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## **The ethnographic novel as activist mode of existence: Translating the field with homeless people and beyond**

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The paper argues in favor of creative methodologies as tool for relevant academic praxis. It provides the analysis of a concrete case in which a non-academic text - a composite book made of a participant's introduction, an ethnographic novel, 21 graphic illustrations and a political essay - allowed for a meaningful re-appropriation of a fieldwork with homeless people in Italy. Such re-appropriation is understood and theorized as a research-activist 'mode of existence', namely as a way to use creative methodologies to pursue active and emancipatory engagement with vulnerable groups. The paper analyses this 'mode of existence' as a process made of several 'translations', or orientation toward the same interests, and it clearly shows the role of non-human agencies in their unfolding. Through its more-than-human narrative, the paper provided an innovative contribution to debates on research-activism and a new reflection on how to engage meaningfully with vulnerable groups. The conclusion highlights areas of improvement to further strengthen the activist-research mode of existence presented in the paper.

**Keywords:** Translation, Creative methods, Ethnographic fiction, Homelessness, Mode of existence, Activism

# **The ethnographic novel as activist mode of existence: Translating the field with homeless people and beyond**

Michele Lancione

## **Prologue**

September 2009, Turin, Italy: That afternoon I had an appointment with Antonio, a middle-aged homeless man whom I met a few days earlier in the soup kitchen where I was volunteering. Sitting at a bar in the city centre, stirring our caffè corretto, Antonio was the one to bring up the subject. I still remember his first question very clearly: ‘What do you want to know? What do you want from me?’ Back then, those words sounded like a challenge. Although I replied – giving him an overview of my research intent – I couldn't stop thinking about that question: ‘Che cosa vuoi da me?’ (What do you want from me?). Towards the end of our conversation, Antonio brought up the subject once again. ‘So, what are you going to do with this material?’ This was another challenging question: my work was going to be written in English (since my PhD was based in Durham, UK), to be defended and presented far from the places he knew, the city where he was performing, the institutions with which he dealt. He listened to me attentively, while I tried to offer an overview of the above. When I concluded, he asked if I thought Turin's social services would read my work. I replied that I did not know for sure, but that I wanted to do my best to let them know about my findings.

## **Introduction**

That first conversation with Antonio – who became a friend and an important gatekeeper for me – sowed the seeds of doubt in my mind. Was it enough to do a ‘solid’ piece of research? Was it sufficient to do “my best” to communicate its outcomes to the policy makers in Turin? At the time, I was still unclear about what I had to do. But the more I delved into the field, the more I felt I had to do something: I needed to ‘bring’ my research's outcomes closer to homeless people, policy makers and the general public. That urgent feeling eventually took the form of a book called ‘Il numero 1’, which was published in 2011 by an independent publisher in Turin and distributed

nationwide. Since one of the book's aims was to translate the field research in order to connect it to different audiences, 'Il numero 1' is a composite book. It includes a preface written by a homeless friend, a full-length ethnographic novel, 20 black and white illustrations, and a more academically sound appendix.

Exploring the making and the implications of the book, the aim of this paper is to offer geographers and other scholars using ethnographic methods a theoretical, empirical and critical reflection on the role creative methodologies can play in producing new temporary alliances for social change. The literature already offers examples in this sense, such as the recent collection of Marston and De Leeuw's (2013) and Eshun and Madge's (2012) post-colonial engagement with poetry as a means to explore, discuss and communicate research findings, urban ethnologists experimenting with rhythms and flows to (non)represent the city (Atooh, 2011) or the use of videography and the tools offered by Web 2.0 to make sense of post-revolutionary spaces (Governá & Puttilli, 2016) and social conflict (Sandercock & Attili, 2012). Building on these and other interventions, the novel contribution of this paper can be summarised in three points.

First, the paper focuses specifically on the relationships between long-term ethnographic fieldwork, creative writing and vulnerable groups (a terrain that has been only partially charted in Geography, most notably by Christensen, 2012). Second, it frames these relationships in terms of the engagement and relevance that a researcher may have in her/his chosen field and context, hence, contributing to a long-standing and growing debate on activism and research (The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010) and on the commitments of researchers toward vulnerable groups (Cloke, Cooke, Cursons, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2000). Third, the paper analyses how those alliances are assembled together, and it questions the role of non-human agencies in their making. The aim is to excavate how the peculiar research-activist *mode of existence* that characterises the book unfolded and came to the fore (Latour, 2013). How, in other words, did a particular modality of research dissemination and collaboration such as 'Il numero 1' become actualised? What are the affiliations that one could deem as generative of the short- and long-term implications of the work of the book? What can be learned from this case in order to write and do more progressive and collaborative accounting of life at the margins? The paper confronts these questions, employing the notion of *translation*, which is here understood as the movement aligning particular actants toward the fulfilment of a specific mode-of-existence (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Law, 2008).

In order to ground what follows, it is worth recalling why I felt the urgency to embark on this project. There are two interrelated reasons. The first is that, at the time of my fieldwork, I was faced with a linguistic problem, which could be understood also as a problem of *space*. As Julia Christensen has summarised in her contribution to storytelling and participatory research, there is a ‘significant disconnection between the emotive, personal stories of homelessness that I was collecting’ and ‘more conventional, and often less emotive, approaches to research dissemination’ (Christensen, 2012, p. 232). What Christensen describes is a non-relation: a mismatch that does not allow communication to be expressed and meaning to be (co)constructed. Such disconnection becomes a burden upon the capacity of individuals to cooperate, to work together, to share emotions, to imagine an alternative future and, above all, to share a common space. Through academic language, I wasn’t able to challenge marginalisation, but I was concretely (re)enacting it (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013): people were not able to understand, to join in, to make use of what I was saying and, in the end, a space of encounter was not generated.

