way, so it is only fair. How can I work to deliver something different? Even though we are a minority of minorities, we're visible, active, recognizable. People in need contact us when they want to do something, they recognize us as a solution. We are the reference of a practice that is nothing but feminist.⁴²

Butler asks: 'how can we have more viable and liveable lives?'.⁴³ For communities, this also means producing spaces of liveability, outside of and against sexism, violence, and homo/lesbo/transphobia. These are intimate spaces (such as the kitchen tables of black feminisms) to reconvene and rest, and to imagine mutualism and solidarity among each other.

³⁸ Nancy Duncan, *Body Space. Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 2.

³⁹ Interviewee: Virginia, 38, Vicenza. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁴⁰ Regional party, later become national, often accused of having racist, sexist and xenophobic claims.

⁴¹ From the Veneto dialect.

⁴² Interviewee: Virginia, 38, Vicenza. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁴³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

Moreover, these are spaces of politics which challenges male ways of producing spaces and practices, even leftist and radical.

As long as feminist and queer relationships are unexpected, deep, erotic, and marked by biopolitics and strong ways of doing kinship—as many scholars are analysing at length—what emerges from this practice of making kinship is also a different way of making space.⁴⁴

The encounters—when they are real encounters—change you. You put deep personal experiences to the foreground. When a relationship works it transforms you, transforms the other person. There is an exchange made of recognition and conflict that changes your mind. [...] The importance of having a space is to gather, all different, with different paths, but with a common point of arrival [...]. It is that kind of sharing, I am there because I believe that that this is the way that can give me a sense as a woman, a lesbian, a human being. That kind of relationship, of political sharing, is a warm core that gives you the energy to go outside.⁴⁵

Feminist space also changes the embodied experience of activists, their perception and their life trajectories. In the context of contemporary feminist movements in Italy, this means dealing with a wider definition of feminist relationships which are strongly embedded in gender, sexual and ethnic differences. Women and queer people are not one-dimensional individuals, but complex subjects who experience different kind of oppression and liberation.

When I was a kid I could feel the injustices. I wanted to be as boys, to have their privileges. Then I started reading a lot, Virginia Woolf was my polar star, and the path in the university. [...] Then I discovered and claimed on my sexuality, to be a lesbian, a woman, a proletarian—three things that together are pretty challenging. [...] I think that in the last ten years I really changed my way to be a feminist. [...] If I look at the last ten years I've done a spiral path going down in depth, an excavation toward my identity, deconstructing identity for find it again later. I don't think I have finished. [...] I can go beyond the complexity and fragmented nature of my plural identities, plural parts of my personality, that can come together in the intersectional struggle. Otherwise I should only have my collective on gender issues, then a collective on LGBTQI issues, one for the class struggle, one for the polyamory, and one against racism. Instead, we are keeping everything together.⁴⁶

The access to a feminist space changed the relationships among activists and with the outside world. Often, this is linked to vulnerability and troubles connected to the embodied gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religious experience. On the one hand, space holds the possibility of self-liberation, agency, and empowerment. On the other hand, it shows up contradictions inherently embedded in feminist spaces.

When I went back to F. I created for the first time a queer collective with two girls that I have met at a film forum. We were four and we talked a lot, and I remember the relief to talk about feminism, pop culture, those things that one hears while walking down

⁴⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); DWF, *Questo Sesso che Non è un Sesso*, 1 (89), 2011.

⁴⁵ Interviewee: Virginia, 38, Vicenza. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁴⁶ Interviewee: Virginia, 38, Vicenza. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

the street. For the first time, I felt that kinship and was amazing. [...] It was a path, because initially I listen, and then you get ideas and shyly rise up your hand. [...] The acknowledgment that things of my private life have a wider effect, if we want we can call it politics, was a crucial acknowledgment. [...] I hope that this will be the way in which I'll carry out the rest of my life, the solid basis on which to build all the other relationships, personal and political relationships.⁴⁷

However, being involved in a feminist space also means changing the relationship with politics itself. The method, as well as practices and relationship, are constantly questioned and shaped, depending on the needs and limits of the group. Even though social movements usually challenge hierarchies and institutional ways to do politics, they remain places of power and asymmetries. Feminism, as a method, put the power at the core of the reflection, aiming to unveil invisible dynamics that always take place in organized groups. As one interviewee explains:

