

Silvia Luraschi, University of Milano/Bicocca (Italy)  
Gaia Del Negro, Canterbury Christ Church University (United Kingdom)  
Laura Formenti, University of Milano/Bicocca (Italy)

## Feminism as a dilemma? Three voices for a dis/orientating conversation<sup>1</sup>

*Eravamo belle senza palestre ossessive  
Eravamo belle senza liftings miliardari  
Eravamo belle senza diete demenziali  
Eravamo belle senza vestiti firmati  
Eravamo belle senza “perché”  
perché alla fine eravamo protese tutte sopra le righe di un mondo orribile  
per tentare di costruire un mondo più bello*

*Eravamo belle e basta* (Marisa Chiodo, digital artist)<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction: are you a feminist? Do you think like one?

In this paper, we share the first results of a triadic ethnographic conversation (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) undertaken in 2017-18. We started by choosing a photo from the catalogue of the exhibition *L'Altro Sguardo: Fotografe Italiane 1965-2015 dalla Collezione Donata Pizzi/ The Other View: Italian Women Photographers 1965-2015 from Donata Pizzi's Collection* (Perna, 2016), that we had previously individually visited. We then used reflexive writing as a research method to share our experiences and thoughts, and to develop a local critical theory of feminism as a dilemma. In order to do this, we exchanged short narrative texts, poems, and pictures. In fact, creative/narrative writing and art are powerful means to reflexivity.

We chose duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), a collective form of autoethnography, because it aims to build knowledge from the researchers' experiences based on a principle of difference that illuminates cultural contexts, besides individual lives. We are different in age and expertise, and yet similar: three white women, Italian, researchers in education from the Milan area. We use biographical and art-based methodologies to make sense of emerging phenomena and to raise awareness of their subjective, relational, and social implications (Formenti, 2016, 2017).

Recently, the revival of feminist ideas and practices, also due to Trump's election and the Weinstein affair, is producing discussions, self-disclosure, political activism, and a possibility to foster awareness of the many forms of oppression that a woman can experience. Do we feel oppressed, as women? This question opened other questions, linked to transformative learning. *Is the experience of feminism conducive to transformation? Of which kind?*

Speaking of 'feminism' is difficult. In workshops, meetings and conversations, we discovered that it may produce annoyance, as if the term served to classify people, instead of problematizing experience. As an example, during a Feminist Hack Experience<sup>3</sup> at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Cinisello Balsamo, in January 2018, many participants – students, teachers, photographers, academics, educators – took a distance from

---

<sup>1</sup> If you would like to cite this paper please contact its first author.

<sup>2</sup> We were beautiful without obsessive gyms/ we were beautiful without billionaire liftings/ we were beautiful without absurd diets/ we were beautiful without designer clothes/ we were beautiful without “because”/ because in the end we were all hunched forward over the lines of a horrible world to try and construct a world more beautiful/ we were just beautiful. (<https://www.storiadidonne.it/>)

<sup>3</sup> Darlene Clover, Kathy Sanford and Nancy Taber guided a workshop on this new method for adult education in museums, aimed at enhancing awareness of gender biases and developing critical thought.