Second, I was faced with a *temporal* problem. As Pickerill (2014, p.25) has recently pointed out, vulnerable groups and people working with them ‘often request immediate support, immediate access to research results, and immediate impact’. This is, of course, at odds with the time necessary to do and to disseminate academic research. To put it simply, by the time my second paper on homelessness in Turin came out (Lancione, 2014), one of my research collaborators had already died, while the City administration faced new issues, including the refugee crisis. In short, if I had relied only on that and subsequent publications, I would not have been able to respond to the most immediate needs and expectations of my research collaborators. If many homeless people saw the use of telling a broader story that lasted beyond them – one able to change policies and interventions in the long run – what all of them wanted was to hear their stories told aloud in the here and now.

It is at the intersection of this *space of relations* and *time of immediacy* that the ethics and politics fuelling ‘Il Numero 1’ emerged. Space and time were demanding something, and doing ‘Il numero 1’ was just a way to take that call seriously. What space and time demanded was a twofold *politics of representation* (Lassiter, 2001): one about collaboration, engagement and empowerment, in the short-run, and about a longer-term self-sustaining legacy. *A posteriori*, I can confidently say that the politics fuelling ‘Il numero 1’ were both ‘about servicing and informing powerful groups and making policies work better’ – inasmuch as it was aimed at service providers in Turin – ‘[and] about representing and empowering marginalized people’ (Pain, 2003, p. 651) – inasmuch as it was

aimed at making them part of their own representation. Doing the book was about taking the contingencies of the fieldwork seriously and acting upon (and through) them.

The paper is organised as follows. In the following section, I present the three main tenets – and literatures – around which the argument is built and to which it contributes: activism, non-human agencies and ethno-fictional writing. Then, the paper presents the different translations through which the research-activist mode of existence characterising ‘Il numero 1’ came to the fore. The concluding section highlights three areas of improvement for the experimentation of creative-activist mode of existence with a vulnerable group.

## **Activism, translations and the ethnographic novel**

### ***The active role of research***

The questions underlying the spatio-temporal politics outlined in the introduction are of a research-activist kind. This is not the space to provide a review of the extensive literature that our discipline has produced in the last two decades on this matter (Blomley, 1994; Mason, 2013; Routledge, 1996; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). It is enough to say, following a recent contribution by Derickson and Routledge, that research-activism can be thought of as a political ethos, guiding ideas and practices that are concerned with an ‘attempt to find, generate, and resource potential rather than only provide intellectual critique’ as well as ‘to contribute to practices that are aimed at social transformation rather than merely the production of knowledge or the solving of local problems’ (Derickson & Routledge, 2015, p. 6). There are at least three concerns that ‘Il numero 1’ shares with the research-activist ethos.

The first resides in asking: what do research constituencies gain from our research, and how should we make our findings relevant to them? According to Flyvbjerg, this question should define the role and meaning of social sciences: ‘the purpose of social science is not to develop theory, but to contribute to society’s practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 167; for a review, Lancione, 2013b). Researcher-activists have argued similar points in the case of vulnerable groups (Pickerill, 2014) and around practitioners working with them (Mason et al., 2013). At the

most basic level, ‘giving something back’ to our research constituencies is the easiest response to these concerns, and it is arguably the one that guided the first phases of ‘Il numero 1’. But who decides what that ‘something’ is? Is it still a prerogative of the researcher or a more mutual – and possibly empowering – endeavour (Pain, 2003)?

The second concern is about how to meaningfully engage with our research constituencies. Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Mason, 2015), Solidarity Action Research (SAR) (The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), and also certain expressions of auto-ethnography from ‘below’ (Reed-Danahay, 1997) are all approaches working in this sense, filled both with limits and opportunities (Pain & Francis, 2003). The concern here is about positioning, a point at this project’s core. The kind of positioning advocated by research-activism – and shared in the making of ‘Il numero 1’ – is not only about being reflexive on the position of the research into the field (McDowell, 1992), but about constructing horizontal solidarities and the blurring of hierarchical boundaries between researcher, researched and research (Rose, 1997). The point is not to dismiss the power imbalances but to acknowledge these hierarchical structures and then challenge them through participation, encounter, careful listening and co-production (Butz & Besio, 2009). Here, ‘Il numero 1’ is analysed, both as a practice through which some of these spaces were produced, and also as an artefact potentially able to produce further iteration of these spaces.

Third, as it is the case with any kind of activist endeavour (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010), research-activism is a messy and emotionally demanding activity (Brown & Pickerill, 2009). The concern arising from this point is related to one’s own wellbeing as well as that of others. Brown and Pickerill highlight in this regard the distinction between the space of the self – ‘where we make sense of why we feel certain ways, and where we need to understand internalised oppression, in order to resist aligning with existing oppressive behaviours in society’ (2009, p. 31) – and the interpersonal space, where ‘through activist practices (such as ritual, material vulnerability, and laughter) and experiences of solidarity, the feeling of self grows, and emotional energy is shared’ (2009, p. 32). Finding the balance between these two spaces is hard and demands a particular ethical *oeuvre*, one aimed at cultivating the interpersonal milieu through which the activist struggle can be emotionally sustained. To me, ethnographic writing and, in particular, the ethnographic novel served as a way of enacting that milieu, by means of sharing and presenting, discussing and imagining, crafting and performing. The book became in this sense not only a research-activist exercise but also

a ground for a shared and empowering kind of emotional labour (for a similar conclusion on storytelling, see Christensen, 2012).

