

Regendering Urban Space? Transfeminist Streetscapes in Milan, Italy

Valeria Pecorelli*

Keywords: *city, streetscapes, feminist geography, social movements, right to the city*

Mots-clés: *ville, paysages de rue, géographie féministe, mouvements sociaux, droit à la cité*

Parole chiave: *città, streetscapes, geografia femminista, movimenti sociali, diritto alla città*

1. *The sexist city*

Gender is as ubiquitous in our urban existences as it is taken for granted (Bondi, 2005; Duncan, 1996; Rose, 1993); it is at the heart of numerous everyday practices that distinguish city life. In turn, the city is the space where we may «read all those mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion that are a reflection of the discursive construction of genders» (Borghi, 2009, p. 22). Thus, women often experience the city via «physical, social, economic and symbolic barriers – that shape their daily lives. [...] Many of these barriers are invisible to men» (Kern, 2021, p. 6), who have different experiences in settings that are, by definition, more congenial to them. Feminist geographers participating in the debate on urban space have shown that the right to the city is not equally enjoyed by all subjectivities. There is no neutral way of experiencing urban space, given that «men are still the standard of normality» (Chapman, 1988, p. 247). The city has gender norms around which inequalities are generated¹; it can present as exclusionary or inclusive depending on one's social class, age, sexual orientation, degree of able-bodiedness or skin colour. A gendered perspective – albeit often thought of as genderless – is also brought to bear on urban streetscapes (Fenster, 2005). For example, Poon (2015) pointed up the sexism of street names after mapping seven international cities and finding that only 27.5% of their streets were named after women. Over the past two decades, a growing body of literature has critically studied the politics of toponymy from within three leading frameworks that respectively conceptualize streetscapes as: city text, contested arenas, and performative spaces (Azaryahu, 1996; Alderman, 2002; Rose-Redwood, 2008; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, Azryahu,

* Milan, IULM University, Italy.

¹ In many cases, urban spaces and services are planned for and designed by men, given that the city is organized to facilitate traditional gender roles, male experience is the norm (Kern, 2021).

2018). Knowing that, to date, scant attention has been paid to investigating gender inequalities in streetscapes, in this paper, I draw on both critical toponymy and feminist geography perspectives to present a case study in which memories, identity and place have been revisited to produce a more inclusive urban space. From a methodological point of view, the data were collected via a solidarity action research approach (Pecorelli, 2015a) and semi-structured interviews with activists in Milan.

While the issue of gender imbalance in urban toponymies remains neglected from an academic perspective, there are projects under way to rename cities in commemoration of women that have been launched by members of the public and activists in Europe, the United States and India. In this context, a variety of actors engaging in a diverse range of practices have used toponymy and cartography as gender-inclusive tools. Interestingly, an ongoing initiative in Brussels involves renaming numerous stops across the city's underground network in honour of European women who contributed to social and political change. The Brussels Metro project was inspired by the "City of Women" map of New York, which was designed to celebrate women who made valuable contributions to the life of the city, or could have done, had they not been forgotten. An international project along similar lines uses the software application Mapbox to generate participatory maps based on user reports of "male and female" street names across a set of cities, including San Francisco, Mumbai, London, Paris, and Bangalore: the aim is to cartographically illustrate the sexist bias via the use of pink and blue colour codes. While this project, like the one in New York, is perceived by most observers as having little practical impact, for others it serves to highlight a problem and to point up the need to change our contemporary public spaces. For example, in 2015, the *Fémicité* project in Paris issued a map to celebrate a successful campaign by local feminist groups to introduce a female dimension into the toponymy of the French capital by getting over sixty additional streets named in memory of women.

2. Milan

On rereading Milan's odonymy through the lens of the city as "text" (Rose-Redwood, Alderman, Azryahu 2018), one fact is clear: only 3% of the city's odonyms honour women. Over 50 of these pay tribute to women religious and, in keeping with the city's historical development, are mainly located in the historic centre. About 30 streets are named after female historical-political personages: members of the nobility or royalty or leading lights in the *Risorgimento*. Almost no women protagonists of the World War II resistance have streets named after them. Some 30 streets pay homage to female writers, scientists, and artists, while over 20 are named after well-known women from the entertainment, sports, and business sectors. The last-mentioned are the most recent and are mainly situated on the outskirts of the city, although some are in prestigious locations that have been urbanized lately.

