

Informal partnerships with non-academics: reflections on the agency of a PhD student in a more than “non-human” world¹

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Abstract

Questo paper è un racconto autoriflessivo della mia esperienza come dottoranda in studi urbani, a cui sono arrivata con una formazione di tipo tecnico come architetto. Presento il caso studio qualitativo, che ho condotto sul tema degli allagamenti in un comune del sud Italia, attraverso la lente degli incontri con gli ‘umani’ durante il lavoro di campo. Mi focalizzo su ‘embodiment, traduzione e posizionamento’ e ‘rinuncia/riconciliazione nella partnership’ (con una ONG) come le due sfide principali che hanno caratterizzato il mio duale ruolo di agente in qualità sia di studente di dottorato sul campo sia di attivista in spazi non accademici. La creazione di alleanze con soggetti non-accademici durante la formazione da ricercatore è analizzata per comprendere quali possibili difficoltà e opportunità di apprendimento potrebbero incontrare i giovani ricercatori (i cosiddetti *Early Career Researchers*) in un progetto di ricerca basato su partenariati non formalizzati.

This paper is a self-reflexive account of my experience as a PhD student in urban studies, entering the doctoral programme with a technical background from my studies in Architecture. I present my qualitative case study on flooding in a village of Southern Italy through the lens of the learning encounters with ‘humans’ during fieldwork. The focus is on ‘embodiment, translation and placement’, and ‘renouncing/reconciling partnership’ (with an NGO), considered as the two main challenges characterizing my agentic role as a PhD student in the field and as an activist in non-academic contexts. How I dealt with my non-academic allies during my research training is analysed to investigate what potential difficulties and learning opportunities young scholars (the so-called *Early Career Researchers*) might encounter in setting up a research project based on informal partnerships.

Parole chiave: partnership; studi urbani; ECR

Keywords: partnership; urban studies; ECR

Framing partnership: setting up the first research project

This paper presents an autobiographical account of my doctoral experience conducted from 2014 to mid-2017. I will analyse

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my experience from my point of view as a young researcher in urban studies and activist working in Italy in the environmental field. Reflections on my experience in the field of environmental and water planning provides insights that move beyond these specific themes, and contribute to a broader debate on the role of young scholars, committed to support distressed communities, who are willing to move beyond object-oriented scientific and technical research (on the “non-humans”, i.e. in my case, technical devices, infrastructures and buildings) people in learning processes of young research trainees. Such learning processes include the development of research skills beyond their formal education within the academic environment, through their interaction with non-academic subjects. The international scholarly debate on the difficulties of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in engaged research and participatory action research is progressing (see Slade, 2019; Raynor, 2019; Enright and Facer, 2017). According to Campbell and Vanderhoven, «co-production re-defines relationships between research participants from being essentially extractive or transactional to being interactive, where the boundaries between the academic and non-academic become increasingly blurred» (Campbell and Vanderhoven, 2016: 12). Partnerships for co-production as formal or informal agreements between educational institutions and non-academics may develop from personal relationships between the involved subjects, or may even be driven by convenience or by top-down agendas (Porter, 2015). Scholars and planning educators experimented different types of partnerships to create learning opportunities for students agree on the search for an ideal mutual benefit for all the parts involved in the process (Porter *et al.*, 2015). However, the experience of the same authors warns about problems that may arise, such as time constraints, difficulties in the interaction, limited resources or even students' expectations. Partnership with non-academics in learning processes for young scholars is simultaneously, an opportunity and a risk. In planning practice, building partnerships requires technicians to develop skills for being part of processes and respect a professional ethical code. For urban scholars ethics, aims and ways to involve actors can differ according to the types of planning research (Saija, 2014; 2016) or the specific planning culture (Forsyth, 2012). In Science and Technology Studies (STS) the aspect of mutual interaction