Everything changed relative to the method of politics. I acknowledge that being involved in our collective changed the way in which I take part in the assembly, the way in which I discuss stuff. That is not to say that everything is idyllic. Even within our collective we spend time to achieve these things, but now there is a different attention to each other, a different receptivity. [...] I didn't know that this was what I missed. Another politics beyond hierarchies of traditional squatted centres. [...] This is the difference of my collective, that even in the worst period have been fresh air because I am aware of what is outside. We are not outside the shitty things, but at least it is a space receptive to different troubles. I know that I can be heard, and this was not the same in my previous political experience.⁴⁸

The space and the embodied experience changes depending on the city in which they are placed. The dimension of the city has a crucial role. Big cities, such as Rome, have numerous neighbourhoods and the life-course of a feminist space depends on the respective neighbourhood. The presence of many different collectives changes the relationship with the city. In a small town, a feminist space might build a relation of proximity with most of the city, even in a negative sense. Usually, being visible as an activist, and especially a queer and feminist activist, means a sort of 'coming out of the closet' because of the material consequences of such choice. But in a positive sense dealing with a small city allows you to experience the direct impact of campaigns on the other inhabitants.

These reflections could be considered as the results of long-term genealogies of spaces imagined and produced by feminist and queer communities. For the suffragettes, for instance, getting a space was necessary to recognize themselves among women and to prepare strategies for the struggles to come, especially those about the right to vote.⁴⁹ In fact, a meaningful place for suffrage movements was the Edith Garrud's gym in London, where she trained the bodyguard unit

⁴⁷ Interviewee: Alessandra, 24, Pisa. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁴⁸ Interviewee: Kinder, 29, Rome. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁴⁹ Sylvia E. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement-An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals*, (London: Read Books Ltd, 2013).

of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in jujutsu self-defence techniques.⁵⁰ Latterly, spaces were crucial to re-think health systems and the relationship women have with their bodies, as the tradition of Italian self-help centres and feminist counselling show.⁵¹ Furthermore, spaces were also important for the trans movement, in order to develop awareness of the personal process of transition, beyond medicalisation and pathologisation.⁵² These are just few of the many examples of a spatial genealogy of very different countries, cultures, movements and cities.

My final remark deals with the position of the author and with research work in general. Spatiality also addresses epistemological issues. Indeed, feminist scholars have problematized the supposed neutrality and objectivity of knowledge both in so-called hard and soft sciences. Those who cannot avoid having a body—in the sense that their body doesn't fit the 'norm'—are inevitably forced to question how their bodies influence the way in which they produce knowledge. This strand of reflections, called situated knowledge or the politics of location, pushes for the acknowledgment of the standpoint from which we are allowed to observe and interpret the world. In fact, we should position ourselves in the space of the city, of academia, of the scope of agency and power that we experience and give back the relevance of spatiality to our research work.

Safety: A Contested Claim

One of the main topics that emerged from the interviews with activists in the Italian context is the claim for a safe space. In this section, I will frame it through a historical overview. Then, I will explain contradictions and critiques of the concept of safe spaces. Finally, I will analyse the different roles of safe spaces for queer and feminist movements that emerged from the interviews, specifically: safe spaces against violence and social threats, safe spaces as repossession of time and space, and safe spaces as community.

Historically, the notion of 'safe space' started spreading in the 1980s in the educational field addressing differences among students which often lead to bullying, harassment, and violence.⁵³ The production of a safe space gave non-white, gay and lesbian, disabled, and women students the possibility to better inhabit high schools and universities by having a collective space in which to feel comfortable and safe.

⁵⁰ Edith Garrud, 'The World We Live In: Self-Defence', *Votes for Women*, 4 (1910), 3-4.

⁵¹ Luciana Percovich, *La Coscienza nel Corpo: Donne, Salute e Medicina negli Anni Settanta*, (Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2005); Anna Rita Calabrò and Laura Grasso, *Dal Movimento Femminista al Femminismo Diffuso: Storie e Percorsi a Milano dagli Anni '60 agli Anni '80*, (Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2004).

⁵² Surya Monro, 'Theorizing Transgender Diversity: Towards a Social Model of Health', *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 15.1, (2000), 33-45.

⁵³ Robert Boost Rom, "'Safe Spaces': Reflections on an Educational Metaphor', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30.4 (1998), 397-408; Martha Brady, 'Creating Safe Spaces and Building Social Assets for Young Women in the Developing World: A New Role for Sports', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33.1/2 (2005), 35-49; Andrew Peters, 'Isolation or Inclusion: Creating Safe Spaces for Lesbian and Gay Youth', *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 84.3 (2003), 331-337.

Progressively, the term has been embedded in political claims of women, lesbian and gay people. In the beginning, claiming a safe space was necessary to face daily materiality of violence and homo/lesbo/transphobia. Two main examples of this process are gay neighbourhoods in San Francisco and New York, where the gay community was able to build up an entire 'city within the city'. Even though they were not free from contradictions, these examples explain the powerful potential of a counter-hegemonic urban planning, but also of counter-cities built from a grassroots perspective.