Since 2000, the City of Milan has selected 49 new urban toponyms that commemorate female figures, representing only 15 % of all new street names.

During the mayorships of Pisapia (2011-2016) and Sala (2017-2021), four times more places were named after women than in the 2000-2012 period, a trend that intensified over time (17 were assigned between 2019 and 2021 alone). More than half (26) of these toponyms, however, were assigned to parks and gardens. Gardens are not thoroughfares and thus do not have the same power to define a territory that streets do. In some ways, naming a park after a woman may be seen as an easy compromise for local authorities.

Despite such contradictions, Milan's odonomastic policies are not isolated measures, but rather are part of a broader drive to address gender issues that has been spearheaded by progressive city councils. Pisapia prioritized the "City of Women" within his program and inaugurated and sponsored the Milano Pride event that had been opposed by previous councils. Similarly, Sala has supported multiple gender-inclusive initiatives, for example by funding – through the Milano Urban Center – the "Sex & the City" project, which was designed to offer a gendered reading of Milan's urban spaces. With the involvement of academics, local authority representatives and various formal and informal collectives, this project explored gender-based differences in the way that people experience public space by collecting information on the degree to which the city of Milan fulfils individual gender needs. The outcomes were published in the Milan Gender Atlas. As stated on the project webpage (<https://sexandthecity.space/2022/01/13/milan-gender-atlas-out-now/>, last accessed: 05/08/2023), the findings «deconstruct Milan's contemporary urban space through specific lenses of observation that allow us to read the responses the city is able to offer to the needs of women and gender minorities». "Sex and the City" can usefully inform policies for organizing spaces in which all citizens can feel comfortable. An example of such inclusive policies and practices would be the appointment of a city gender manager, a post that already exists in other European cities such as Vienna and Berlin and whose purpose is to facilitate gender-inclusive urban planning from within the local authority.

If we shift from the perspective of institutional political action to the lowercase "p" (Mouffe, 2007) perspective of social movements, the city becomes a performative space that is «pregnant with possibility» (Chakrabarty, 1991, p. 26), a free and creative space from which new possibilities for representing and producing subjectivities constantly emerge, repeatedly regenerating the city as a space of negotiation and practices from below (Zara, Martinelli, De Vita, 2020). Over the past decade, some of the dominant issues in the international public debate have drawn renewed attention to women's and LGBTQIA+ concerns. This has been especially evident in movements such as *Non Una di Meno*, *Me Too* and *Black Lives Matter* which have become a new voice – articulating new contents and symbols – for migrants, Afro-descendants, indigenous women, and queer communities. These movements have joined together to form transnational solidarity networks that enact practices of struggle with a revitalized social justice dimension, as the case study presented in the next section illustrates.

3. Performances of odonomastic guerrilla warfare

In 2021, the demonstrations that traditionally enliven the streets of Milan on March 8th (Women's Day) and April 25th (Liberation Day) were complemented by odonomastic guerrilla warfare practices: these performances were aimed at the creative deconstruction of urban spaces, in an attempt to evade spatial control systems.

Odonomastic guerrilla warfare consists of grass-roots initiatives to change a street name or add information to a street name sign that alters the meaning of the naming with a view to temporarily deconstructing the supposed neutrality of the urban (Borghi, Dell'Agnese 2009). More specifically, «changing the names that we inhabit is to change the way we think about the city. By suddenly drawing attention to the meaning of the name of a street or square, odonomastic guerrilla warfare trains us not to take the place we live in for granted, and, by not taking it for granted, we begin to reappropriate it!» (personal conversation with an activist).

During the transfeminist odonomastic guerrilla warfare initiative in Milan, some street names were symbolically modified and renamed in memory of women and heroes of the movement. This action, which was implemented by the transfeminist collective *Non Una di Meno-Milano*, was part of the broader project “Decolonizing the City - for an Antiracist and Transfeminist Milan” run by the social centre *Il Cantiere*. It was, in the words of the activists, a “call to arts”, an invitation to decolonize a patriarchal and colonialist city by weaving new urban meanings. The means and ends of the practice clearly emerged from my interviews with the activists of *Non Una di Meno-Milano*:

The streets and squares of our city are almost always dedicated to white men, often colonizers and rapists or destroyers in some war. We decided to change the toponymy, choosing some LGBTQIA+ women and people to be commemorated in public space. Through this symbolic action, we want to begin to break down the wall of invisibility behind which, for centuries, women and LGBTQIA+ people have been relegated. Street by street, square by square we will tear down this wall. It is a task in progress.