between people and objects has been traditionally recognised (see Aikenhead, 1994). Since technology is not separated from society and from social processes, STS scholars study what they call socio-technical processes. Since the '90s, the goal of STS-based education has been to educate future scientists, engineers and citizens to understand and discuss scientific and technical concepts to inform their choices while fully participating in civic life. In this perspective, socio-technical knowledge, which creates an opening for interaction among technicians and non-technicians, experts and ordinary people (Aikenhead, 1994), converges with the participatory nature of the action-research approach. However, more than a decade ago, as a major scholar of critical action research, Kemmis contested a progressive loss of the emphasis on educational critique which was one of action research's pillars in the '80s (Kemmis, 2006). The diffusion of participative methods of research and their transformation in mainstream approaches favoured the publication of several handbooks (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007; Rowell *et al.*, 2017; Chevalier and Buckles, 2019). Methodological texts constitute one of the main sources of guidance for soon-to-be engaged scholars during their training years, especially at the very first stage of their research careers (e. g. within institutional doctoral programmes). Experienced engaged scholars tend to emphasise the non-linearity of the research process and the importance of partnership, reflective learning and skills to interact with a variety of actors (Campbell and Vanderhoven, 2016). Yet, these skills cannot be learned exclusively from (hand) books. The fact that doctoral research projects in the making become transformative does not just depend on the selection of appropriate methods associated with the 'right' epistemics. It depends on the opportunity for young scholars to experience, with the right guidance, transformative partnerships with non-academics.

In my case, I was learning epistemics and doing research at the same time, while I was progressively moving from considering inhabitants only as informants toward redesigning my research on the basis of what I was learning from them. As I will explain in the paper, my research did not start as a participatory project or as a co-production study. Nonetheless, the evolution of the project into an 'engaged' one can provide elements for discussion valuable to both researchers and students with a

similar background willing to experiment with engaged fieldwork as well as for mentors supporting students' learning processes.

A brief auto-biographical introduction

In 2014, I joined a multidisciplinary PhD programme at the University of Naples encompassing technical building design, urban planning and history from an architecture and an urban design background with a specific expertise on technologies for water infrastructures and nature-based solutions. When I entered the doctoral programme, I chose to orient my research career towards urban studies, but co-production was not part of my undergraduate vocabulary. My research object was a sewer system in a village located within the Sarno river basin (Italy), interpreted as a socio-technical system where the technical approach, applied since the '70s, had failed in addressing pollution and flooding that had burdened people for decades. My research project was funded as an individual project and no formal partnerships with local actors were in place to support the study. Nor did I predict a formal space for people-researcher interaction. I started my fieldwork, drawing from Science and Technology Studies, to collect data using ethnographic methods and approaching Actor Network Theory (which refuses the binary distinction between humans and non-humans) as a method for analysis.

As an undergraduate student I had attended two international programmes² and those experiences abroad had made me focus on those uses of science and technology in urbanisation processes that cause disproportionate burdens to some communities. This experience made me consider joining an NGO as a path towards action, so, in 2013, I became involved as a volunteer and an activist in a national environmental association, in my hometown's chapter, located about five kilometres from the village under study. As a consequence, by the beginning of my PhD fieldwork, I was both an activist as a researcher-in-training.

In this article, I reflect on my interactions with actors I met during the research process, citizens, members of citizen movements

² In the previous 5 years I had had experiences as a student in two cities of fast-growing countries, one marked by the selling of natural lands to private companies (Istanbul) and the other one marked by environmental and social inequalities that make people's life very hard (Mumbai).

and an environmental NGO, interpreting them on the basis of three main concepts: 1) the situatedness of knowledge (feminist epistemology); 2) the role of material objects according to Actor Network Theory; 3) research activism. In paragraph 1, I explain how I designed my research project according to my previous experiences and as a researcher with a technical background. In paragraph 2, I tell what happened during occasional encounters with local inhabitants during fieldwork, discovering that being a local, a female, a scholar and a technician was affecting my interaction with people, making me uncomfortable. Encounters during fieldwork became also opportunities to clarify the epistemics and the focus of my study. I introduce translation and placement as additional skills that young scholars coming from a positivist approach to research might better develop during their study. Paragraph 3 is an account of the last part of my fieldwork, the peak of my engagement, when being a researcher fully intersected with practising activism outside academia but I was unable to find a synergy between research and activism. In the conclusive section I discuss how my reflections contribute to the scholarly debate on PhDs' learning processes and agency in urban studies.