These concerns raised by the research-activist literature have deeply affected my reasoning on how to be an engaged academic today, but there is something still largely absent from this literature: namely, an account of the role of non-human agencies in shaping activist endeavour (for a partial exception, see Askins & Mason, 2012; Askins & Pain, 2011). At the risk of oversimplifying, the narrative emerging from many of the works cited above is one that sees the researcher and their collaborators as carriers of all actions: they cooperate, co-produce, share, propose, present, accept, engage and more. But what if our activist endeavours are mediated in ways that are currently unaccounted? What about those agencies that are not human? Do they only allow ‘us’ to cooperate, co-produce and share, or do they portend more? If non-humans have a role in shaping the course of action (Latour, 1996) and the outcome of our political intent and practice (Amin & Thrift, 2013), why don’t we take them more seriously, perhaps taking them into the calculus of our political strategies from the outset?

### *Translating the field*

There are at least two benefits of bringing non-humans fully into the picture of research-activist scholarship. The first is still largely rooted in the classical Science and Technology Study (STS)’s understanding of non-human agencies (Callon, 1986; Law & Callon, 1992). To put it briefly, in recognising those agencies, one will be able to assess not only when and where particular practices and engagements succeed or fail, but also to trace in detail how they do so. The second major benefit of considering non-humans in research-activist scholarship is that in doing so, new ethical demands and political questions could become apparent. For instance, by taking into consideration the small devices, discourses and myriad of agentic powers that populate the ‘homeless city’, one is able to challenge canonical narratives of personal culpability directed at homeless people. As the performative scholarship on homelessness shows, this is because the responsibility for one’s own actions can then be seen as part of a wider network of agentic powers, not as the simple expression of one’s own will (Cloke, May, & Johnsen, 2010; Lancione, 2013a).

The politics here are of ‘cosmos’ (Latour, 2004; Stengers, 2010), namely, of connections among multiple entities that can be understood only in their relations and are politically relevant only in



their relations (Lancione & McFarlane, 2016). Thinking cosmopolitically about activism is then about enlarging the ‘cosmos’ that one currently takes into consideration to include the agencies and ‘modes of existence’ that canonical social theory has neglected for too long. The key is to trace how these modes of existence are assembled and to register what they can bring to the fore, both in terms of their actual capacities and potential (Anderson, Kearnes, McFarlane, & Swanton, 2012). One tool that may be implied in this sense is the notion of *translation*.

According to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), translation stands as a signifier of those human and non-human affiliations that move in the direction of – and are moved because they are fuelled by – a shared ‘interest’ (Callon, 1986; Murdoch, 2006, p. 76). Translation is not a ‘thing’, nor a ‘power’, but ‘processes of negotiation, representation and displacement, which establish relations between actors, entities and places’ (Murdoch, 1998, p. 362). Latour is clear: a translation is ‘neither one actor among many nor a force behind all the actors transported through some of them *but a connection that transports, so to speak, transformations*’ (Latour, 2005, p. 108) (my emphasis). It is worth stressing that the ‘shared interest’ of a translation should not be read from a human-centred perspective. It is not about what ‘I’ wish. Rather, the shared interest is constituted by the alignment of the network or, in other words, by the set of concatenations by which certain things are made to function in a certain way.

The reasons why I refer to the ANT’s declination of translation can be summarised as follows. First, translations are always a matter of human and non-human affiliations. As the analysed case will show, the design of an artistic artefact, the materiality of collaboration, the activation of spaces and propositions all matter in defining the meaning and political capacity of the process itself. Second, the shared interest of translation must not be taken for granted, since that is only how the network aligns temporarily. In this sense, translations must be taken care of *actively*: they require a commitment that, to me, resonates with the research-activist ethos outlined above. Third, invoking translation serves the purpose of avoiding a simple celebration of human capacities in the fulfilment of the ‘interest’. If one is serious about a cosmopolitical take on activism, then the story of ‘Il numero 1’ cannot be narrated only through ‘Michele’ and his abilities in narrative writing. Rather, it is about a wider agentic network that includes ‘Michele’, homeless people and the mechanosphere of Turin and thousands of small mediators co-producing that knowledge (McFarlane, 2011). In the end, talking of translations allows research-activist to reconsider the role of non-humans in their

endeavours, to be committed not only to the ‘cause’ but to the wider agentic power of the network, and to reflexively de-center their role in the mode-of-existence they are temporarily part of.

### *The ethnographic novel*

At the core of the specific form of research-activist mode-of-existence of ‘Il numero 1’ there is an ethnographic novel, a form of fictive writing that could be defined, paraphrasing Geertz (1980), as one of the many ‘blurred genres’ characterising contemporary social science: a mix of literature, poetic sensitivity and thick description through which one re-articulates how she/he writes about research. In short, the ethnographic novel is storytelling constructed around and incorporating both ethnographic evidence and elements of fiction (Crapanzano, 2012; Laterza, 2007).