Contradictorily, especially in North America, the history of LGBT answers to violence is also strictly related to economic and institutional patterns. LGBT communities have to a certain extent had a crucial role in re-arranging a white, neoliberal, exclusionary society.

This is not to suggest that gay identity per se is complicit with urban-centered capitalism accumulation and criminalization [...] but that political goals that call for these forms of state protection must be understood at least in part as expressions of the risk management that is central to those processes.⁵⁴

Yet, what does the search for a safe space mean and why is it often one of the main claims of feminist movements? Several researchers have tried to investigate the issue.⁵⁵ The need for a safe space is linked to the embodied experience of women and queer people. The daily urban life is shaped by heteronormativity and sexism and thus riddled with minor and major episodes of violence and exclusion. Just few examples are catcalling, groping on public transport, harassment and insults, the impossibility to go around with their own partner without risking the own safety: these are experiences of stronger or weaker intensity that daily occur to non-conforming people in the space of the city. A safe space, both as an emotional and material space, allows the experience of a different kind of safety, comfort, strength, togetherness and care. Building a safe space—whether turned into a gay neighbourhood, a feminist squat, a women's house or a feminist counselling centre—means sharing this common element of belonging against sexism and heteronormativity. Safety is an individual perception due to personal feelings of comfort experienced in a space, but it also belongs to internal relationships. Moreover, it is both an emotional state of mind and a practical approach to the managing of the space.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Christina B Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 31.

⁵⁵ Dianne Chisholm. *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Sam Bairstow, "There Isn't Supposed To Be a Speaker Against!" Investigating Tensions of 'Safe Space' and Intra-Group Diversity for Trade Union Lesbian and Gay Organization', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 14.5 (2007), 393-408; Roestone Collective, 'Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualization', *Antipode* 46.5 (2014): 1346-1365.

⁵⁶ Olga Idriss Davis, 'In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy Through Safe Spaces of Resistance', *Western Journal of Communication (includes Communication Reports)*, 63.3 (1999), 364-381. Catherine O. Fox, and Tracy E. Ore, '(Un)Covering Normalized Gender and Race Subjectivities in LGBT Safe Spaces', *Feminist Studies*, 36.3 (2010), 629-649.

However, many scholars have contested the concept of safe space.⁵⁷ There are three main reasons why: first, the concept of safety seems to contain a defensive meaning which obscures agency as an inherent part of oppressive situations. Despite the manifold dangers and threats that affect women's and queer people's lives in the city, these communities are constantly responding with strength and courage by self-organising, conflicting and re-writing a different liveability. For this reason, many prefer the term brave space, as it focuses on the capacity to react in situations of oppression.⁵⁸ Not least, the term brave space refers to the political dimension of the movement, which needs to present itself as a proper actor in the field, an actor capable of struggling and winning. Consequently, space is not only an emotional and individual need, but a collective and political goal to achieve.⁵⁹ Furthermore, these critiques of the concept of safe space are also linked to queer theory and methodology. Queer scholars and activists with the repossession of the insult 'queer' pushed for the empowering affirmation of deviant, pervert, non-conforming embodied experiences and thereby powerfully rejected stigma.⁶⁰ In public spaces, they have created a destabilising presence by playing with the grotesque and fabulous body's impropriety as a provoking tool of politics. Finally, the concept of safe space has had many definitions as the number of spaces that are practicing it. This means a great variance in the meanings of the term, and therefore blurred and problematic outcomes. At times, the concept has been instrumentalised to hide and avoid conflicts and/about internal contradictions of the community. Claims for a safe space have presented unchallengeable facts, even when a discussion on the concept and its purpose would have been necessary.⁶¹

Claiming a safe space means also referring to the problem of violence and the question of who is exposed to it and how. The issue of violence comes with the issue of vulnerability. Exposure to violence and the capacity to react differ among individuals in subaltern positions, as the intersectional approach has shown at length. On this nuanced relation lies another contradiction that affects the claim for safe spaces, as expressed by Hanhardt:

⁵⁷ Cha Prieur, *Penser les Lieux Queers: Entre Domination, Violence et Bienveillance. Étude à la Lumière des Milieux Parisiens et Montréalais*. (Paris 4, Doctoral Dissertation, 2015); Dianne Chisholm, *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Christina B Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 32-33.