Embodiment, translation and placement: from research questions to stepping into the field

At the beginning of my PhD, my goal was appointing and testing a methodology to operationalise a post-human approach to water infrastructures' design. In my perspective, the concentration of flooding and pollution could be studied paying attention to what types of objects produced, placed or modified by experts and non-experts were relevant. According to the aim I declared at that stage, my study was mainly addressed to scholars and my interaction with citizens and local actors was instrumental to study the case. Partnership was intended as a form of alliance with local actors to produce results for academicians.

To pursue my goal, the plan was to study a single relevant case and, for that purpose, I chose Poggiomarino, a village located in Campania Region, affected by recurrent flooding and characterized by the absence of a complete and functioning sewer system. Runoff water and sewer overflow used to inundate the built area and slowly drain underground or canals.

Flooding and water-related problems were decades old and had become sensibly visible for their effects on the inhabitants' life since the '80s. As a matter of fact after a highly disruptive earthquake occurred in November 1980, public authorities invested a large amount of funds in the village as well as in the rest of the Region, not only to rebuild collapsed houses but also to solve pre-existent criticalities. These included infrastructural interventions on the sewer system aimed at addressing pollution and inadequate wastewater disposal, but the process did not result in a complete and functioning infrastructure. Because the sewer system had not been completed, the most recurrent issues were system disconnections in the sewer system and self-created connections to pipes and canals. Residents had pursued their individual interest through self-made interventions aimed at distancing wastewater and coping with the shortcomings of the centralised wastewater system and flooding. Locals developed what I call "a sense of disillusionment and rage" against technicians and public authorities. Some of them had participated, over the decades, in the debates on the formal process of implementation of the sewer system.

During my study I encountered several people who were either directly or indirectly involved in the local movements of protest. This was a highly politicised, unstable and conflictual context where a large variety of projects and actors (encompassing local/regional authorities, environmental boards, institutionalised environmental associations and citizens) allowed people to temporarily aggregate around specific socio-environmental claims. The protection from water-related burdens with self-produced devices had altered the sewer system and this was the very reason why someone like me, an urban scholar interested in non-humans such as water pipes and pumps, had decided to physically enter the field and start a case study. This decision then activated a sequence of meetings and events that made me become aware of the complexity of relations with people I had to deal with while completing my study.

My study was rooted in my previous work as a graduate in technology of architecture and decentralised technical devices for local water management. My focus on non-humans – especially water – and on their relationship with human activities such as spatial transformation and the construction of self-produced devices and objects was a way to address the

disjuncture between formal planning of both the sewer system and the city, on the one hand, and people's direct intervention in private and common spaces, on the other. From this perspective, humans were relevant as far as they were able to 'give voice' to the non-humans. Even if the ability of humans to speak for non-humans has been presented by ANT theorists as problematic or even counterproductive (Latour, 1999). People and their actions and experiences were central to my investigation and I attempted to involve them in the project using interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations. Because I was doing research on hidden objects and devices – most of the infrastructural elements such as pipes, pumps and junctures are located underground – I needed to access private information that was, in many cases, about informal/illegal alterations people had made to the sewer system. Secondly, I was interested in how the system worked in unpredictable weather conditions (in case of rain). Methodologically speaking, the project was to expand the academic studies on environmental and social justice of water infrastructures from a materialist perspective, focussed on non-humans (Bennett, 2010). As I said, instead of formulating or supporting the claim made by locals, my aim was to analyse material alterations that contributed to directing flooding in some specific areas of the town. Nonetheless, explorations with the involvement of people I met – using ethnographic methods as I did – is not a static process and I had to face many challenges. My research project required the ability to create very different types of interaction, going from more formal interviews to more intimate conversations. At that time I presented myself as a student and, sometimes, as a research trainee. Among the people I encountered, some of them provided chances to reflect on my presence and my role on the field as explained in the notes on the following two encounters I had during the fieldwork:

31 March 2016 – inhabitant, approximately 80 y.o. (translation from my notes in Italian)

Extract 1: «The lady (with a combative spirit) gently let us [me and her neighbour] enter her courtyard but, in a few seconds, as soon as she hears I am interested in water flooding and pollution, I see the fury on her face. She then submerges me with her fast words, while I am thinking that she might have misunderstood my role and the reason

of my presence. The woman who is with me explains that I am not from the Authority in charge of canals or any other public authority. Nonetheless, for the whole length of the conversation, the old lady will suspect I have the power to improve her situation: at the end of the meeting, she urges me to take the message with me, her huge problem and her obsession with the little canal at the back of her house».

31 March 2016 – inhabitant, approximately 55 y.o. (translation from my notes)

Extract 2: «He comes back to his son and me, referring to the fact that we were both trained at the university. He asks for my approval when he starts pointing at the street behind me and starts talking about the correct way to design streets, with a proper asphalt layer. I quickly change the topic without understanding why he is talking about the quality of street paving while discussing of flooding, and why he thinks I am an expert of this topic. He might have thought I am a technical engineer because I had mentioned sewer pipes. This leaves me with a veil of disappointment and the assumption that being a student in the field of infrastructures makes people think I am an expert on asphalt».

The two extracts from my fieldnotes show how moving from studying my object of inquiry with a detached and technical perspective to the interaction with people in the field made me reflect on my role, on what it means to be embedded and an embodied researcher. I entered private lives, people's habits and domestic space to reach an aim that was hardly explainable to them. At some point being embedded brought me miles away from the theoretical dimension of the first year of my PhD. Interaction with inhabitants and local actors opened a Pandora's box of multiple roles of scholars. Before graduating in Architecture, I had had another experience on water flooding in Mumbai. During that study my interaction with people was very different and defined by the language barrier because I did not speak any local idiom and used English to interview only Indian governmental technicians. My focus was on objects and devices and fieldwork consisted only in direct observation of the built environment, with no contact with people. With my doctoral thesis I entered an unfamiliar as well as more complicated and, at the same time, interesting terrain.

Only after the completion of my dissertation, the discovery of feminist epistemology helped me to better understand what

had happened during my fieldwork. Scholars working with feminist epistemology have dealt with the issue of reflexivity and embodiment during the conduction of a doctoral research project, when students work on the foundation of their academic identities and deal with the complex «materiality of the field, a constantly shifting landscape that appears static only in the proposal» (Billo and Hiemstra, 2013: 314). This body of research on the fieldwork experience produced by feminist geographers is very relevant for urban scholars. Nonetheless the technical side of urban studies is less prone to self-reflexivity and scholars tend to define their role through their action as materialisation (e. g. the production of a document, a map, a prototype). When I conducted embodied research, people's preconceived ideas about what technicians could or should do had very strong effects on our conversations. Despite my effort to always explain them that their knowledge on their problems could help me as a student, the fact that my role was not fully recognised by interviewees put them in a 'guessing position' about who I really was and what the consequences of their interaction with me were likely to be. I had to rely upon my ability to ask for information, to gain people's trust and, ultimately, to have their help on the basis of their declared/undeclared general sense of hope to see their lives improving (even if only in an undefined way) or just make their voices heard, even if only within the limited time and space of our encounter (see extract 1). I was able to formulate these thoughts with some clarity only toward the end of the doctoral experience, while, during the process, I just felt discomfort for being perceived by people only as a local tiny young woman questioning about infrastructures. I became very careful and eventually reduced the interaction with people. I learnt that, at the beginning of each interview, encounter or interaction, the person I had in front of me was using his/her own perceptions as a guide to set the tone of the conversation and this would eventually influence the information I could access. In some cases, people begun to consider me as a sort of relative, and, when possible, I avoided mentioning I was a technician, when possible, because I had noticed it was not helpful. Confidential stories were more helpful to me than more formal interviews in which they felt a technician was investigating.