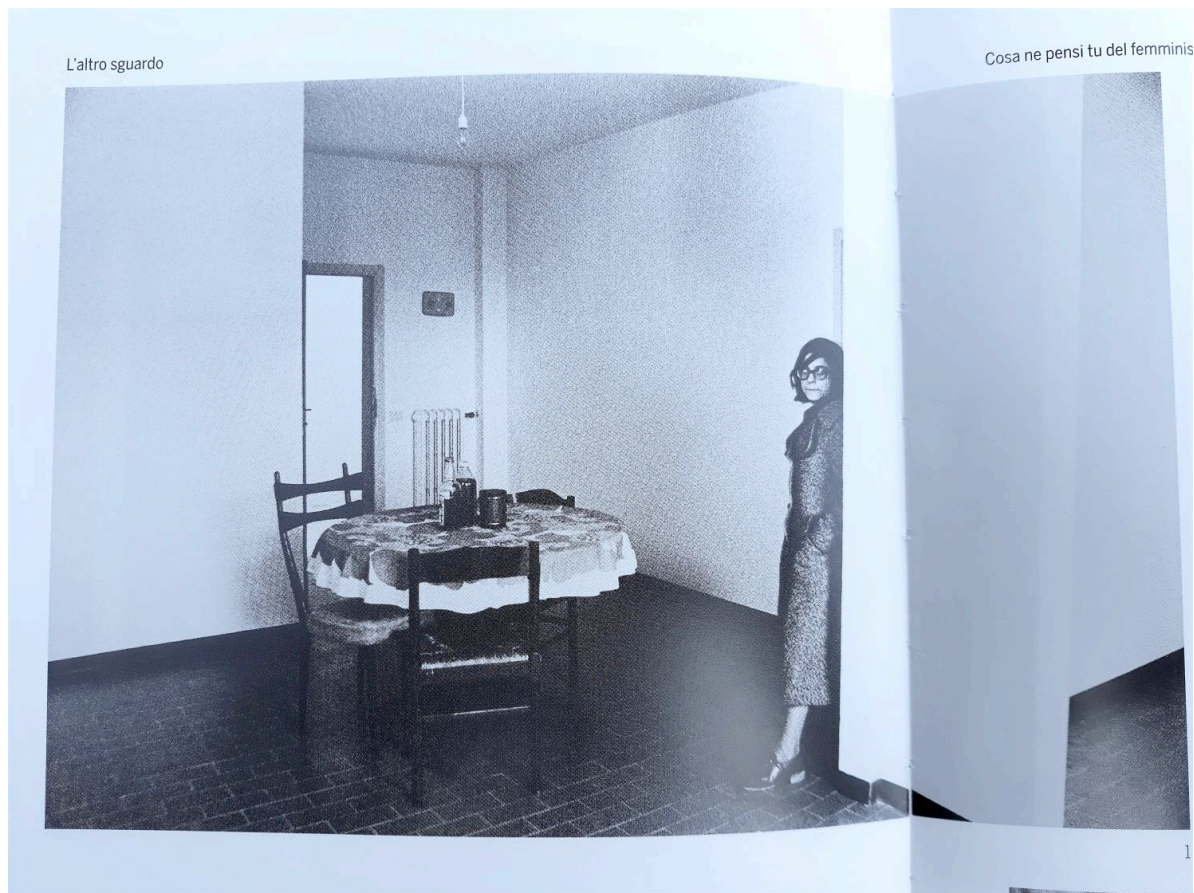
using the word ‘feminist’ to talk about themselves. There is a range of answers when we come to naming and self-categorization: *Are you a feminist? I do not call myself a feminist, but... I am not a feminist! Of course I am!* The verb *to be* seems to create categories and raise walls, ironically in times when identity becomes blurred and liquid, so we are more generally confused about who and what we are. Maybe this is a wrong way to start with.

In our recent conversations on feminism, and in the last year by writing this duoethnography, we became gradually aware that we had not socially constructed ourselves as *feminist*, in some web of affiliation, for example through collective engagement with other women, and self-consciousness activities, as it was the case in the Seventies. The relationship between political and personal is at stake, here. The issue, then, is not self-categorization, but learning: how do you learn about feminism and how do you become one?

This prompts us to explore together our experience and the dilemmas it reveals. Dilemmas are the basis of transformative learning, especially when they disorient us and push us out of the comfort zone – that means when researchers engage emotionally as whole persons.

As feminists have been doing starting from the late Sixties and Seventies (an extraordinary historical moment in Milan), we use our own biographical experience as the ‘site of research’ (Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2012) allowing us to walk a reflexive path of reciprocal unveiling. Collaboration and critical friendship have sustained our mutual interrogation of established roles and identities, ideas and presupposition, indicating that transformation may be nurtured through an intimate and deeply relational process. A tenet, this, of feminist research. We hope that this exploration will bring more awareness of what is at stake, theoretically and practically, when we bridge feminist ideas and methods with transformative learning.

Our dialogue starts, as said, with a photograph from the exhibition (Perna, 2016). Each of us chose one, and used it to explore her life and raise one or more dilemmas.



### **Laura: my photograph, my dilemma(s)**

I chose a photo by Liliana Barchiesi<sup>4</sup>: *In the occupied house at Famagosta Street, Milan, 1974* (Perna, 2016, p. 90). The image struck me for the contrasts between the squared, white, bare room and the round, clothed, colored table (I imagine it orange and green, the photo is B/W) at the center of it. Cold and warm. White and black. Basic. An occupied house, probably just finished. It worked like that, in the Seventies: working class families organized together with students, women, migrants from the South to claim their right to housing. Bare spaces, still smelling the new paint, became lively with people, children, and the smell of food: onion and garlic, tomato and frying oil, the smells of migration in those years. An illegal act, justified by need. I always feel a privileged person, when I think that millions of people do not have a roof over their heads.

The image tells to me a story of poverty and hospitality: in the middle of the table, there are beverages. For whom? There is a host: soda and alcohol are expensive, not for daily use in a proletarian family, I guess. A group of people is maybe going to meet around this table, to share ideas about actions to be taken. The space will maybe fill soon with activists, maybe they are behind the camera. Or maybe not: there are three chairs, this might only be the freshly occupied home of a couple, and next to the camera there could be a woman, a young Sicilian or Neapolitan, or from Veneto, who just came to Milano hoping for a good life.