⁵⁸ Cha Prieur, *Penser les Lieux Queers: Entre Domination, Violence et Bienveillance. Étude à la Lumière des Milieux Parisiens et Montréalais*. (Paris 4, Doctoral Dissertation, 2015); Brian Arao, & Kristi Clemens (2013). From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces. *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, 135-150.

⁵⁹ Nancy Duncan, *Body Space. Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁶⁰ Teresa De Lauretis, *Queer theory: Lesbian and gay sexualities*, (Indiana University Press, 1991); Elisa AG Arfini, and Christian Lo Iacono, *Canone Inverso: Antologia di Teoria Queer*, (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2012).

⁶¹ Dianne Chisholm. *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City*. (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Cha Prieur, *Penser les Lieux queers: Entre Domination, Violence et Bienveillance. Étude à la Lumière des Milieux Parisiens et Montréalais* (Paris 4, Doctoral Dissertation, 2015).

The issue of recognition is important, though, because the majority of people who are most vulnerable to violence are not held up by policymakers, LGBT organizations, or even queer collectives. [...] In a context of antiviolence organizing, contemporary grassroots organizations continue to try to create alternative system of protection, but they often struggle to understand vulnerability in ways that neither flatten difference nor rely on the impulse toward knowable identity.⁶²

Despite the academic debate around the concept of safe space, spaces and communities are daily practicing their answers to the collective need for a different reality, opposed to the violence and exclusion of the heteronormative world. That is why further research focusing on interviewees' interpretation of the world and their own actions is needed.

If so, what is safety from a queer and feminist point of view? In order to formulate the answer, it is necessary to understand the grassroots production of the discourse around safety, which goes well beyond institutional debates, public opinions, the academic field or policy-making settings. Through the words of the interviewees, it challenges at least three dimensions of the way in which the concept is usually framed: the role and identity of threat and 'enemies'; the role of repossession of time and space; and the role of community.

The main reason why queer and feminist communities have claimed safe spaces is the perceived un-safety of the city and of the social structures that shaped it. But what is actually perceived as threatening and dangerous by women and queer people?

In the neighbourhood, we have done a lot of walks at night, because it seemed that the problem was the lack of security in the streets. The goal of our walks at night, that we built up through public assemblies, was to make clear that violence in the streets is made by guards and in general secrecy.⁶³ Most of the harassments took place without no one intervening. The walks at night used to start at our space and then they went around, passing over the bridge, because one of the solution proposed by the city hall was to install surveillance like it was the solution to harassments, or even closing the bridge, so you close a passage for all the people.⁶⁴ We stopped under the buildings with whistles, we sent these whistles around, and in each one there was a piece of paper saying: 'when you will hear the sound of this whistle take a look outside, don't act like it is nothing, because the first method of intervention to stop violence is that it is visible, that we support each other and that there is not secrecy'.⁶⁵

Despite the narratives that generally attribute the problem of security in urban areas to migrants, homeless people, beggars, activists seem to refer to other kinds of threats. Since generally public discourse, newspapers and politicians addresses certain categories of people as the source of a common perception of un-safety, feminist activists are addressing a wider concept

⁶² Christina B Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 32-33.

⁶³ Colloquial term used to address both military, cops, carabinieri and in general armed forces.

⁶⁴ A contested bridge in a neighbourhood of Rome, site of a lot of harassments and reactions by the local movements.

⁶⁵ Interviewee: Kinder, 29, Rome. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

of safety and comfort, related to the way in which public space is shaped by a number of different actors. Even those actors traditionally considered as protectors of citizens.

For instance, I avoid passing through the city centre after a certain time. There are a lot of pubs frequented by military, all of them are drunk.⁶⁶ It might happen that they harass and shove you. That is why, if I should exactly point out an uncomfortable place, it is the city centre. This is a zone where often brawls and unpleasant situations take place, military harass you shamelessly. As a woman, I consider that situation much more annoying than walking through Campo Marzo,⁶⁷ or the railway men area, or the Sun Village with the working-class districts. Degradation for me are thousands of S.U.V. parked with thousands of militaries,⁶⁸ hanging around in the city centre in the weekend and having annoying parties.⁶⁹

The definition of what an un-safe place in the space of the city is, is more nuanced than that which is presented by the public discourse. Moreover, what affects women and queer people's lives depends on different aspects connected to the city. For instance, the access to the welfare and health system which is linked to issues of abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, and reproduction; the access to spaces intended for supporting women and queer people's lives, such as counselling, women's shelters, hospitals and other services; as well as the presence of organisations that explicitly rally against queer people, such as far-right organisations, pro-life and conservative catholic groups.