The street names to be changed were chosen from among the historical figures or memorials most criticized by the transfeminist movement, during meetings and discussion and study sessions. At the guerrilla warfare events themselves, the original signs or plaques were marked “Rejected” and modified or flanked by new plaques with the name and explanation of the alternative commemoration. New heroines from the movement's cultural universe were integrated into the city's spatial narratives. Some ceremonies were accompanied by a brief explanation of the peculiar merits and characteristics of the commemoration in question. Where possible, a QR code was displayed to provide a link to the movement's webpage and guerrilla map.

As the activists explain, the aim of the movement is not to erase history but rather to propose a counter-narrative that deploys toponymic celebration to

draw attention to personages and events whose historical memory has been overlooked in society. Bringing out these silenced identities reveals the normative role of urban space as a producer and manipulator of social presence and raises the question of what kind of city we wish to create.

Transfeminist guerrilla warfare may be understood as a form of “artivism” (Dumont, Gamberoni, 2020), which leads us to touch upon further dynamics of this kind of action. Specifically, the graphic and aesthetic dimension successfully stirs the collective consciousness by eliciting more intense social reflection. These practices «turn out to be a much more effective vehicle for “piercing veils”, spreading messages, and questioning and fostering citizenship» (Dumont, Gamberoni, 2020, p. 5). Milan has already been the site of original and impactful practices and forms of artivism in the recent past. Examples that spring to mind include the fuchsia paint that was playfully poured over the statue of Indro Montanelli in the Porta Venezia public gardens or the fuchsia-varnished nail on the iconic middle finger that stands in front of the Stock Exchange building.

Social, and especially political, criticism of the guerrilla renaming initiative was not long in coming, and there was no shortage of instrumentalization, as often happens to social movements, whose contents and practices are readily belittled and ridiculed, rather than discussed on their merits (Pecorelli, 2015b).

4. Concluding remarks

The performance enacted by *Non Una di Meno* is not especially novel within the collective action practices of urban-scale social movements. What may be new is the movement’s will to broaden the narrative by adopting an intersectional and decolonial perspective that turns a sensitive ear to unknown and long-forgotten stories in order to «knock down the wall of invisibility behind which, for centuries, these subjectivities have been placed» (<https://nonunadimenomilanoblog.wordpress.com>, last accessed: 05/09/2023). The purpose of performances to mark March 8th or April 25th was not so much to bring about the permanent renaming of city streets via institutional practices (e.g., by inviting residents to sign petitions), nor to vandalize street furniture as a means of disrupting *bourgeois* respectability. Via the aesthetics of their action, which is often misunderstood by the media as an “act of absurdity” bordering on violent, the stated intention of the activists from *Non Una di Meno* is to “draw out the contradictory”, generate awareness, and invert the power of narrative. For if we imagine the city as a text, what story would we read? Furthermore, we should reflect on the power of renaming streets. By launching imagined toponyms in masculine cities, albeit merely by painting a few walls with the colours of rainbow, can we help to generate truly inclusive spaces?

At present, there appears to be active interest in including all subjectivities in the streetscape, both in the institutional sphere – as borne out by actions and policies inspired by the European Charter for Women in the City (2016) – and within social movements fighting for social justice. The academy could usefully foster further awareness and critical debate by actively engaging with the discourse of the gender divide and fostering dedicated inquiry into it.