---

<sup>4</sup> Born, living and working in Milano, Barchiesi has been an activist and independent photojournalist since the early Seventies. With her work, she chronicled the changing world of women: street protests for divorce and against illegal abortion, workers unions and women groups, the role of women in the family the need of housing. Her research goes on, fighting gender stereotypes, not least of migrant women, through photography and films (Perna, 2016, p. 182). See <https://www.storiadidonne.it/>

Anyway, there is someone who cares: someone who put a cloth and welcoming bottles on this table. Why do I think that this gesture came from a woman?

Another contrast is represented by the woman in the picture. Who is she? She does not look like a squatter. She wears fashionable but severe clothes and shoes. She looks in the camera. Is this a self-portrait of the photographer?<sup>5</sup> I do not know, but I feel a connection with her. She says to me: 'Do you see? I show you this because it is important, I want you to know and reflect on what it means. I am in the picture because I cannot claim a neutral presence. I am involved in it'. Occupiers were not, and are not, loved in the society of private property and privileges. A newspaper of those years, *Lotta Continua*, told about the Communist Party and Workers' Unions being against these occupations. They were not able to control these 'anarchists'. Occupiers are normally treated as delinquent, arrested, fined, put in jails. Or tolerated, if they do not disturb, and until the property does not complain. In the Seventies, they were politically organized: they made their voices heard in the streets, they took space. By collaborating with each other, they invented a new way of doing politics, as 'unexpected subjects' (Lonzi, 1970). And feminists played a pivotal role in disrupting previous games and inventing new ones.

My dilemmas are all in these contrasts: I feel disconnected from my family origins. I did not participate to the difficult beginnings of my parents. My father decided to become a photographer when I was four, so he left his work and became a self-directed worker. He had no class awareness or strong belonging. I wonder if he ever belonged to any union. I have no class awareness, myself. I do not feel as a daughter of working class parents. I did not participate to the social struggles of the Seventies (I was thirteen when the photograph was taken). I profited, however, of those struggles, as a citizen and a woman, in terms of voice, awareness, and agency. But my feeling is that knowledge had a role in this: I learned, I was lucky, maybe clever, I am a witness, like the woman in the photo. Inside the picture, and yet separated from *the real thing*.

The ones who are struggling (still and more now than ever) are crushed by the system. They do not have my privileges. Be they women, or migrants, or undereducated people. I am very ambivalent towards feminism: the ones who claim *to be* feminists, do not necessarily behave or think like one. And too often they are, ironically, the ones who do not need it. I vaguely feel that I do not deserve *to be* a feminist.

---

<sup>5</sup> She is not. I know now, since I saw a photograph of Liliana Barchiesi in her website.



**Silvia: One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman**

I chose a photo by Agnese De Donato<sup>6</sup>: *One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*, 1970 (Perna, 2016, p. 94). The image presents the battle for divorce in Italy and the opposition from the catholic world<sup>7</sup>. The photo's title is a quote from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949): by calling women the second sex, de Beauvoir means that man is considered to be the standard, so women are defined in relation to men. The quote calls attention to a difference between nature and culture, sex and gender, being and becoming. The way women are thought of – as naturally endowed of some features, and consequently treated in society, affects their becoming, they are taught to be in certain ways. The image shows a contrast between two women: one dressed in white (as a bride, if unconventional?) in the background, the other dressed in black (not wearing a bra and partially showing her breast) in the foreground, with a raised fist. The latter represents the feminist movement, that was fighting

---

<sup>6</sup> Agnese De Donato was a journalist and photographer, born in Bari («when, not even under threat I will tell you»), who lived, worked and died (2017) in Rome. She took part in the creation of the feminist magazine Effe (1973), working as an editor and cover designer, and picturing the struggles of the feminist movement.

<sup>7</sup> In strongly catholic Italy, the right to divorce was a major social and political issues of late 1960s and early 1970s. The law was first proposed in 1965 by the socialist deputy Loris Fortuna; in 1969 a parliamentary coalition defeated the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and Italian Social Movement (MSI) by 325 to 283 votes to allow the State, rather than the Church alone, to authorize the dissolution of marriage.

in those years to build new ways of living and create spaces of freedom and independence from men (especially father and/or husband).

In the Italian society, young women were under pressure from family and friends to get married as soon as they could: before 1970, a woman in her late twenties or thirties who was unmarried, was taught to see it as a deep personal failure. In the Seventies, feminist groups, made of women, and men who supported their cause, challenged this culture and took an active role to sustain a law for divorce (in 1970, followed in 1974 by a successful national referendum, when the parties from the right tried to cancel it). Separation and divorce have been constantly growing since then, in Italy: while in 1995 there were 158 separations and 80 divorces every 1,000 marriages, in 2010 they were 307 and 182, respectively.

Women's freedom and power have changed, but patriarchal rules have not, including stereotypical binaries (Women's Bookstore, 1987/2017; 1990), still present in society and also in the mainstream of education.

