EXISTING IN/DIFFERENCE: LESBIAN CO-FORMATIONS IN URBAN ENCOUNTERS

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A Marti Gianello Guida,
Che sei statx specchio, da mano a mano

Negli occhi, le code, i riflessi

(non c’è mai un punto
alla fine dei tuoi versi)
IN TRENTO, DA AUDRE A ME

“Sento che è la cosa giusta”
mi sento dirlo
ma non sento la mia voce e
dissento
involontariamente
da ogni parte di me.

“La poesia sarà la tua forza”
ho letto,
ricercato il senso profondo
tra la paura di non sopravvivere
e quella di sorridere

perché l’erotico di Sé è disperso
il modo che ho di dirlo
trema
di quell’esclusione personalizzata
di cui io
donna in forse
sono la ferita

incisa tra obbligati tentative di
femminilità

sorprendentemente
il contesto sembra plaudire
alla distorta immagine
resa e arresa alla richiesta apparenza

e allora sorrido anch’io
provando a “sentire che è la cosa giusta”
a sentirmi in salvo
in quella protettiva e svilente prospettiva
di me
mi guardo attorno
fino a che occhi amici
mi restituiscono il discernimento di me
tra accrocchi di stoffa e colori spenti

finalmente, mi ricordo di respirare

disobbedendo all’imperativo di essere
altro da Sé
per esistere
disobbedire
è concedersi quelle carezze di senso
che a poco a poco
al senso di vita fanno spazio

disobbedire
è meglio che curare
se la cura è un veleno al sapore di vite
che non appartengono

e vivere tal volta
è quello scherzo che ognuno può sperare
di ricevere
o fare

di quelli la cui natura inaspettata
è di fatto la scoperta più attesa

MARTI BAS
FarsiDiVersi, 2018
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1 Source: http://www.polkadotpattern.it/2014/09/i-ringraziamenti-dei-libri-sono-la-mia-parte-preferita/. Translation: I love the acknowledgment page, the most intimate contact with the author, where the author stops being the author and become themselves again.
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Figure 1 - Bicocca magic tunnel, 2019. Picture of the author

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Abstract - English

This work aims at expanding the debate about diversity, difference and urban minorities in Western European cities, looking from a queer and intersectional perspective. This interdisciplinary study explores the meaning of encounter and the spatial dimension of lesbian identifications, a subaltern location in terms of gender and sexuality but dominant from a homonationalist frame. My aim was to explore the everyday relationships with the city from the perspective of lesbians, a largely understudied subject within urban literature outside the U.K. or the U.S.A. The research is based on participant observation that I conducted between 2015 and 2018 in Milan and in Brussels, and 45 interviews: 29 with participants and 16 with key informants. I adopted qualitative methodologies and a grounded approach based on abductive reasoning and constant comparison. The participants were selected on the basis of their sexual orientation and their relationship with the city (being a migrant to the city). I retrace the emergence of lesbian subjectivities in Milan and Brussels as a result of a double exclusion (both within gay and feminist movements). Challenging the majoritarian/minoritarian opposition, the research highlights that differences are reproduced within the definition of the lesbian category itself. In particular, I look at how gender, race, and class weave together and impact the negotiations with the urban space, with lesbian spaces and with the category of ‘lesbian’ itself. The results show that the participants identify, counteridentify, and disidentify with the category of lesbian in many ambiguous ways. Ultimately, the conflicts for accessing certain spaces of comfort (both physical and relational) render intelligible the other lines of privilege: white, gender-conforming, middle-class, etc. These modalities of assimilation, resistance, and disidentification, in fact, are reflected in their spatial experiences of the city through what I call shrinking maps as a result of avoidance and negotiation of both homo- and hetero-
normativities – between being “just a normal client” and looking for safe spaces made of people “with whom I don’t have to explain”. By shrinking maps I mean that the possibilities of encounters are reduced by non-encounters. Reconsidering the centrality of visibility, I show how the participants sometimes move through the spaces as – what I call – present-absences: they are not intelligible through places and relationships’ scripts when they “pass” sometimes as man, sometimes as straight. Places, indeed, are not accessible to everybody: the materiality of difference emerges in the embodied possibilities to choose, or not, among different strategies to access spaces and identifications. Exclusionary practices are reproduced along the lines of class, race and notably nonconforming gender expressions, as in the case of butches and femmes that are perceived as “excessive”. The price is being excluded not only from spaces, but from lesbian existance: you cannot be a “real” lesbian.