For queer and feminist movements facing these threats means building different spaces: the repossession of a space leads to the possibility of a new temporality, and to the production of comfort and safe zones.

When I come back home, there is our collective. We formed it in three, and then it became bigger. It's essential to have that 'home' to get back, otherwise I would feel much lonelier, I would have fewer tools [...]. If I would not have that place to confront myself with [...] from that place starts the political reflection, and then you bring something to the city. Having that beating heart it is like oxygen. It has been formed by few women with different approaches —someone did not even define themselves as a feminist at the beginning. How much do we have seeded, how much have our lives changed? None of us is the same as before. We could do this even here, in the desert of cultural stimuli.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ The interviewee is talking about the situation of Vicenza, a city in the Veneto region, in Northern Italy. This city is well-known for the presence of two extensive military bases, the Ederle firehouse and the Molin firehouse. The social impact of the army camps has been stressed during the interview especially because of the meaning of that but also for the dimension of Vicenza, a small city in which these great agglomerates have strongly changed the environment.

⁶⁷ Campo Marzo is the surrounding area of the main station in Vicenza, usually addressed as an un-safe area due to the massive number of migrants and homeless living there.

⁶⁸ "Degradation" is a term often used in the public discourse about urban areas and is linked to the need for "decorum". The term has been used to justify campaigns against migrants and social deviants within urban areas, against sex workers and writers etc. This perspective is strongly connected to gentrification, and it aims at creating 'nice' cities by excluding not-normal bodies and behaviours, especially from the city centre.

⁶⁹ Interviewee: Virginia, 38, Vicenza. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁷⁰ Interviewee: Virginia, 38, Vicenza. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

Safety means a process more than a static characteristic. It is a conversation, a negotiation, a relational practice. There are no fixed rules. As the interviewees state, safety is contingent and constantly defined by the people involved. It depends on people, situations and spaces.

My collective is a safe space. For me ‘safe’ means that you have had the courage to face certain things, and you constantly call into question certain things. Our current assembly is the result of four years of discussions, of ‘deaths’, of people that aren’t here anymore, of new people. [...] Within a safe space, critiques are constructive and you should have the possibility to speak. Not all the feminist spaces are safe.⁷¹

Moreover, safety is not about individual prevention from risks, or private protection. Safety is about community, a safety of community.⁷² Despite the institutional discourse on security as the protection of property, persons and families, the notion of safety as framed from the grassroots perspective of feminist and queer movements refers to the collective meaning of the word. What prevents threats and violence is the production of community, collective support, solidarity, care, and relationships of trust and reciprocity. If the neoliberal system is based on the notion of competition and self-made men, radical feminist and queer movements are trying to draw a reciprocal approach to needs and problems. As the experience of self-organised women’s shelters shows, a response to gender-based violence is the self-organisation of women for women. Only through the co-production of a community, constantly permeated by complicity, contention, and negotiation can a new notion of safety be built. A notion of safety which follows the individual needs of each woman while at the same time claiming the political meaning of —collective — space of one’s own against violence.

Conclusion

The Italian context is a challenging case for an analysis of the intersection of urbanisation, queer and feminist movements and the production of safe spaces. Even though gender and sexuality have been progressively embedded into institutional narratives of Western democracy — producing the new liberal citizen against the old barbarian “other” — queer and feminist movements are re-drawing different imagery from below. Political spaces, which are not free from contradictions, are compelling units of analysis where the broader social and economic context intersects with collective agency of the movement and individual perceptions and emotions.

The dimensions of space and safety and their emotional and political meaning show the nodes of these intersections. Intersectionality, kinship, feminist relationship, and contention are relational patterns that constantly produce and change the space. Drawing on interviewees’ own words, this contribution aims at challenging conventional meanings of safety, through embodied explications of the concept. Indeed, what is embedded in the notion of ‘safe’ space is a relational and emotional feature, related to the possibility for those traditionally marginalised in the urban

⁷¹ Interviewee: Kinder, 29, Rome. The translation from Italian into English is my own.

⁷² Chiara Bellingardi and Federica Castelli, *Città. Politiche dello Spazio Urbano* (Roma: Iaph Italia, 2017).

environment to find —collectively —new strength and tools for surviving and constantly changing the surrounding spaces and themselves. Moreover, the contribution shades light on a city from below, showing how different and complex cities are composing daily urban life, by grassroots communities which are often hidden in mainstream views of the city.

Working on these trajectories could provide an insightful angle for the research to come, both for understanding and improving the role of feminist and queer communities within the city and for suggesting new viewpoints on urban planning and urban policies, especially referring to non-hegemonic populations such as women, LGBTQI people and other minorities.

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