My dilemmas emerge from the patriarchal game of “command and obey”, enforcing a social norm that women must “behave decently”, and “cover themselves sufficiently”, hiding their (sinful) bodies – to other people and not to “provoke” men. The photo is important for me because it brings back to memories of my personal experience: I divorced five years ago; this change of status transformed the way I see myself in society. I was a wife far from feminism and now I am becoming a feminist because *being or acting like a girl* is still used as an insult, equated with weakness, and something to be ashamed of. I also chose this photo because a common question asked to a sexually assaulted woman is “*What were you wearing?*”<sup>8</sup>.



<sup>8</sup> *What were you wearing*: Survivor Art Installation originated at the University of Arkansas in 2013. Created by Jen Brockman and Dr. Mary Wyandt-Hiebert, the project was inspired by Dr. Mary Simmerling's poem, *What I Was Wearing* (<https://sapec.ku.edu/what-were-you-wearing>).

In March 2018, I visited the art exhibit “*Com’eri vestita?*”<sup>9</sup> in Milan. Walking through the gallery, I got a glimpse of the horrors lived by those who were assaulted, written in their own words. “*I was wearing my pajamas. I just wanted to sleep and maybe have beautiful dreams...*” a note said next to a corresponding outfit. The design of the exhibit was simple, but that added to its impact. The clothing on display is just normal, as simple as pajamas, t-shirts or jeans. Women’s pain is emphasized by implication that they could have avoided attack if they had made different wardrobe choices: “*My girlfriend asked me: maybe you provoked him!?*”. The exhibit also challenges the stereotype of attackers as anonymous strangers. The women whose stories were displayed were victimized by friends, significant others, and family members. I was struck by the ordinariness of this exhibition. Just normal.



### **Gaia: The women’s house**

I chose a photograph by Gabriella Mercadini<sup>10</sup>, *The women’s house*, in *Governo Vecchio Street. Editorial staff “Woman Daily”*, Rome 1979 (Perna, 2016, p. 89). In the picture, a group of twelve women sit in a semicircle among and on top of piles of newspapers. They are of different ages and three older women are standing. They wear flowery skirts and dresses,

---

<sup>9</sup> *Com’eri vestita? Rispondono le sopravvissute alla violenza sessuale*, Milano Casa dei Diritti - 13-21 March 2018; Mudec - 13-14 May 2018. (<http://www.alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2018/05/03/comeri-vestita-i-vestiti-delle-vittime-di-violenza-in-mostra-a-milano/>)

<sup>10</sup> An activist photojournalist, Mercadini began to work as a freelancer in 1968, documenting workers’ and students’ movements and women activism. She developed a parallel research on art and museums, as with the project *L’art et/est celui qui le regarde*. She continued working until the end, bearing witness to marginalization in ghetto camps, and the factory workers’ and immigrant women’s struggles. She died in Rome in 2012 (Perna, 2016, p. 196).

apart from one who wears trousers. Several smiles at the camera, one laughs. The photo seems to have interrupted an editorial meeting. It struck me for the relaxed informal atmosphere, transgressing my imagination of how editorial work is conducted<sup>11</sup>. There are no desks and the women are sitting naturally on the product of their work. *Quotidiano Donna* (Woman Daily) was first published in Rome on 6 May 1978 as a politically autonomous supplement of the Workers' Daily, to become self-managed from December 1978 (Marcodoppido, 2013; Salvati, 2012).

The location is significant. We are in Palazzo Nardini, occupied in 1976 by *Mld Movimento di liberazione della donna* (Movement for the liberation of the woman) that became a symbol of Roman feminism.<sup>12</sup> The publication was direct expression of the women collectives and made a claim in favour of anti-authoritarian communication. The picture, however, shows some form of hierarchy, or at least leadership: the group looks up to the woman on the left. Who is she? What kind of leadership does she exert? My fantasy is that she leads with care, telling stories, sharing her knowledge, asking questions, waiting, encouraging, listening to the other women, and to herself.

My dilemmas regard the relationship to knowledge, and “women ways of knowing” that connect knowledge with the personal life, body and emotion, which are often silenced and severed from rational thinking (Belenky et al., 1986). In Italy the term ‘emotional’ is used to indicate weakness, often in women. Academic arguments are rational – and, as the word reveals, associated to prevarication. Italian feminism started in the 1970s as a spin off of the organised Left movements, because women invented alternative forms of organisation based on self-consciousness groups. They met regularly to exchange stories, and thus learn about their exclusion and oppression and support one another to challenge the social order. Ideas were circulated among these groups horizontally, “regardless of national directorates or personal leaderships” (Cavarero & Restaino, 2002, p. 69) – although theoretical leaders did emerge, like Adriana Cavarero in Padua and Luisa Muraro in Milan. Anti-authoritarianism does not mean there are no differences; the question, how is power exercised?