To sum up, in this thesis I suggest that “there is no safe space”: lesbian as a co-formation reproduces other exclusions through homonormative transexclusions – in the case of Milan – and reproducing white hegemony, particularly contested in the case of Brussels. Reconsidering the literature on encounter, this study shows that where plurality is not recognized – through imaginaries, practices and performances – the access to identification for certain subjectivities is erased and, along with it, so does the very possibility of encounters. An analysis in terms of co-formations might be helpful in order to recognize power dynamics beyond oppositional discourses, therefore enhancing transidentiarian solidarities and broaden the accessibility to imaginaries, relationships and spaces within the city.

Keywords: encounters, lesbian subjectivities, visibility, disidentifications, whiteness.
Abstract - Italiano

Il presente lavoro si propone di apportare una prospettiva queer ed intersezionale al dibattito sociologico attorno alla diversità, alle differenze e alle minoranze urbane. Partendo da un approccio interdisciplinare, questo studio esplora il significato dell’incontro con la differenza a partire da soggettività lesbiche, un posizionamento subalterno reso dominante all’interno della cornice omonazionalista. L’obiettivo è quello di esplorare la città a partire dalle esperienze quotidiane di un soggetto minoritario, quello lesbico, raramente oggetto di attenzione nella letteratura non anglosassone. Si tratta di uno studio qualitativo interdisciplinare basato su un ragionamento abduttivo e radicato (grounded theory) e costante comparazione. Ho svolto due anni di osservazione etnografica tra il 2015 e il 2018 a Milano, Italia, e Bruxelles, Belgio. Inoltre ho intervistato 45 persone, 29 partecipanti e 16 informatori ed informatrici privilegiate. Le partecipanti sono state selezionate all’orientamento sessuale e rispetto alla loro relazione con la città (essere immigrate in città). I risultati mostrano che le partecipanti si identificano, controidentificano e disidentificano con la categoria di lesbica in maniere diverse e ambivalenti. Infatti, la differenza lesbica produce a sua volta differenze all’interno della stessa categoria. In particolare dall’analisi emerge come genere, classe e razza si intreccino per produrre specifiche negoziazioni con lo spazio urbano, negli spazi lesbici e con la categoria di lesbica stessa. Sono i conflitti per l’accesso a certi spazi, fisici ma anche relazionali, che rendendo visibili le linee di privilegio: bianchezza, conformità di genere, classe media, etc. Queste modalità di assimilazione, resistenza e disidentificazione, infatti, si riflettono nelle esperienze spaziali della città tramite mappe che si restringono (shrinking maps), risultato di evitamenti e
negoziazioni tra etero- e omo- normatività – tra l’essere “un cliente come chiunque altro” e la ricerca di posti “safe”, fatti di persone “con cui non ho bisogno di spiegarmi”. Riconsiderando la centralità della categoria di visibilità, mostro come le partecipanti attraversano talvolta gli spazi come presenze-assenti, non intellegibili attraverso i codici dei luoghi e delle relazioni, venendo percepite ad esempio come uomini, o come etero. Queste tattiche e questi luoghi, tuttavia, non sono accessibili a tutti i corpi nella stessa maniera: la materialità delle esperienze di diversità si manifesta nelle diverse possibilità di accesso a strategie e luoghi di identificazione. Queste presenze-assenze si riproducono lungo linee di classe, di razza, e di espressioni di genere percepite come ostentatorie e esagerate, come nel caso delle butch e delle femme. “Non c’è spazio sicuro”: nate dall’esperienza di una doppia esclusione (dentro il movimento omosessuale e dentro il movimento femminista), le soggettività lesbiche intese come una co-formazione riproduce nuove esclusioni, in particolare con comportamenti omonormativi transescludenti nel contesto di Milano e di riproduzione dell’egemonia bianca, particolarmente contestata a Bruxelles. Alla luce della letteratura sugli encounters, questo studio mostra che dove la pluralità non è riconosciuta – attraverso gli immaginari, le pratiche e le performances – viene cancellata la possibilità di identificazione per alcune soggettività e con essa si elimina anche la possibilità di incontro. Analisi in termini di co-formazioni possono favorire il riconoscimento delle strutture di potere al di là di dicotomici discorsi oppositivi, incoraggiando forme di solidarietà transidentitarie e espandendo l’accessibilità a immaginari, relazioni e spazi dentro la città.