Ethnographers have always published ‘literary works alongside their ethnographic works’ (Langnes & Frank, 1978, p. 124). From the first alleged ethnographic novel ever written in 1890 – ‘The Delight Makers’, Bandelier’s story of the Keresan Pueblos, to the late Duke University Press’ book by Tobias Hecht, ‘After Life: An Ethnographic Novel’ – the history of the discipline is punctuated by works of this kind (Schmidt, 1984). Although full recognition of this genre is yet to come, today, ethnographic fiction is more accepted as a legitimate way of communicating research outcomes. In a recent contribution, Jacobson and Larsen correctly point out that the post-structuralist turn in anthropology, which shifted the discipline away from more traditional forms of ‘ethnographic realism’, has contributed in this sense (2014). *Cultural Anthropology* has gone as far as saying that ‘[t]hough we’ve separated the fiction from the anthropology, there is no way to easily demarcate where fiction ends and anthropology begins’ (Byler & Iverson, 2012). Indeed, if traditionally the distinction between the two had been based on the objective nature of the ethnographic ‘truth’, today that kind objectivity is largely gone. What is truth? As the same authors spell out: ‘Aren’t things like love, grief, shame, embarrassment and joy “true”? Does the “truth” even matter if it is ultimately useless to the communities that are studied and represented?’ (Byler & Iverson, 2012). .

Having said this, it is important to maintain a distinction between pure ethnography (which is a specific kind of writing) and ethnographic fiction: the latter would not be possible without the former. More importantly, it is pivotal to separate pure fiction from the ethnographic novel. An ethnographic novel is written on the basis of ethnographic research, with the aim to disseminate the findings of that research to a wider audience: it is explicit about where it comes from, and it has a

clear sense of direction. Narayan has proposed four points to help one discern between ethnography and fiction: '(1) disclosure of process, (2) generalization, (3) the uses of subjectivity, and (4) accountability' (1999, p. 135). In the following sections, I will discuss my own ethnographic and collaborative book to argue in favour of a responsible approach to ethnographic fiction, one that takes Narayan's points seriously and is explicit about its spatio-temporal politics of representation.

### **Translations, or, the unfolding of a mode of existence**

I undertook fieldwork with homeless people in Turin in 2009 and 2010 (with incursion in 2011 as well). The fieldwork consisted of spending time with (mostly) Italian homeless men while following their street journeys across the city, in volunteering at two Faith-Based organisations by delivering services to them and in undertaking observation at a drop-in centre managed by the municipality. The aim was to trace how the experience of homelessness was constructed in daily entanglements with city's spaces, services and artefacts (Lancione, 2013a). I started to write fictive accounts of my fieldwork's notes both to make sense of them and to be able to discuss them with some of my homeless friends. As I said in the introduction, these notes emerged in response to their demand for immediate 'outcomes' and 'impact'. From the accumulation of those notes, the idea of the book gradually emerged in mid-2010 and, after lots of work and entanglements, the book was published by Eris Edizioni in June 2011.

The mode-of-existence characterising this endeavour, which I aim to evoke in the remaining parts of the paper, is the enmeshment of two agentic forces: 'my own', as a human being – with my capacities and wishes – and the wider mechanosphere of human and non-humans that the network gradually started to enrol. In the process, my agency was gradually marginalised in order to give room to other actants in the production, assemblage and extended life of the book. The final product is an artefact that, because of the way it has been written and the way it has been presented, carries with it the potential of producing further translations.

### **First translation: From the city to the structure of the book**

A relevant aspect of the first translation that 'gave birth' to 'Il numero 1' was the participatory ethos foregrounding it. Since the very beginning, I shared my narrative notes with the group of

homeless friends with whom I used to spend more time. These included Antonio, Amos, Pancrazio, Paolo and a number of other individuals around which the in-depth ethnography of my PhD thesis was based. Their first reactions to my writing, which were mainly of praise and excitement, filled me with a renewed spirit: I felt, for the first time after months of fieldwork, that I was moving toward a possible answer to Antonio's original challenges. Another response that the feedback generated was a sense of increased expectation in my regard: my homeless friends now knew that I was working on something and, with little provocations here and there, they were always ready to remind me of my 'task' (to 'tell their stories').

The affective charge that this emergent mode-of-existence was bringing to the fore exceeded our human-based interaction. In other words, that interaction took place in different spaces characterised by heterogeneous affective ambiances that mediated the way we ended up doing the book (Anderson, 2009). Sharing notes and chatting with homeless people about the book in the institutionalised setting of the Vincenziani's soup kitchens, while they were queuing for the free distribution of clothes, or waiting to receive counselling, definitely played a role in facilitating the expression of their resentment for certain aspects of the service. The buzzy atmosphere of a small café close to the train station, where I used to chat with Amos; his phone calls always interrupted by all sorts of emergencies and his numerous drafted emails containing chunks of his introductory essay, played a role in defining the patchworked nature of our collaboration. Eleonora's messy desk and her numerous, thick sheets of white paper, criss-crossed by black strokes; my tiny desk in a studio in Turin, where I sat and wrote the whole thing without seeing many friends or people in general; the living room of one of the book's publishers, filled with manuscripts, cigarette butts, red strokes on white paper and a huge cat looking at us at all times... All these things, with their immanent power and affective charge, moulded the way we wrote, assembled, designed and eventually published 'Il numero 1'.

I am not recalling these spaces and atmospheres here to romanticise the process of doing the book but to ground it and make it real. It was indeed through those spaces, because of their specific settings and affective ambiances, that our network and mode-of-existence started to take form and substance. In this regard the city itself, Turin, played a fundamental role in shaping the overall structure of 'Il numero 1'. It is because of the complex entanglement of public institutions (the Municipality of Turin), private ones (mostly Faith-Based Organisation), vulnerable people (such as the homeless), the general public, moving on the plane of a post-industrial and stratified city that a

bare novel wouldn't have been enough to achieve the politics of representation (interest) grounding our mode-of-existence. In stating this, I am not dismissing the rational choice of proceeding with a composite volume; but I am stressing the *mediated* nature of that rationality. That mediation is the process by which Turin entered in the book - through its stories, institutions and entanglements - while we, at the same time, were trying to connect the book back into the city - structuring it in such a way for the plug to be possible. The preface by Amos and the body of the 'ethnographic novel', Eleonora's 20 black and white drawings and the 'appendix' are not, in this sense a purely rational choice that came out of our minds but the elongated spaces of that city and its atmospheres. The city called, demanded and largely imposed to us the composite book that we ended up doing. It comes without saying that we could have ignored that call, but this is precisely the point of thinking through translations: to allow for complexity to room large and not been ignored, controlled or reduced.