Italian feminism chose to keep afar from academic circles and remained rooted in the practice of women collectives. In the years that lead to legislation on divorce (1970, 1974) and on legalised and assisted abortion (1978), women learned to speak in the first person, and re-signified their relationship with culture, founding bookshops, magazines, and documentation centres about women history – so called her-story – and produced new perspectives in the arts.

However, this was not possible for all women. Many were hindered from participation to these experiments, aimed to transforming the social space and cultural world, due to their class belonging, low education, status of migrant, etc. as well as to physical and psychological constraints, or even violence (Solnit, 2014). The movement also reproduced exclusion. According to bell hooks (2000), successful middle class white women created enclaves for themselves in the gender studies departments of many universities, leaving out other women.

The photo to me represents my dream of sitting on the floor – embodying thinking, like in dancing, walking, swimming etc. –, wearing gowns – beautiful, colourful, handmade? –, and discussing and writing with other women. I have never felt able to find my own voice with others. Aged 33, I am now coming to feminism after having tried to be a successful student

---

<sup>11</sup> During a visit to publisher Mondadori's headquarters in Milan for an interview, I got an impression of a much more traditional and stiff atmosphere.

<sup>12</sup> House to the Cardinal Nardini in 1400, then women's house, the building was abandoned and at the time of writing is being sold by Regione Lazio to become a resort. So much of the public good. [[http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/01/08/news/roma\\_palazzo\\_nardini\\_pronta\\_la\\_vendita\\_da\\_casa\\_de\\_lle\\_donne\\_a\\_resort\\_di\\_lusso-186048359/?refresh\\_ce](http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/01/08/news/roma_palazzo_nardini_pronta_la_vendita_da_casa_de_lle_donne_a_resort_di_lusso-186048359/?refresh_ce), retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2018].



first, and academic later. In my youth, despite my parents being lefties, feminism was not talked about; I went to university and was expected to find a good job. In pursuing an education, I left my working class migrant family behind me. Culture is my burning question. Writers, journalists, historians, etc. are for the majority men, women are told they don't know (Solnit, 2014), and often tell this to each other! Why does this still happen? How is it that after the movements of the 1970s many women (and men) still buy into narrow views of 'career'? What made *me* look up to those in power, often men, and abstract myself from my class and gender? How can I learn to relate to knowing without feeling inadequate and oppressing others? I am interested in feminism because I want to learn not to reproduce fear, fragmentation, competition, and abuse.

### **Laura: the personal is political, and viceversa**

It is so refreshing for me, to see your choices, read your stories, and become aware of so many issues! We took different angles; it seems to me that images are really powerful in revealing our different perspectives. I see the two of you in your writing. And I see more clearer now the influence of those women, artists, activists, and academics who taught to all of us that personal experience and reflexivity can be used as a leverage, to make the world more meaningful and beautiful (by the way, have you read the poem at the beginning of the paper?). This brought me to revise our research question as follows: do you *think* like a feminist? And what does it mean? Paraphrasing Mezirow's famous chapter "thinking like an adult", it seems to me that a different way to knowing was initiated by those women. A transformative way, sure, but beyond the vulgata of transformative learning. In fact, it entails (I am summarizing what we have shared up to now):

- Different unexpected subjects (working class citizens and families, students, women, migrants...) organizing together to claim their rights;
- Togetherness, care, hospitality
- Sharing ideas and plans
- A straight, direct sight (I am in): no neutrality
- Disrupting previous games (criticality)
- The researcher's self-positioning (as a woman, an academic, a privileged person, etc.)
- Biographic roots: remembering and forgetting
- Class awareness (Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, ecc. – all men!) and gender awareness
- Voice, awareness, agency
- Senses and the body (the smell of food in Laura's text, sitting on the floor, etc.)
- Witnessing
- Thinking and acting like a feminist
- Learning (last but not least)

I asked to myself: is feminism – and the dilemmas we found in our grasp of it – transformative? How? For many years, my idea of feminism was intellectual and academic. But now, when I go back to read the chronicles of the Seventies, and look at the images (give a look to Barchiesi's website), and read your stories, I am impressed by all the joy, conflict, informality, creativity, the power of a free body, and public expression of emotions and relationships. I was too serious for many years! I guess that I was scared by the messiness that comes when life bursts in. Now, what attracts me more is precisely this messiness. In many senses: for example, I see in the photo you choose, Gaia, the beautiful disorder of bodies informally occupying spaces, sitting on the floor, or behaving in unexpected ways. The relationship with knowing does not need to be stiff and authoritarian.