Moving from objectivity to the situatedness of the scholar in the production of knowledge was a long learning process. Situated

knowledge and technologies entered the feminist scholars' debate following Haraway (1988, 1991) and her ideas of the limits of objective knowledge. Gillian Rose (1997) analysed feminists' tactics to deal with power in research contexts, arguing that, due to the impossibility of understanding and operating in power relations (both external or co-constructed by the researcher), it is important to use reflexivity to make questions instead of solving problems and offering models. Uncertainty and the danger of the research process posed by Rose and other feminist scholars could help young urban scholars to become aware of the impossibility of working in a power-free field when you embed yourself in the 'case'; help them to accept that the roles in the field have to be negotiated with whoever we encounter. Being a technician meeting people affected for years by disproportionate technical burdens and problems while being a young female student with a technical background investigating the case outside of any formal partnership with locals was way more problematic than I had expected. Especially for scholars in change-oriented disciplines such as planning and architecture, their embodiment in the field means they face preconceived ideas about mutual roles which inform power relations. Because I was not self-aware of the dynamics I was entering, I used various 'instinctive' strategies such as: omitting information about myself, hoping to be identified as a person to trust, because I was powerless and with no personal interests in the case; devoting time to explain the reasons behind the study and also the limits in the know-how of a trainee. My prevailing fear of not being able to accomplish the study settled my priorities and affected the interaction with people.

During the training as a scholar pursuing a qualitative study, I was aware of the fact that my analysis of the urban system and the sewer infrastructure would not have been comparable to a technical map produced by engineers, and this was never my scope. Nonetheless, I struggled with my scientific background in learning qualitative methods and recognising my role. As I said, the main method I used to address the analysis of the case is Actor Network Theory (ANT). This choice was negatively influencing my experience during the data collection. The ANT literature does not pay attention to the process of data gathering/production and omits the researcher from the picture. Because ANT redefines agents according to their ability to produce

effects, it overcomes the separation between human agency and the agency of objects. Both categories are equally relevant for the effects they produce. In my case ANT was particularly useful to interpret the actual functioning of the sewer system made of pipes and pumps and of unconventional elements such as chairs, curbs, open areas and streets. Unfortunately, this brought me sometimes to de-humanise people when entering in contact with them and to not sufficiently acknowledge my agentic role in the fieldwork. I struggled with the idea that when ANT investigates humans and non-humans «their identity is defined through their interaction with other actors» (Cressman, 2009: 3) independently from the fact that those actors are humans or non-humans. Humans are considered only for their effects not for who they are. The agency of the researcher seems to be limited to the observation of those effects. On the contrary, as geographers say, with the method of actor network «ANT is thus able to sensitize fieldworkers to their own role in constructing the field they are describing. This underlines that an ever-present feature of fieldwork is that it partly creates the field it describes as it carves out situated knowledges of it» (Johannesson and Bærenholdt, 2009: 19). I add that researchers 'construct' the field not only through descriptions developed *after* fieldwork, but also through interactions and encounters *during* fieldwork. As I said, despite the materialist perspective, I discovered I could not detach myself from the social world. Nonetheless I developed a higher level of self-reflexivity only after the completion of the study.

I will now move from self-reflexivity to describe how I dealt with epistemological reflexivity, a process started during the elaboration of the study to address the aspect of its theoretical and methodological congruence.

10 May 2016 – meeting with a member of a civic organisation, approximately 50 y.o. (translation from my notes)

Extract 3: «We talk about his projects to install a little plant to treat water [...]. From his words I understand that the reason is economic, to cut costs of the car-wash activity he runs. [...] We move to the back where he shows me a prototype of a plant to treat and reuse water locally. At the moment, he is trying to improve the system using low-tech and cheap materials such as sacks and bins. [...] The last thing I

remember is his gaze, curious and sceptic at the same time. I think he was challenging me... is it because I am an activist? Or a researcher?».».