### **Second translation(s): Prefigurative devices**

If in the mingling of bodies and the city the first translation, giving rise to the network and the structure of the book, took place, the artifact of the book came to the fore with a second set of translations. These could be defined as 'prefigurative', since they comprise a number of arrangements that were put in place in order to connect the book to its readers in meaningful ways (namely able to activate that space of encounter and time of immediacy orienting the network's interest). Once again, I understand these arrangements as mediated processes, or post-human devices, which encompass at least three areas: how to write, how to illustrate and how to design the book.

### *The device of narrative*

Starting from the book cover, the aim of the novel is to represent the post-human process of becoming a homeless subject (Figure 1). The plot of the novel is therefore centred on a character who, having lost his means of sustenance (family, home, job), gradually becomes home-*less*: the process by which he becomes entangled with the time, spaces and subjects populating the “homeless city”, which include other homeless people but also particular Turin contexts, such as shelters, soup kitchens, the black market, and the train station. Each of these entanglements unfolds on the basis of real-life events drawn from my participant observation data. Laid out in succession, these events show the process experienced by the vast majority of my informants: a shift from one form of normality (householder, worker, parent) to another (nomad, hustler, loner).

The experiences collected through my ethnography demanded, in this sense, specific stylistic choices to be made (the ethnography acted, in this sense, as mediator of those choices). The major aspect in this regard concerned the decision to leave the main character nameless. He speaks and thinks, but his name is never voiced, and nobody ever asks for it. The purpose of this device was to give a sense of ‘collectivity’ in the narrated episodes. These are indeed carved out of many life-experiences but are not specific to anyone in particular: they are part of the normality of homeless men’s lives in contemporary Turin. Another important choice was to reduce dialogues to a minimum and to give ample resonance to inner thoughts and feelings, in order to portray what people told me during many hours of walks and chats, as well as the atmospheres I myself confronted during those walks and chats. In letting these voices come together in the thoughts, and even dreams, of the three main characters, I over-simplified them. However, I believe that these devices allow the book to bring the reader ‘closer’ to the collective experience of becoming a homeless-subject, and thus better evokes the feelings, fears and hopes of these people (Robinson, 2011). Last, since small objects and places had an enormous importance in my understanding of homelessness and in crafting the experiences of the homeless people I encountered, ‘Il numero 1’ contains at-length descriptions of apparently insignificant details – like sidewalks, parks, streets, clothes, urban landscapes and so on. These prefigurative role of these stylistic devices is clear: they aim to render the experience of homelessness in Turin emotionally intelligible to the reader.

The following excerpts are two examples of the these devices. In the first, the hero confronts the issue of not having a formal residence:

*I was alone, it was cold and I had no residence. That's the thing. With the residence I could have stayed a month in the same public dormitory, and I wouldn't have had to wander around with my things from place to place, day after day, hour after hour. I ended up hating the Identity Card too. I was looking at it when I was queuing at the soup kitchen. When I was queuing at the dormitory. When I was queuing at the employment agency. I'd take it out of my paper-stuffed wallet – numbers, holy pictures, and little money – and I'd stared at it. I saw myself in it, but distorted. That face didn't belong to me any more. It was part of a story that I was slowly forgetting. And not only that: it stated that my residence wasn't in that city. My residence wasn't in any fucking place. I wandered. But if you want to sleep comfortably, you can't do that. [...] And then, I'd tuck my ID away, I'd light a cigarette and I'd look around feeling myself, very slowly and gently, slipping away. (p. 41-42)<sup>i</sup>*

This passage offers a glimpse of a major issue that homeless people faced back then in Turin, namely the fact that in order to access the public shelters for more than a night, one had to have a legitimate proof of identity released by the City. More importantly, using the hero's train of thought as the main stylistic device, one is able both to portray the power of that municipal rule in shaping subjects' feelings and emotions, and the role that a small object (an ID card) can have in triggering powerful affective responses. The following passage offers a similar example related to the distribution of clothes by Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) in the city. Once again, through this particular writing style – which mixes thoughts, emotions and the materiality of life at the margins – I try to connect the intimacy of clothing, both to the limits of a particular service provision and the struggles of becoming-homeless. What (hopefully) the reader gains from this is a sense of how the experience of homelessness is constructed in the micropolitics of everyday life:

*I would go to this soup kitchen, eat and then wait for my turn to get the clothes. A couple of shirts. Shoes. Mostly underwear: I had to throw it away once a week because in the dormitories there is no washing machine. One can't imagine how pleasant it is to wear clean underwear till you have longed for it as much as a bed to sleep in and a roof over your head. It's one of the few items of clothing that they gave us new, unlike all the others that were second hand. However, quite often they would give us the underwear without wrap, without package. The reason was that they didn't want us to go and sell it. It's*