And, in Silvia's choice, the natural form of a breast, following gravity and (for me) aging (in the Seventies, it was burning bras and refusing body containment, as ruled by a masculine idea of "statuesque perfection", but now it is plastic surgery what rules!). Or: the contrast of a Madonna image of woman (but she is a contrast herself, with that chaste white outfit, flirty look and iconoclastic posture – open legs! That was not allowed to good girls in the Seventies – this could open way to other stories) and the fighter: how are these images composed within each of us, like archetypal symbols? I am a warrior, a healer, a mother, and a lover. And much more. But even now, at my age, with my position in the academic world, I feel sometimes belittled and not allowed to talk back to power.

Having voice is something that you do not achieve alone. It is a kind of learning where a group makes the difference. What do you think?

### **Silvia: body learning and wisdom in education**

*"If your learning is arranged in all your two hundred and forty-eight limbs, then it is secure. If not, it is not secure."* (Talmud, Tractate Eruvin)

My Catholic upbringing has given to me a sensitive edge for searching spirituality in everyday life and, at the same time, implicit adhesion to oppressive patriarchal values. Challenges to the dominant "heteropatriarchy" (Connell, 2013) come from a variety of groups with an agenda in post-colonial studies and this paper is not the right place to open that conversation, but it is worth to know, because it brings arguments in favor of epistemological pluralism. Back to my embodied experience, during adolescent years I disciplined myself to read the Bible alone everyday so I noticed that God is often associated with wisdom (Boyce-Tillman, 2007). What is wisdom, from a feminist and spiritual perspective? As Perdue explains (2007, p. 30), Woman Wisdom is often associated with God, personified and eventually hypostasized.

Fraser (2018, p. 52) quotes some ancient writings where the Woman has the role of creating the cosmos. This probably comes from the power of giving birth, but it could be far more than that. Where is wisdom in women's bodies? In the capacity to give birth? And why not men? They also have a body: is there wisdom too?

So, our body bears tremendous wisdom, but in formal education people are educated to ignore it (Tisdell, 2003)! In the systemic paradigm, wisdom is connected to grace and to the ability to think in stories and perceive the pattern which connects (Bateson & Bateson, 1987). The literature on wisdom in Adult Education has opened, in recent years, new ideas on the role of the body, emotion and intuition in learning. How does it connect to feminism? There seems to be a gap between authors who follow spiritual threads and others who try to challenge essentialist theories of feminine features.

### **Gaia: connecting knowing to our lives**

Thank you for bringing into our conversation the exhibition "*Com'eri vestita?*" and Marisa Chiodo's irreverent poem *Eravamo belle*. These made me reflect about the disciplining of women bodies to become 'sex objects' (Valenti, 2016)<sup>13</sup> in the imagination of both men and women. Looking beautiful was a real issue for me: in my teens I was permanently on a diet, and later my grandmother would suggest that success was due to the looks ("Such a beautiful girl, of course they take you!"). I was competing and hiding from emotions (Verhaeghe,

---

<sup>13</sup> For an example see *Women's bodies*, Lorella Zanardo's short documentary on how women bodies are sexualized in Italian television. <http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/english-version/>.

2012), like in Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time*.

But our conversation feels reinvigorating because it is both 'academic' and deeply personal! This prompts me to look better for the unexpected in my family myths (Cavarero, 1995): one Grandma bought feminine magazines, the other claimed a space as tailor in the house walls; Mother became a free-lance journalist and teacher activist in the women workers movement.<sup>14</sup> Aunt Lorena (below), excluded from education as migrant, occupied the factory where she worked, travelled, and did crochet. She paid for my travels in South East Asia that changed my life, yet for many years I did not feel close to her<sup>15</sup>.



**Photo: My Aunt Lorena holding me, somewhere in 1985.**

Only in the process of curating a collection of essays by Jack Mezirow (Cappa & Del Negro, 2016) I discovered that his wife Edee's thriving upon returning to education had such an influence on his theory of transformation! What made me blind to *her* place in this genealogy? After this conversation, I see my disattention, the emphasis in the learning community on Mezirow as a self-standing masculine creator (where are his collaborators?), and a general rule in academy as well as society: this is how patriarchy works, enforcing paternal figures, even if they are not willing to do so (Mezirow does not seem that kind of "father").

The practice of feminism (Women's Bookstore, 1987, 1990) connected social change with self-consciousness, starting from personal differences: young/old, city/suburbs dweller, Catholic/liberal upbringing, migrant/local, academic/student, etc. Questioning oneself became a method of research and learning. What troubles you, what embarrasses you, what do you long for, who took care of you and your ideas? How did you become the person that you are, under which kind of influence? This implements a transformative discourse, beyond the theory of transformative learning. Not least, because it alerts scholars and educators of the risk of *appropriation*, 'the privileged act of naming [that] often affords those in power [...] a description of their work [...] that may obscure what is really taking place' and those 'who may have less or no status' (hook, 1994, p. 62). In feminist transformative practice and

---

<sup>14</sup> The 150 Hours scheme opened access to education for workers and housewives in Milan See note below.