Keywords: Multiculturalismo quotidiano, soggettività lesbiche, disidentificazioni, fragilità bianchezza, visibilità
INTRODUCTION

It was a sunny Sunday morning at the beginning of November, 2015. I was living in Milan for a few months and I had just come back from my first visit to Brussels a few days earlier. It was my second or third attempt at finding a team since I had moved to Milan. I took the metro to go play football with a new team. I hadn’t met any of them before, we just discussed on the phone. As with any first time meeting, I was feeling scared and excited. When I got out of the metro, in a completely unknown part of the city, I suddenly saw two women wave at me. My look of surprise was eloquent and obvious enough to make them explain themselves: “We were waiting for a woman... with a sporting bag... Italian... and easy-going. Someone without high heels and make-up I mean! It was easy to find you” said one of them, smiling. I felt welcomed, and smiled back at them. We won the match that afternoon and I spent time sharing beers with them and the good vibe of victory. I gradually became part of the team.

My lesbodar activated quite easily, recognizing some relationships and conflicts in the group. It was familiar to me, and this helped me feel at home. It was also probably the first time in Italy that I was defined as “Italian”. It took me a while to realize how similar and yet different I was to them and what this difference meant to me, and to them.

This is how my intellectual journey began. Through this experience, I tried to

---

2 Gaydar, gay radar, lesbodar, lesboradar, or radar refer to the supposed capacity to recognize other lesbian, gay or queer people when sharing a space (entering a room, walking in the street, etc.), without talking to them. See for instance: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lesbodar.
explore the meanings of difference in terms of sexuality, gender, and race, starting from a specific location: the everyday experiences of the city of lesbian women having migrated to Brussels or to Milan. Exploring the literature, I became very interested in the geographies of urban encounters, and the ways in which sexuality plays a role in the definition of who is considered marginal in the cities, and to whom.

The common definition of lesbian is a woman attracted sexually or romantically to other women. This definition assume that the core of lesbian difference relies on their sexual preferences. In contrast, I consider sexual difference is built upon and incorporates, first of all, gender and also race, class, political orientation etc. in various ways that are yet underexplored. This definition, moreover, is highly controversial for the unproblematic use of the term ‘woman’. Some understand it as a ‘natural’ biological category – excluding lesbian trans women, for instance – while others talk about gender as a performance (West and Zimmerman 1987) or about its performativity (Butler 2006). Moreover, as pointed out by Black feminism, women are far from being an unitary category; rather “it too has its own specificity constituted within and through historically specific configurations of gender relations” (Brah 1991, 60). Some lesbian scholar asserts that “lesbians are not women” (Wittig, 1992) refusing the gender categorization for its implicit economic and political subordination to men:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically (Wittig, 1992, p. 20. Emphasis in the original).

In contrast, in other feminist pluralist conceptions – like in the case of womanism, by Alice Walker – the category of ‘women’ has been put at
the center of the analysis. In order to overcome these situated differences, some authors prefer to talk about women or female same-sex desire to describe a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999). Lesbian, in this sense, seems configured as a Western construction that situates from the beginning other subjectivities (working class, racialized, disabled, etc. but also bisexual and trans people) at the margins, as Others thus creating “theoretically ‘impossible’ or ‘unviable’ subjects” as Rahman (2010) shows about the experiences of gay Muslims. I am aware of these tensions: “who might identify as a ‘lesbian’ (and what that might mean) depends on political and social circumstances as well as geographical and historical specificities” (Nash 2015, 250). I choose to use the term lesbians for two main reasons. First, I want to bring awareness about these stories and make them more visible and easier to unearth among researchers and activists. Secondly, it is an attempt to resignify the category in an inclusive sense, especially for trans and racialized lesbians and for bisexual and pansexual women.