*understandable, I thought. But still, it was an insult, a lack of respect. It shattered the last fort that still made us feel men, worthy of slippers. Give me the wrap, let me touch it. I want to feel the plastic under my fingers. I want my hands, not yours, to be the ones that break the soft shell of the new pair of underwear, folded and clean. I want to bury my nose in the cotton, just for a heartbeat, before slipping it on. What divides the man from the beast is not the faculty of reason or free will. It's underwear. The fine line it's all in the slippers, in owning a clean pair. And the more dirty they get – farting, with the help of bad milk, does the trick – the more the line becomes thinner. It becomes a solid barrier, very solid. The next step is starting to bleat, clapping your hands on command and rummaging with dirty nails through a garbage bin. I knew, because I saw, that some people did exactly that. And I was certain, when I spotted them, that their underwear would be nothing but a tattered piece of fabric smeared with the dirt of their own shit. I couldn't bear that sight. I would not resign myself to that destiny. I wanted to kill them, all of them. And to throw, plugging my nose, their underwear to the dogs. At that time my underwear was still sweet, white and soft. Nice. Clean. (p. 47)*

The prefigurative role of narrative writing is also clear in the preface written by Amos. There Amos offers a brief but poignant account of his experience as a homeless man in the city, which resonates with that of the main character of the novel, although using a more immediate, heartfelt tone. For instance, talking about the disconnection between one's own desires and the normative approach adopted by the City's services, he writes:



*The most unsettling thing about this matter is that I've never heard a social worker say C'mon, you're gonna find a job! Or try to go there... or give any other advice of this kind; everyone's single worry was that you'd get in in time for the service, and they gave you guidelines only on how to sign up for a new centre or dormitory... (p. 10)*

The tropes evoked by Amos are both material ('sign up'; 'guidelines') and emotional (the refusal of the social workers), and they speak loudly of the inadequateness of the relationships between service-providers and homeless people, of the lack of meaningful interaction and care. In other words, they speak truth to power in a way that most people having an understanding of homelessness can get. Playing on similar chords, the final essay of the book was addressed to a subset of readers: policymakers and practitioners working in the homeless domain. For this reason, the essay is more scholarly, following a clear analytical path that identifies specific issues within Turin's institutions and policies. The role of this closing chapter is to work as device able to connect the content of the novel to the politics of homelessness at stake and to advance concrete proposition for action.

Figure 1. The book cover

Source: Illustration by Eleonora Mignoli

### ***The device of illustration***

The choice of inserting illustrations in the book was mediated by three concomitant agencies. The first was that of the numerous paintings, drawings and books about illustrations that populated the flat that Eleonora and I were sharing in Turin in late 2010 and 2011, which were acting as a constant reminder of the power of images in conveying meaning and opening lines-of-flight (Berger, 1972). Second, there was the wish of Eleonora to learn more about the story narrated in the book and our idea - as a couple - to share the affective ground of a common project. Third, there was the explicit opportunity, given by the people from Eris Edizioni, who worked with us on the manuscript,

to leave room in the book for a number of evocative drawings: pages were added to the final count, more money was allocated to the project and a new channel of communication was made possible.

Eleonora's illustrations are dense, filled with machinic details, portraying the entanglements of matters, bodies and hopes/fears/dreams that make up the "homeless subject" narrated in the novel. Take, for instance, the illustration in Figure 2. Several homeless people have told me that it perfectly captures the realities of sleeping in abandoned train wagons during the winter: the cold, the solitude, the harshness, the fear, and the dreams of warm beds that turn into nightmares.

Figure 2. Sleeping in the train station

Source: Illustration by Eleonora Mignoli

Eleonora's artwork emerges from her personal engagement with some homeless individuals included in my research but also from her close reading of the ethnographic novel. As she puts it:

It's a peculiar writing, very dry yet precise, full of short sentences, as if told by someone out of breath. In the tight gap between paragraphs I felt that my illustrations could find their place. My desire was to create a sort of counterpoint: where the novel takes you urgently from one word to the other, the illustration creates a saturated space where the mind can rest and wander. At the same time, with the sharp B&W, I wanted to keep the mood of the novel.

A clear example of this visual style is represented by the first illustration of the book, which intersects with the second chapter of the novel, where the hero dwells on memories of his recent past but has yet to be revealed as homeless to the reader. This is how Eleonora interpreted this passage, which leads her to draw the table in Figure 3:

The first illustration shows a balloon hosting on its surface a small microcosm. A hand holding a needle approaches ready to pop it. It's the beginning of the story, where the protagonist falls out of grace. He lives at the top of the balloon, in the house with the

swimming pool on the background of a growing environment, doesn't see the needle approaching nor knows that between them and nothingness there's only a thin layer. But we know that when the balloon pops they will be violently ejected out of that existence and everything will fall around them.

These and other drawings in the book worked as devices able to connect the actuality of things narrated in the story to the potentiality of escape routes, dreams and affectivities that the written word is not able to express in full. Illustrations are, in this sense, key to perform the second translation of the book: in making it more intelligible, alive and real (in a Deleuzian sense, both actual and in potential; Deleuze, 2001).

Figure 3. The beginning of the story

Source: Illustration by Eleonora Mignoli

### ***The device of design***

The design of a book is a quintessential matter for a marketing strategist. But it is also very important from an activist-research point of view, when the aim is to allow the artefact to be able to sustain itself, to meaningfully engage readers, to travel and to perform future translations. In this regard, there are a number of points that I want to briefly highlight concerning 'Il numero 1'. The first regards the size of the book. Since we wanted something easy to bring along, the Publisher proposed a rather small paperback format that could sit in a jacket's pocket. Moreover, and second, this choice was also aligned with the idea of producing a very affordable book (10 euro), printed on recycled paper but, at the same time, of a good quality in its finish. The latter was particularly important, since the appearance of a book already contains in itself the power to communicate trust, to solicit interest and to provoke curiosity.