Engineers of centralised sewer systems work to produce technical drawings in which, for instance, they place the project of underground pipes on a layer and the overground elements of the city on another. In systems such as the one I analysed in the case study, informal interventions do not find place in the map of the state of the art. Maps I examined were representations of the existing or planned underground network, updated according to the progressive discoveries made by the engineers. In this case, forced centralisation (channelling wastewater into the existing network), diversion (deviating water from its path) and dispersion (moving water to areas where it could be absorbed) were performed by the self-implemented system. These performances were decided by the people, and the system – made by underground and overground elements – was influenced by these individual alterations. Nonetheless, the entire system was performing also other acts, not planned, not decided (stagnation of water in the central area, flash flooding, etc.). While my initial focus was on the second aspect – the human and non-human actors causing disruptive effects to be investigated with ANT – it was specifically during my experience in the field that I rearticulated my questions to consider also human agency in the process. In ANT the concept of translation is central and it is used to place on the same epistemological level all the elements involved in technical networks (also human actors). According to Callon, «translation involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different» (Callon, 1981: 211 as quoted in Cressman, 2009). The process of translation is then the process of including different humans and types of non-humans in the same sociotechnical network, in my case in the sewer system. I found this operation very useful during the analysis of the system. With this method I could explain that many objects not considered by engineers were also part of the sewer system (i.e. chairs and bins placed to stabilise manhole covers). On the other hand, to conduct the part of the study on micro-alterations (see extract 3), placing myself in the field and opening to interactions, required to move from the ANT perspective to the perspective of power, roles and human agency. It was a cyclical operation of translation. I intend

here *translation* as the ability to bridge different methods and strands of knowledge with while the researcher is developing the case study. Methodological creativity, which in my case was stimulated by encounters with people in the field, required the ability to be flexible during the development of the research project. Translating, as I intended it here in relation to the agency of the researcher, couples with the ability of *placement* which I explain as the framing and re-framing of the research project in the making. In my view, placement differs from the feminist concept of positionality, connected to the situatedness of knowledge that helps scholars to understand and eventually change position using self-reflexivity (Sultana, 2007). Placement is related to epistemic reflexivity, i. e. the cyclical adjustment of the research project on the basis of the fieldwork experience (for me the repeated encounters and informal partnerships with local people that made me to rediscuss my research questions). For young scholars in technical disciplines, placement consists in occupying an epistemological space that can be renegotiated overtime. Against the limitations deriving from the process of translation introduced by ANT, I suggest early career scholars to be aware that ANT can provide answers only to some questions and not others. During encounters with people I became aware that I could not interpret part of the collected data with ANT and, therefore, I needed to reframe my research questions accordingly.

A researcher or an activist... or both?

Summer 2016 was meant to be the last stage of data collection and my last opportunity to interact with people on-site. This part of the work gave me another insight in how partnerships can develop during a doctoral study and how relevant the role of the researcher is in making decisions affecting the course of his/her own study. After the first round of investigation I had a list of the potential actors to be involved, from which I noticed an unusually high number of local people and groups that were familiar with the topic of flooding and knew its relevance. Most of them had experienced daily burdens and some were even knowledgeable of the technical aspects of the infrastructural system. This list included civic associations of people directly affected by flooding, technicians who had worked as informal

consultants and activists, video makers and photographers, and local administrators that had to provide temporary and partial solutions to flooding. People's wide, heterogeneous and long-lasting involvement was a very specific aspect of the case.

By the time I entered the PhD program, I was already involved as a volunteer in environmental campaigns and actions with a national environmental association and I maintained this commitment during my PhD years and after. It had not affected my research design, and I did not use my affiliation to develop a formalised partnership between my two organizations. My dual role of institutional scholar and of activist did not 'interact' with each other until this last fieldwork stage. As a matter of fact, by that time, I had to become aware of the fact that being part of an environmental association was shaping my work and my experience in fieldwork – researching on flooding while getting in touch with local civic movements –, more than I had expected. I often clarified, with local activists, that my membership with this environmental association was not meant to intersect with my research activities. However, in several cases what I considered a private matter did complicate my interaction with informants and I perceived this double role as problematic, as when I annotated in my diary «The last thing I remember is his gaze, curious and sceptic at the same time. I think he was challenging me... is it because I am an activist? Or a researcher?» (see extract 3, paragraph 2). Some local activists did not believe my activity could have been disconnected from my involvement in an environmental NGO, to the extent that some of them started to see me as an environmental activist more than a scholar.