<sup>15</sup> In the documentary *Il femminismo a Milano*, Lea Melandri says that by being involved in 1970s women workers education she was enabled to recompose her relationship with the women of her family, that she had left behind in the countryside of Emilia Romagna when she moved to Milan to become a teacher and feminist intellectual (<https://memomi.it/it/00004/128/femminismo-e-150-ore.html>).

research, vulnerability can become our strength to trouble power! What do you think? Essoglou (1991) criticized Freire's restricted interpretation of *dialoguing* and *naming*, from a feminist perspective, since she saw in those concepts a silencing of a feature that is common to women, indigenous people, and children. It is messiness, uncertainty, embodied wisdom... something that hardly can be named without losing its complexity and sacredness. So, yes, I think that challenging borders and inventing new methods feminists did a great thing. They used their bodies and voices, imagination and art, to disrupt institutionalized thinking. This brings us to performative ways to read feminism, as a practice instead of an ideology.

### **Feminism, art and a theory of transformation: "A Performance of Possibilities"**

We have identified in this paper some dilemmas and questions emerging from meeting feminism and feminist art in our academic lives, theory and practice. Dilemmas related to self (how can we avoid self-reification while nurturing a deeper and more integrated development of self through a variety of learning contexts), other (how can we really meet the other? What kind of relationships are conducive to shared transformation and co-evolution?) and reality (how can we enact a world through our action? Which is the role of the body in this, if we want learning not to be abstracted from lived life?).

The method of triadic ethnographic conversation is transformative (and maybe feminist) itself, in articulating bodily experience, intimacy, criticality, and knowledge. Spry (2011) writes:

"Performative autoethnography views the personal as inherently political, focused on bodies-in-context as a co-performative agent in interpreting knowledge, and holds aesthetic craft of research as an ethical imperative or representation... [For me] it has been about dropping down out of the personal and individual to find painful and comforting connection with others in sociocultural contexts of loss and hope" (p.498).

We share stories of our own experience, writes Silvia, yet we are not any folklore feminists but women who choose to be complicit in the politics of social and cultural happening. As Laura writes: the personal is political, and viceversa. The challenge is that the "I" is never singular but an emerging form of embodied multiple selves. As Gaia writes, Mezirow's (1979) first study on transformative learning examined the experience of mature women returning to university at the time when women were engaged in feminist consciousness raising. Mezirow (2000) argues:

"Central to the goal of adult education in democratic societies is the process of *helping learners* become more aware of the context of their *problematic understanding* and beliefs, *more* critically reflective on their assumptions and those of others, *more* fully and freely engaged in discourse, and *more* effective in taking action on their reflective judgements" (p. 31, *our italics*).

The question is: who has enough knowledge and power to be able to help a woman, a child, a disabled person, a migrant, from an outsider – and possibly colonizing - position? Some of the issues that we identified (gender, emotion, spirituality, community, collaboration, culture) are contested in the field. They call for intersectionality, and yet gender matters. There is a large amount of research – including our own – to explore these instances. We need practices. Spaces for adults to restart a collective discussion on them. What our dialogue revealed to us, perhaps, is the possibility to access the field from another perspective, as in the tradition of feminist practice. Performative autoethnography as a method of inquiry does not assume that

we can give voice, or help others; it is firstly “self-reflexive and self-subversive” (Madison, 1998, p. 482).

Hopefully, this embodied, reflective, and reflexive process can be contagious, and provoke cascade effects when we teach in our classrooms or facilitate a cooperative inquiry, so as to build what Giroux (2001) constructs as *public pedagogy*, that is a process of critical learning beyond the sterilizing confines of traditional education discourse. A transformation of social life seems to be possible only if enacted in the public sphere (Alexander, 2013). A *performance of possibilities* (Soyini Madison, 1998) offering good direction, not only for artistic performance but for transformative adult education:

“In a *performance of possibilities*, I see the “possible” as suggesting a movement culminating in a creation and change. [...] The *performance of possibilities* centers on the principles of transformation and transgression, dialogue and interrogation, as well as acceptance and imagination to build worlds that are possible”.

The theory of transformative learning provides a ‘space’ that adult educators and researchers could ‘occupy’ by experimenting unexpected ways to incorporate art and reflexivity into their repertoire of activities, connecting learning to the pursuit of freedom and creative living. Gouthro (2018) maintains:

“Critical educators are aware that creativity cannot be reduced to a series of instrumental formulas. Being aware of and knowing how to use certain tools to aid in the creative process, such as incorporating artistic practices or learning encounters with the arts, may be a means for educator to nourish creativity as understood in a more holistic and critical way” (p. 1018).

What we propose is to learn from the dilemmas that the history of feminism brings to our lives. Connecting knowing to our own lives, bodies and emotions, witnessing, engaging with difference, making projects and telling stories to each other could enrich the transformative debate of a quality of messiness that is deeply critical to social and personal transformation.