In order to elaborate on this issue, I find the concept of intersectionality only partially useful, since it lacks the tools to account for the hidden aspect of power relations and their spatial and relational dimensions. Moreover, intersectionality also falls short when we need to understand the interactions between the experience of subordination and domination with the partial position of privilege that comes with being a white middle-class lesbian, for instance. That is why, following Bacchetta (2016), I will use the concept of co-formation, in order to shed light on the interaction and articulation among domination, subordination, and privilege, as they are lived, experienced, and embodied by lesbian women in the urban space.
Moreover, I find that scholarly debates on everyday multiculturalism, superdiversity, and encounters, which investigate how difference is negotiated through situated practices and everyday interactions (Colombo and Semi, 2007), do not take enough into account how sexual difference has been created. My work is aiming at contributing to the enrichment of this theme. I engage in a critical understanding of the construction of and along differences in the lesbian spatial experiences of Brussels and Milan, two Western European cities. The encounters, in this sense, are encounters with difference as well as with similarities, which become spaces of identifications, counteridentifications and disidentifications (Muñoz, 1999). This work explores the im/possibilities of encounters for and among lesbians in Milan and Brussels and the consequences in terms of co-formations of lesbian space-identifications.

A general contextualization of these two cities and ‘herstory’ (how lesbian women emerged in those spaces as a collective subject in the last decades) will help situate the research field. The analysis of the interviews will then deepen the perspective on how and which encounters make identification with oneself and others possible or impossible. Encounters, indeed, also implies absences and invisibilities, which are produced through complex, contradictory and multifaceted dynamics that are highlighted through the analysis. Ultimately, this work aims at expanding the debate about diversity, difference, and everyday multiculturalism in Western European cities, looking at it from the viewpoint of queer and intersectional perspectives.

The thesis consists of eight chapters, divided in four main parts: theoretical contextualization (chapters 1 and 2), methodologies and positionalities
chapter 3), contexts (chapter 4), analysis of the interviews (chapters 5, 6, 7, 8), and conclusions. In the first chapter, dedicated to the theoretical contextualization, I will make clear my starting points within the urban literature. I wrote the second chapter as a toolkit: I describe the key concepts that guided my analysis (intersectionality, co-formations, encounters, dis/identification and visibility) in terms of both literature and research design. The third chapter aims at describing how the research was conducted, putting emphasis on how my positionality plays a major role both as a tool and as a limit for the research. The fourth chapter offers a wide overview of Milan and of Brussels, situating the two cities in their national and historical contexts. The fifth chapter is built on two parts: the first is dedicated to the historical emergence of lesbian subjectivities in the two contexts; the second to the description of the two lesbian scenes. Chapter 6 to 8 are dedicated to the analysis of the interviews, and each of them is divided in three parts. In the sixth chapter the emphasis is put on the individual experience of difference nourished by invisibility and erasures, and the strategies and tactics that the participants use to keep their sense of self together. In the first part I show the conflicts that arise from a minoritized position, that lead to the second part where I discuss the embodiment of lesbians’ counteridentification; the third part show the role that flirts and relationships have in stabilizing lesbian existences. Chapter 7 – “shrinking geographies” – focuses on the encounters and non-encounters within the two cities: First, I look at the efforts and consequences of disidentifying with the victim of street violence and how gendered geographies of fears and homonationalist discourses restrict the possibilities of encounters. Second, I propose the image of a minesweeper as a metaphor to look at how the participants strategically avoid not only material but also symbolic encounters. Third, examining
the consequences for non-encountering with “different” others, I show how collective identifications are reinforced through “bubbles” with a discussion about the role of self-ghettos, separatism and safe spaces. Finally, in chapter 8 – lesbian co-formations – I discuss issues of power, intersectionality and boundaries embedded in the definition of lesbian identities noticeably in terms of gender, race and class.
CONCLUSIONS: EXISTING IN/DIFFERENCE

Homosexuality exists and does not exist, at one and the same time: indeed, its very mode of existence questions again and again the certainty of existence (Hocquenghem, Preciado, and Schérer 2009, 25).

Ghetto: The geographical concentration of social groups. Tends to imply a high degree of involuntary segregation. Usually applied to ethnic minorities but may also refer to older people, gays and lesbians, single parents or those who are mentally ill. See colony, enclave, service-dependent ghetto (Knox and Pinch 2013, 326).  