The two roles overlapped when, as environmental activist I was involved in my association's 2016 edition of the annual campaign aimed at increasing environmental awareness in citizens and pushing public authorities to take action. Part of the campaign consisted in monitoring pollutants in streams and canals of the Sarno river basin. That year, after my ten months of interaction with inhabitants, I decided with another fellow activist to carry out some additional sampling points in the village. The event created an unexpected overlapping between my role as an activist with a technical background and my role as a research trainee. The following extract is taken from the meeting I had with one my key informants, member of a local civic association, while we were visiting one of the areas later to be included in

the monitoring campaign (he is also the only person I met again after the end of my training in summer 2017):

22 July 2016 - meeting with a member of a civic organisation, approximately 30 y.o. (translation from my notes)

Extract 4: «We talk about burdens for people and he mentions the fact that some farmers asked for compensation; the cultivation ban in the area because of suspected pollution; water diversion; the changes in flooding patterns. We decide to go to see the place and we go with his car. We stop a hundred meters from the water tank and there is the famous manhole cover here, the one I saw in pictures. [...] We walk down to the fields where we see a water stream that seems coming from the street where we were before. Water has a strange colour and it disappears among the vegetation».

Few weeks after this conversation, the site was monitored. The results of the chemical analysis did not have disruptive effects among locals because the results of the analysed water sample were part of a long list of information confirming the presence of problems in many other areas of the river basin. Overall, data collected at the larger scale showed that water pollution was severe in most of the sampling points.

I participated in several, highly educative, environmental campaigns during the years of my formal undergraduate and postgraduate education. Most of these campaigns were related to water, allowing me to become familiar with the topic of pollutants in water and how institutional environmental authorities in Italy monitor water bodies. From my experience, I think there are not predetermined potentials and limits to scientific quantitative analysis. If the aim of activists is to influence governing bodies, quantitative analysis can be used by coalitions of different groups and organisations to generate a more effective voice (Takahashi, 2009). However, in my case I did not attempt to create any coalition between local activists and my environmental NGO, despite the fact that, as an activist, I continue to exercise political pressure against the pollution of the river basin. On the contrary, within the context of my research, I deliberately renounced to formalise this partnership in my study. As a researcher I still think that developing a partnership between the research institution, the local citizen groups and the NGO should have required time, effort and an adequate

re-framing of the research questions. I agree with Derickson and Routledge that it is possible to reconcile the academic and the activist roles «triangulating the research question that lays out our approach to the coproduction of knowledge with and for our community-based collaborators» (Derickson and Routledge, 2015: 1). However, in my case, the lack of time and support by more experienced engaged scholars was crucial. By the time I realized I could have gone in that direction, it was too late. For a research trainee interested in combining research and activism but without a background on how to do that, it would have been helpful to engage in a comprehensive initial evaluation of available time, resources and competencies. In addition to that, there were other reasons compromising my ability to combine research and activism: my initial research design based on qualitative methods and ANT did not favour the process of formulating research questions with and for my community-based collaborators. As a young researcher who wanted to enter the academic community, I underestimated the potential of involving non-academics as possible contributors and recipients of my study.

As a reflexive activist I would bring the attention to the role played by the mobilisation of quantitative knowledge by non-local activists, including myself. Some local residents hoped that a supralocal technical group could have increased the opportunities to exercise pressure on political bodies while others preferred to rely on local meetings and protests. Spatial scale in activism is a crucial processual component which defines the type of actions to be undertaken by activists according to the problem to be addressed (Takahashi, 2009). In the case of the village, the aspect of merging different scales and the inclusion of local problems in a larger environmental campaign on water pollution in the river basin would have required a much more adequate support. I see this as one of the potential ways to merge the role of the activist with the one of the researcher that, unfortunately, I did not have the time and energy to explore.

Epilogue: multiple roles of an engaged PhD student and the challenges of partnership

I started this paper arguing that academicians should pay attention to the role of young researchers in fostering

partnerships with non-academic subjects because this could advance their learning at the beginning of their careers. I see this particularly true for the Italian academic context, where I found very hard to move beyond my background oriented towards technical design.