By mid-2010 I already had a full draft of the manuscript in my hands. Although the draft was still very provisional at the time, I considered distributing it among my homeless friends as it was:

a pile of self-printed stapled sheets. However, I realised that the pile of sheets was lacking a material form and structure that would allow it to speak more prominently and effectively to its potential audience. This is why, in the end, I submitted it to three different publishers. Although I received offers by all of them, I finally accepted only the one by Eris: the only radical publisher among the group, and the only one from Turin<sup>ii</sup>. More than one year passed from the moment I finished the manuscript to when it was published but the outcome was a well-designed artefact, able to stand on its own.

The third and last point concerning the role of design in promoting future translations of the book lies in the choice of its publisher to license it under a Creative Common License. While protecting its authors, this form of licensing is designed to allow anyone to make copies of the book for free, without incurring any form of liability. By enrolling the book into the Creative Common network, we provided it with further capacities to make an impact, especially when it comes to its diffusion among vulnerable and non-financially able groups, such as homeless people.

### **Third translation: Engaging in a mode of existence**

The second set of translations just outlined was of a prefigurative nature. Through the agentic powers expressed by its structure, content, style, illustrative material, craft, open-source policy and price, the book was made freer, more able to perform future translations and, hence, more apt to pursue its short and long-term politics. Arguably, however, writing and publishing the book was only a starting point for the achievement of these ends. A further layer of engagement needed to be brought to the fore, one able to fully ‘activate’ the activist mode of existence of ‘Il numero 1’. Aside from interviews with radio and local newspapers, and the recognition the book received within literary circles<sup>iii</sup>, there are three ways through which the actor-network of the book pursued this task.

The first related to the promotion of the book among the homeless community. After an initial distribution of copies to the people with whom I was close, Amos took responsibility to spread copies of the book among his network of peers. I had already shared excerpts from the text with some members of this network, but for others the book came as a surprise. Between the days in which the distribution took place and the moments when the first comments started to flow, I felt terribly stressed. The fact that the book was out there re-positioned me in unpredictable ways in the eyes of the people with whom I had spent so much time. The agentic power of the book was totally

dissociated from 'Michele': I could not control it, although I had my name on its cover. After a while, feedback started to flow. They were, for the most part, enthusiastic. For example, Antonio told me: 'I like it, I like it a lot. Good on you! Cardù [a character in the book loosely based on him] is indeed smart, he is almost as smart as me. But you know that I am smarter!' Other comments read:

R., reported by Amos: 'R. told me that he read it four times. He knows all the passages by heart! He also said that although you tried to make the ending less sad, he likes it anyway.'

A.: 'I like the book! It seems my life... But do you really think someone is going to read it?'

P.: 'You did it! Bravo! I am going to tell everybody about it because here there are too many things that do not work. The font is too small though... I need to put on my glasses!'

P.: 'Great Michi! The book is cool! I didn't think you could write it like this. I did not like the sex scene though. But all the rest is great, it is true. I want to write mine now!'

Homeless people who read it generally liked the way the book portrays their lives, and they told me that they could see themselves in this or that aspect of the overall narrative. At least one comment, however, wasn't totally positive. Angelica, a homeless woman at the time of my study, told me:

'I like it, I mean, I can see some things of my life in there... But I don't like how it is all so sad in the book. You did not say about the fact that life is beautiful, that there is hope! I am going to write these things in my book now!'

Although the book terminates with a hint of hope, Angelica was right in pointing out the overall pessimist tone of the writing. Both the book and the fieldwork fail to take her experience, and surely that of many others, fully into account<sup>iv</sup>.

This initial engagement with homeless people set the stage for a series of eight public events in Turin co-organised by the editors, Eleonora, Amos, a number of other people and myself. These events included presentations in bookshops, bars and social clubs that took place in July 2011. Each

one of these was structured around my reading out some book passages and some newer texts, Fabrizio, a musician friend, accompanying my readings with selected songs that evoked the themes of the book and Eleonora painting live throughout the performance then dividing the paintings into small pieces that were distributed to the public (as further material afterlife of the tales)<sup>v</sup>. Friends, homeless people, colleagues from the University of Turin and a wide number of people simply interested in live performances attended the events. Although we did not collect systematically document people's responses, their comments were generally very positive. I believe the mix of music, painting, words, alcohol, bodies, chairs, books, colours, hopes and ideas allowed the book to speak to a broader public in effective ways. Indeed, the homeless people who were able to attend the events said they found them powerful and were genuinely gratified by the experience.

The third level of engagement took place with practitioners and policy makers. Since the appendix of the book was targeted at them, the first action was to put it online as a free downloadable document. I then forwarded it to all my contacts, also inviting them to the public presentations, and I mailed copies of the book to them as well. Through the possibilities offered by the web and the sharing and forwarding of original emails and posts, the network of the book expanded its reach. Many young social workers and practitioners working in the homelessness sector in Turin came to the events, showing appreciation and support. 'Scarp de tenis' – the main journal treating homelessness-related issues in Italy, edited by a range of organisations working in the field and written and sold by homeless people themselves – published a piece on the book, exposing its message to a wider group of practitioners (the same happened with the national newspaper *La Repubblica*, which reported on the book).