Knox and Pinch *Urban Social Geography. An introduction* (2013) has been re-edited 6 times since the first edition, in 1982. I found it in my hometown university library back in 2014 while I was preparing the proposal that eventually lead me here. While my initial research had nothing to do with gender and sexuality – nor my little academic career at that point – I was always curious to see what was written ‘about us’. Most of the times I could find very little, often related with faraway U.S.A. gay&lesbian subjects living in some sort of ghetto – or gay heaven – which was a world unknown to me (except for The L Word). It was annoying. Somehow, ethnic minorities literature resonates much more with my way of seeing the world, and there is where I started. Now I

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3 Lesbians appears only in one chapter: “Bodies, sexuality and the city” together with “gender”, “prostitution” and “disability studies”. “Of color” once as in “lesbians of color”. Trans, not even once.

4 The L Word is more than a TV series, it is a trope of lesbian identification, as it has also emerged from the interviews.
see why. As the quote above highlights, the term ghetto is “usually applied to ethnic minorities” but it also includes other marginalized-still-accepted Others: older people, mentally ill subjects and gays&lesbians. Indeed, claiming a “quasi-ethnic” status (Epstein, 1987) has been a central strategy for LGBTQIA+ movements in order to claim rights. More recently however, LGBTQIA+ issues are also framed – both in the literature and in the policies – in terms of cosmopolitan “diversity” (Barberis et al. 2017; Taşan-Kok 2014; Colombo and Semi 2007; Vertovec 2007; Wood and Landry 2008; Ward 2008; Oosterlynck et al. 2016; Brown 2006; Gressgård 2015). Diversity and superdiversity arise from the necessity to recognize the multiplicity of expressions within groups and the complexity of identification, as claimed by intersectional scholars (Davis 1983; Combahee River Collective 1979; Hill Collins 1990; Lorde 1981; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; Y. Taylor, Hines, and Casey 2010; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Crenshaw 1991; K.-Y. Taylor 2017). However, diversity policies are often oriented towards individual recognition of rights within a Western national frame. If diversity approaches highlight the fluidity and complexity of multilayered identities, the individualization of difference does not seem to take the question of power and structural oppression adequately into account. Sara Ahmed (2012), for instance, qualifies the use of diversity as non-performative, in the sense that it claims for a change – in terms of institutional inclusion, for instance – that it prevents to produce (Marten 2016). Dhawan and Castro Varela invite to be “vigilant about the instrumentalization of these progressive tools by hegemonic discourses and structures to sustain the status quo” (Varela 2016, 13). Queer scholars, in particular queer and lesbian geographers have shed light on processes of gaytrification, touristification and commodification of the LGBTQIA+ scene that invite to think about exclusionary processes
beyond the minority/majority dichotomy in its spatial version of queer revolutionary-emancipatory subject-spaces as opposed to oppressive dominant heteronormative straight places (Binnie 2003; Knopp 1995; Valentine 1993; Bell et al. 1994; Bell and Binnie 2004; Oswin 2008; Cohen 1997b; Gamson 1995; Bell and Valentine 1995; Brown 2009; Skeggs et al. 2004; Skeggs 1999; 2003). As a matter of fact, Western cities have been described either as oppressive or emancipatory for gays and lesbians; however, there are limited contribution dedicated to an understanding of the processes that makes these identities relevant in the first place, which bring back Dhawan and Castro Varela’s question: “what difference does difference make?” (2016). The “in/difference” of my title alludes to these debates as an engagement towards the recognition of power dynamics from my situated location (Anthias 2008; Haraway 1988; Rose, 1997).

![Figure 3 - If the dildo points at fighting patriarchy, the fascist looks at the dildo. Torino, 2019.](image)

In this study, I explored lesbians’ socio-spatial experiences of Milan and Brussels. The experience of becoming – aware of being – white described in the third chapter challenged and enriched my data collection and analysis, leading me to choose to live aside most of my field notes and focus on the transcripts instead, adopting a grounded
and abductive approach.