My aim of investigating socio-technical infrastructures using a case study brought me to do fieldwork in a village in the Sarno river basin (Italy) to study the local sewer system. My interactions with locals did not result in helping a community affected by environmental burdens. I discussed my case to address how interactions were, instead, learning encounters that provided elements to discuss the agentic nature of young scholars, their opportunities and difficulties. As a young researcher in transdisciplinary urban studies, I had the opportunity to choose my topic of investigation and to experiment with theories and methods combining technical knowledge inherited from different disciplines. However, I began my research with the preconceived idea that a technician is the only author of his/her own work and that he/she is the only one responsible for it. I was not prepared for the epistemological shift caused by dynamics and expectations I encountered when entering in contact with people in the field. In the long journey towards the completion of my Dissertation, my ideas evolved around the fruitful intersection between academic research, fieldwork encounters and activism, when I became more familiar with fieldwork and realized the alternative roles I could play. However, it was hard to combine all three.

Several researchers working in complex, hostile, cross-cultural or faraway contexts have discussed the unexpected results of interacting with people in doctoral fieldwork (Naveed *et al.*, 2017; Caretta and Jokinen, 2017; Billo and Hiemstra, 2013; Ballamingie and Johnson, 2011). With my experience, I want to point out that the dimension of otherness in fieldwork – the experience of the encounter with somebody or something different from us during the research – is also relevant for scholars who work in places and with communities that are not distant. In my case, for instance, I struggled with the fact that my interpretations and my reflections were often altered by my sense of similarity and kinship, by being assimilated to either a local technician or a relative. The strategy of avoidance and omission I developed to cope with it did not help to build my self-confidence in the long

term. I suggest students to not under-evaluate the difficulties of interacting in a context they are already familiar with and approach more consciously the opportunity to be involved within the framework of a formal partnership with non-academics, even if such a partnership is temporary and occasional.

When I became more sensitive to the role of people in the transformation of the infrastructure, I expanded my study beyond the agency of non-humans. I called this operation *translation*, the ability to be creative and methodologically flexible in developing the case study. Linked to this, there was the ability of the researcher to learn how to place him/herself – ability I called *placement* – according to an epistemic shift and reworking the framework of the project in its making. For doctoral scholars, creativity in their research process is part of their identity development (Frick and Brodin, 2020) and it can be stimulated by non-academic actors.

The last part of my fieldwork interactions was discussed in paragraph 3, titled 'A researcher or an activist... or both?'. According to Derickson and Routledge (2015) scholarly, intellectual, and political merit have all to be considered in a research project, especially for young students. As an activist I supported the inclusion of my research case within a national campaign promoted by the NGO I volunteer for. However, this part of the work was not included in my dissertation and did not affect my research questions. Because I ran out of time and I did not have enough resources, experience and support, this intersection was just temporary and did not become a productive and transformative partnership, nor for the research neither for the community. After the end of the study, while my involvement in the activities of the NGO continued, my contacts with the members of the local civic movements have remained occasional and did not result in other activities. In my experience, being both an academician and an activist does not mean that it is easier to learn and find space to merge the two roles. It requires additional work. In a recent publication, Raynor (2019) spoke about the risk of young scholars leaving the academia considered that they need to undertake a double career to satisfy personal and professional development to be engaged researchers. I agree that the risk of dropout is serious. If young scholars that still work inside the academia and keep practising activism, like myself, need serious extra work to self-develop action research projects in informal contexts, their life can become miserable.

Finally, throughout the paper I identified temporary partnerships as a form of interaction that was characterising my case study, broadening the meaning of partnership to include different types of alliances knowledge production. Particularly for doctoral students, being aware of different forms of partnership and their ethical as well as epistemic implications could be very helpful instead of looking at creating partnerships as neutral and acritical operations. I suggest we invest on the agentic nature of young researchers in informal spaces of fieldwork to attempt creative experiments. On the other hand, providing support for long-term projects with communities as well as appropriate preparatory research courses for this goal is crucial.

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