Although the book itself could not change the politics of homelessness in Turin, it did contribute to a debate around the quality of service provision that was already in place at the time. An example in this sense is the Vincenziani's soup kitchen where I volunteered and undertook observation during the fieldwork. Two nuns in particular were very open to my critical observations and involved me in consultations leading to the partial re-design of their service provision. One of them also came to a public event, criticising me for the use of dirty language in the book, but appreciating it overall. On the municipal side, the book reached policy-makers, thanks to the relationship that I maintained over time with a few of them. Despite his late engagement with the book, M.D. (the director of city services for adults in need) saw it as a tool to set off a discussion with his colleagues. As he wrote to me:

‘I finally read [ . . . ] “Il numero 1”. It is truly impressive how the book manages to capture the reality of the services offered by the City of Turin, and of homeless people, at least according to my experience. I hope to be able to use the Appendix in the reflections I will propose to my colleagues, both in City and in the cooperatives’ (M.D., e-mail communication, May 2012).

### **Conclusions: On ways of improving translations**

With this paper, I argued for the need to write more, better and differently to engage with radical praxis today (Mitchell, 2006), via an analysis of a concrete case in which, at least to a certain extent, a non-academic text has allowed for a meaningful re-appropriation of academic research. In this sense, the paper has shown how researchers using ethnographic methods can utilise creative strategies to pursue goals that sit at the crossroads of research and activism. I also argued that research-activist scholarship should take non-human agencies seriously, since the latter play a foundational role in the way we conceptualise, perceive and perform activist endeavours. To show this, I analysed a collaborative book project called ‘Il numero 1’, understanding it as a mode of existence, namely as a modality of being and acting in the world. That modality consisted of an extensive network of humans and non-humans sharing the same ‘interest’ – which I conceived, in ANT terms, as the peculiar orientation of that network. In the case of ‘Il numero 1’ the network was oriented toward the fulfilment of specific spatio-temporal politics of representation, aimed in the short term to empower homeless people - allowing them to become part of the politics of their representation - and in the long run to tell their story through an opportune, powerful, medium.

As a way of concluding this paper, I want to reflect on three shortcomings of the project. These are taken from the current literature on research-activism and cover also the less satisfying aspects of ‘Il numero 1’. First, in the book, there is a problem of *commitment* with policy makers. ‘Il numero 1’ has been a good exercise for listening and reporting the stories of homeless people and their pleas. However, it entirely failed at listening and reporting the stories and the pleas of service providers. The appendix of the book, although addressed to them, does not take their perspectives into consideration: it tells them what to do and how to do it better, without fully discussing the limits and opportunities of their operations. Paraphrasing Derickson and Routledge, the research underlying the book could have been more resourceful if it had been ‘designed explicitly to ask and answer questions that non-academic collaborators want to know’ (2015, p. 1).

Second, the book suffered from a lack of full *co-production*. Although the book was factually assembled by at least four people – Amos, Eleonora, the people from Eris and myself – plus a number of other actants and actors, and even if notes were shared with homeless people and feedbacks taken seriously into consideration, a more progressive co-production is needed to achieve even more empowering outcomes (Lassiter, 2001). Lawless has spoken in this sense of ‘reciprocal ethnography’, the process through which written text is continuously exchanged and commented upon between the researcher and its collaborator, in order to arrive at a form of deep conjunct writing. Such a process requires an interrogation of the hermeneutic circle of doing fieldwork and writing ethnography. As Lawless puts it:

It is about interrogating oneself on the hermeneutic circle: ‘I have not relinquished my role as interpreter, as thinker, as objective observer. But I have given up the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar’s position as more legitimate because it is the more educated or more credible one’ (Lawless, 1992, p. 312).

Last, and related to the previous point, ‘Il numero 1’ could have benefited from a more explicit participatory approach to its afterword. The problem here is one of *co-action*: although homeless people were invited to the presentation of the book, not enough was done to actively engage them in its presentation and dissemination. The empowering force of the project was, therefore, somehow not fully exerted by a lack of a full co-ordination in production and action, points that need to come at the centre of future translations with vulnerable groups.

Recognizing these shortcomings, the paper shows how translating the fieldwork and working towards a research-activist mode of existence is a complex, tiresome and fragile endeavour. However, it is a necessary one that has the potential to make academic findings available to a broader public and may help scholars to ‘give something back’ to their participants in partial but situated and committed ways. In the case of a vulnerable group, this mode of existence can bring to the fore empowering experiences for research collaborators that may allow them to rethink taken-for-granted notions of what is possible and what is not. At the centre of this mode of existence, there is a cosmopolitical understanding of what it is to be an activist and researcher, one able to encompass standardised narratives of self-capabilities in order to focus on the affective, on passivities and on non-human agencies. In the case of ‘Il numero 1’, it is the attention paid at the agentic power of devices, such as narrative writing, drawings and designing, that made the book able to stand on its own and to endure translations that continue today.



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i All the text taken from ‘Il numero 1’ was translated from Italian by Eleonora Mignoli and revised by myself.

ii Eris Edizioni is an independent publishing house committed to support and produce alternative and radical knowledge, also through the adoption of Creative Commons licensing. It defines itself as being ‘against any gender discrimination, anti-fascist, and against any regimes depriving any human kind from their rights’ (<http://www.erisedizioni.org>).

iii The book has been positively reviewed by “L’Indice dei libri del mese”, arguably the most important literary magazine in Italy at the time. It also got a special recognition at the XXIV edition of the “Italo Calvino” prize, a renowned literary competition for emerging authors.

iv From that criticism on, I then encouraged Angelica to write her own experience of homelessness, which eventually ended up published in a book called *The Other Face of Life* (L'altra faccia della vita).

<sup>v</sup> Video of some of these performances can be seen at the following page:

<http://www.michelelancione.eu/narrativapoesia/video/il-numero-1-performance/>