Contrary to many geographic approaches that look at identities through spaces (for example concerning residential segregation patterns, gentrification of certain neighborhoods, commodification of the gay scene) I chose to start from the processes of identifications, counteridentifications and disidentifications (Muñoz 1999) of the participants to explore the ways in which urban encounters shape these identities as collective ones:

The refusal to assume a preconceived notion of the subject is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion (Butler, 1992); rather it is to query the process of its construction and the situated roles we play in this (Bracke and Puig de la Bellacasa 2009, 47).

The first question that led my research was: what difference does lesbian difference make? In other words, is lesbian (still) a relevant category for the actors in two friendly Western European cities? Or, instead, is it doomed to disappear? I was interested in particular in exploring the hypothesis that the recruitment of LGBTQIA+ within femonationalist and homonationalist frameworks might make these identifications obsolete. The research showed that the assimilation of lesbian women to gay identities fail to recognize the specificities of lesbians’ gendered experiences, notably within the space of the city. As a matter of fact, lesbian sexuality is – paradoxically for a “sexual identity” – erased within dominant heterosexual framework of desires, particularly from the public space: there is no such a thing like a lesbian cruising scene, neither in Milan nor in Brussels. Moreover, my interlocutors could not escape their gendered identification while choosing where to go or not to go in the city: while walking on the streets, especially at night, one
“becomes” a woman despite their gender expression or identification. What seems that has partially disappeared from the lesbian category is its political legacy: lesbian means, first and foremost, a *woman* engaged in sexual and/or romantic relationships with other *women*, with all due respect to Wittig (1992).

My second question was how encounters shape lesbians’ identification, counteridentification and disidentification with both homonormative and heteronormative imaginaries. Discourses of securitization and homonationalist fears of an Other racialized (straight man) have been proven to largely impact the ways in which they navigate the city. In efforts to disidentify from the role of the victim, some neighborhoods are avoided – or public manifestations of homoerotic desire are contained in order to avoid problems and to respect “other” cultures. This was especially evident in the case of Brussels, where islamophobia discourses were amplified by the terrorist attack of 2015 and 2016. Moreover, many areas are avoided for other reasons: in Milan, many participants declared to be unconcerned by places and areas that they consider too posh; also, the touristic centre was systematically erased from their mental maps. This also highlights the impact of the class dimension of what I called *shrinking maps*: in fact, avoidance is not always a matter of choice, rather also of possibility to access and maintain a viable position within a space.

I called *shrinking geographies* the result of avoidance and unintelligibility that – as in a minesweeper game – is produced and reproduced through non-encounters rather than encounters. I used the minesweeper as a metaphor to think about the possibilities and impossibilities of encounters as mutually constituted. What can be seen as spatial
concentration – the so called ghettos, or scene – are in fact scattered and often heterogeneous spaces where the participants perceive themselves as “safe” compared to elsewhere. Safe spaces are rarely – if never – lesbian-only, they are not always defined in a geographical sense, nor they are physically marked. A safe space can be a neighborhood or a cinema that once a year hosts a queer movie festival. What matters in these spaces is the possibility for people to be themselves without having to explain, or to justify themselves.

Constrained by negative as well as positive discriminations, the participants highlight the trap of visibility that is embedded in scopic regimes (Pile and Thrift 2005) and the indifference offered or imposed by present-absence: lesbian bodies are inscribed in spaces that do not read them as such. Present-absence can also be a strategy aiming at saving the energy that is required by being constantly perceived as space invaders (Puwar 2004b). Therefore, encounters are limited not only in terms of physical co-existence in a space (Goffman 1972) but also in terms of non-intelligibility of certain bodies within a space. The question of intelligibility shifts the attention from the lesbian bodies to the scripts encoded within spaces and imaginaries: who is readable as such in a space?