## References

- Alexander, B.K. (2013). Teaching Autoethnography and Autoethnographic Pedagogy. In S. Holmas Jones, T. E. Adams & C. Ellis, *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 538-556.
- Bateson, G. & Bateson M.C. (1987). *Angels Fear. Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*. New York: Mcmillan Publishing Co.
- Belenky, M.F., B.M. Clinchy, N.R. Goldberger and J.M. Tarule (1986). *Women's Ways of Knowing*. NY: Basic Books.
- Boyce-Tillman, J. (2007). *Unconventional wisdom*. London: Equinox Publishing.
- (de) Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage, 1997\*.
- Cappa, F. & Del Negro, G. (2016) (Eds.) *Jack Mezirow. La teoria dell'apprendimento trasformativo. Imparare a pensare come un adulto*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Cavarero, A. (1995). *In spite of Plato. A feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy*. Oxford: Taylor and Francis.
- Cavarero, A. & Restaino, F. (2002). *Le filosofie femministe*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Connell, R. (2013). The Social Organization of Masculinity. In C. McCann, *Feminist Theory Reader Local and Global Perspectives*. Routledge. pp. 253–263.
- Del Negro, G. (2018). *An auto/biographical, cooperative study of our relationships to knowing*. Unpublished Thesis.

- Essoglou, T.A. (1991). The Dialogics of Negation: Gender and Subjectivity. *Paulo Freire Symposium on Cultural Politics and Critical Pedagogy*, New School for Social Research, New York. <http://www.tracyannessoglou.com/dialogics-of-negation/> Accessed 26 March 2018.
- Fraser, W. (2018). *Seeking wisdom in Adult teaching and learning*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Formenti, L. (2016). Learning to live. The pattern which connects education and dis/orientation. In
- Formenti, L. (2017). *Formazione e trasformazione*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Giroux, H. A. (2001). Cultural studies as performative politics. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 1, 5-23.
- Gouthro, P. (2018). Creativity, the arts, and the transformative learning. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller & P. Jarvis (Eds.). *The Palgrave International Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning* (pp.1011-1026). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress. Education as the practice of freedom*. New York/Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody. Passionate politics*. London: Pluto Press.
- Libreria Delle Donne di Milano (1977). *Non credere di avere dei diritti. La generazione della libertà femminile e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2007\*.
- Lonzi, C. (1970). *Sputiamo su Hegel*. Milano: Et. Al. edizioni.
- Madison, D. S. (1998). Performance, personal narratives, and the politics of possibility. In S. J. Dailey (Ed.), *The future of performance studies: Vision and revision* (pp. 276-286). Annandale, VA: National Communication Association.
- Marcodoppido, R. (2013). Il patriarcato nella tradizione artistica occidentale. In FemminilePlurale (Eds), *La Gallery del patriarcato*. Blog
- Mezirow, J. (1979). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 74, 5-12.
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Norris, J, Sawyer, R.D & Lund, D. (2012). *Duoethnography: Dialogic Methods for Social, Health, and Educational Research*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Perdue, L. G. (2007). *Wisdom Literature. A Theological History*. Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Perna, R. (2016) (ed). *L'altro sguardo. Fotografie italiane 1965-2015*. Milano: Silvana Editoriale.
- Salvati, E. (2012). *Donne senza veline. L'informazione e le sfide del movimento femminista attraverso le pagine di Quotidiano Donna*. Roma: Teseo Editore.
- Sawyer, R.D., Norris, J. (2013). *Duoethnography*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Smith, Z. (2016) *Swing time*. London: Penguin.
- Solnit, R. (2014). *Men Explain Things To Me*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Spry, T. (2011). Performative autoethnography: Critical embodiments and possibilities. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 497-511). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, E. W., & Cranton, P. (2012). Reflecting back and looking forward. *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice*, 555-573
- Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Valenti, J. (2016) *Sex object. A memoir*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Verhaeghe, P. (2012) *What about me? The struggle for identity in a market- based society*.  
Translated by J. Hedley-Prole. London: Scribe.
- Women's Bookstore (1987/2017). *Don't think you have any rights*. London: Silver Press.
- Women's Bookstore (1990). *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (P. Cicogna & T. de Lauretis, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

## **Sitography**

- Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias: <http://www.enacademic.com>
- Il Corpo delle Donne: <http://www.ilcorpodelledonne.net/english-version>
- Femminileplurale: <https://femminileplurale.wordpress.com>
- La Repubblica: <http://repubblica.it>
- Memo Mi La memoria di Milano: <https://memomi.it>
- NoiDonne: <http://www.noidonne.org>
- Storie di Donne: <https://www.storiadidonne.it>
- What were you wearing? University of Kansas: <https://sapec.ku.edu/what-were-you-wearing>