References

- Alderman D., «Street Names as Memorial Arenas: the Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County», in *Historical Geography*, 30, 2002, pp. 99-120.
- Azaryahu M., «The Power of Commemorative Street Names», in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14, 3, 1996, pp. 311-330.
- Bondi L., «Gender and the Reality of Cities: Embodied Identities, Social Relations and Performativities», in *Institute of Geography Online Paper Series: GEO-005*, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, 2005 (available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/822>, last accessed: 05/09/2023).
- Borghi R., «Introduzione (ad una geografia [de]gene-re)», in Borghi R., Rondinone A. (eds.), *Geografie di Genere*, Milano, Unicopli, 2009.
- Borghi R., Dell'Agnese E., «Genere» in Dell'Agnese E. (ed.), *Geo-grafia. Strumenti e parole*, Milano, Unicopli, 2009, pp. 291-315.
- Chakrabarty D., «Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India», in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 14, 1, 1991, pp.15-31.
- Chapman R., «The Great Pretender: Variations on the New Man Theme», in Chapman R., Rutherford (eds.), *The MaleOrder: Unwrapping Masculinity*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, pp. 225-248.
- Dumont I., Gamberoni E., «Spazio pubblico tra creazione e competizione», in *Geotema*, 62, 2020, pp. 3-8.
- Duncan N. (ed.), *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, London, Routledge, 1996.
- Fenster T., «The Right to the Gendered City: Different Formations of Belonging in Everyday Life», in *Journal of Gender Studies*, 14, 3, 2005, pp. 217-231.
- Kern L., *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World*, London, Verso Books, 2021.
- Mouffe C., *Sul politico. Democrazia e rappresentazione dei conflitti*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2007.
- Pecorelli V., «Wondering While Wandering: Living Between Academia and Activism», in *Interface: a Journal For and About Social Movements*, 7, 2, 2015a, pp. 145-160.
- Pecorelli V., «Spazi liberati in città: i centri sociali. Una storia di resistenza costruttiva tra autonomia e solidarietà», in *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14, 1, 2015b, pp. 283-297.
- Poon L., *Mapping the Sexism of City Street Names*, CityLab: www.citylab.com, 2015 (available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-11-04/mapping-the-sexism-of-street-names-in-major-cities>, last accessed: 05/09/2023).
- Rose G., *Feminism and Geography*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Rose-Redwood R., «From number to name: symbolic capital, places of memory and the politics of street naming in New York City», in *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9, 4, 2008, pp. 431-452.

Rose-Redwood R., Alderman D., Azaryahu M. (eds.), *The Political Life of Urban Streetscapes Naming, Politics, and Place*, London, Routledge, 2018.

Zara C., Martinelli C., De Vita A., «Movimenti femministi di dissenso e spazi in trans-formazione. Verona città transfemminista», in *Geotema*, 62, 2020, pp. 15-26.



Regendering Urban Space? Transfeminist Streetscapes in Milan, Italy

Informed by critical feminist theory, this essay examines performative practices designed to re-territorialize the urban fabric of Milan by claiming the right to the city from a gender perspective. A further aim of the research presented here was to fill a gap in critical toponymy, because – to date – little has been written about gender and street names. Odonomastic guerrilla warfare, albeit a recent development, is not confined to the city of Milan, but rather, in light of ongoing initiatives by women's associations and transfeminist collectives in other Italian and European cities, is also driving change in other settings, via counter-narratives that go beyond the binary male/female dimension to rethink both our history and our contemporary life spaces.

Ri-generare lo spazio urbano? Paesaggi urbani transfemministi a Milano, Italia

Questo studio adotta l'approccio teorico della critica femminista, soffermandosi sulle pratiche performative di ri-territorializzazione del tessuto urbano milanese in cui il diritto alla città viene richiamato e rivendicato nella dimensione di genere. L'obiettivo è anche quello di colmare una lacuna nella toponomastica critica, poiché finora è stato scritto molto poco sul genere e sui nomi delle strade. La guerriglia odonomastica, seppur recente, non trasforma esclusivamente il volto della città di Milano, ma, visti i progetti in corso in Italia e nelle città europee da parte di associazioni di donne e collettivi transfemministi, anima anche altri contesti attraverso contro-narrazioni che superano la dimensione binaria maschile/femminile per ripensare la storia e ripensare lo spazio delle nostre vite.

Re-générer l'espace urbain ? Paysages urbains transféministes à Milan, Italie

Cette étude adopte l'approche théorique de la critique féministe, en s'attardant sur les pratiques performatives de reterritorialisation du tissu urbain milanais dans lequel le droit à la ville est rappelé et revendiqué dans la dimension du genre. Il vise également à combler une lacune dans la toponymie critique, car jusqu'à présent, très peu de choses ont été écrites sur le genre et les noms de rue. La guérilla odonomastique, bien que récente, ne transforme pas exclusivement le visage de la ville de Milan, mais, étant donné les projets en cours en Italie et dans les villes européennes par des associations de femmes et des collectifs transféministes, anime également d'autres contextes à travers des contre-récits qui dépassent la dimension binaire homme/femme pour repenser l'histoire et frapper au centre de l'espace de nos vies.