My third question concerned the aspects of lesbian identities that are welcomed and those who are left aside in Milan and Brussels. In other words, I was interested in exploring the erasures and impossibilities beyond an outside/inside, revolutionary/oppressed binary. Co-formations (Bacchetta 2009, 2016) became the tool to understand exclusionary processes and power relations along the lines of gender, class and race that are at stake within the category of lesbian itself.
Moreover, thinking in terms of lesbian co-formation allow to look at lesbian identities as a process embedded within its particular context – Milan, Brussels – and at the same time reflecting broader systems of oppression (such as capitalism or homonationalism). As a matter of fact, although present in both cities, what I called the gender border control emerged as more urgent in Milan – where the feminist debates around trans issues are hot-blooded. On the other hand, Brussels’ field was where negotiations and conflicts around “intersectional” lesbian identities were more present, and this is reflected in the participants’ account of racial inclusions and exclusions. The concept of co-formation has been proven useful also to account for dominant-marginal intersections embedded within spaces – the space of the negotiations of femme-butch relationship, of the comforts and discomfort in the lesbian scene, and ultimately, within the city. Indeed, rules are written, embodied in those places, times and bodies, and they create what is visible/readable/possible from every location. In other words, the collective or individual experiences of marginalization can and should be put in relation with how system of domination, oppression and privilege are reproduced within spaces. Certain bodies-experiences, such as racialized ones, are not intelligible through Western codes; similarly, lesbian trans* experiences are removed out of the equation: they represent what I call present-absences or epistemological impossibilities. Present-absences describe the unintelligibility of certain bodies, identities or part of them within certain spaces. It represents an attempt to accounts for misrecognition beyond the dominance of visibility. Present-absences can be the result of exclusions, or epistemological impossibilities, and at the same they can have been used as strategies by the subjects of my research. For Munt (2008) unintelligibility and indecipherability can open to new resignifications:
Being non-intelligible means more potential for new identities to form, in the moment of radical indecipherability, when the subject is turned, s/he is lost from view and undefined [...] thus discursively [be] more open to resignification (Munt 2008, 182).

Being lost from the view creates sorts of “epistemic uncertainties” (Stoler 2010) that can unsettle the dominant social imaginary. Bacchetta’s co-formations helped me in counterintuitively look beyond what is visible; better said, I think that co-formations can be used as a metaphor to explore other senses and sensitivities including touch, smell, hearing, taste, and emotions.

I suggest that there are some benefits in using co-formations as a tool for the analysis. First, as a cis-white researcher, I could see and speak about race and gender avoiding the risk of speaking for others (Alcoff 1991). I don’t know if “as a white woman, [I] will ever understand the experience of living as a racialized woman” (field notes, 2017) but I consider the engagement to see and to speak about privilege from a privileged location as commitment to social justice because it dismantles one of the very pillars of domination which is neutrality, normality, unquestionability: “Naming whiteness and white people in this sense help dislodge the claims of both to rightful dominance” (Frankenberg 1997, 633).

During the research, I “became” white, and this strongly impacted the adjustment of my research design through reflections on positionality and responsibilities in the processes of knowledge production. For this reason, I partially set aside intersectionality – which largely inspired Bacchetta’s co-formations: while intersectionality is a powerful tool to render visible how different systems of oppression interact, it doesn’t focus on the other heads of the hydra, namely domination and privilege,
for its legacies and political history. As I showed, on the contrary, co-formations can be used to make privileged locations explicit and therefore accountable. Decolonizing (my) knowledge is one of the big challenges that I tried to assume while doing this research. It is a matter of theory & praxis and implies to be engaged both in and with theory as well as in the way we (re)produce theories. I questioned my sources, where my bibliography came from, and who was able to speak through my work, thanks to my system of references. I particularly question the production of knowledge in English about a French/Dutch and Italian mainly speaking contexts and how the “North Atlantic abstract universal fiction”, quite dominant in LGBTQIA+ and queer studies, was permeating my work (Michel Rolph Truillot in Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 2). While still writing in English, I decided to keep trace of the original quotes – in a footnote – in order to recognize and make available to the reader other languages. The results show that although spatial proximity with similar people is seek, this is not translated in residential nor commodified clusters within the city. Further research, however, could investigate further the place of home and workplaces in shaping the mobilities and the shrinking maps of the city. Moreover, the research did not consider younger lesbians, which might suggest a shift towards new subjectivities and co-formations, such as queer, that might be interesting to explore in other researches.

To conclude, with my work I hope to stimulate reflections about the reproduction of power dynamics both within and through the research process, challenging oppositional discourses and disclosing “invisible” privileged positions. If the master reveals its tools, wouldn’t be easier to dismantle the master’s house?
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