The Wandering Ethnographer: Researching and Representing the City through Everyday Encounters

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Abstract: Drawing on fieldwork I conducted in Milan, Italy, in 2004-05 and in 2009, this paper is an open invitation to create experimental forms of ethnographic representation that could become part of the unfinished production of the everyday in urban locales. To this end, I reflect on several fieldwork encounters—Milanese people's commentaries, everyday incidents, as well as local cultural and activists' projects—that can provide a helpful model for such a practice. I argue that these varied interventions offer insight into complex social processes and disjunctures in contemporary Milan because they are small, quotidian, and temporary, and because they can easily travel through the urban terrain. Learning from these encounters, I propose that we, too, can produce stories and objects that speak by circulating: ethnographic interventions that use public space, activate affect and become companions to people's embodied journeys in city spaces.

Keywords: experimental ethnography, Milan, Italy, urban anthropology, public space

Résumé : À partir de recherche de terrain que j'ai menée à Milan, en Italie, en 2004-2005 et en 2009, cet article est une invitation ouverte à créer des formes expérimentales de représentation ethnographique qui pourraient faire partie de la production inachevée du quotidien dans les contextes urbains. À cette fin, je réfléchis à diverses rencontres vécues dans le cadre de la recherche – commentaires de Milanais, incidents du quotidien, de même que projets locaux, culturels ou militants – qui peuvent constituer un modèle utile pour une pratique de cet ordre. Je fais valoir que ces interventions variées permettent d'appréhender en partie des processus et des dichotomies sociales complexes dans le Milan contemporain parce qu'elles sont de portée modeste, quotidiennes et temporaires et parce qu'elles peuvent voyager facilement parmi le terrain urbain. De ce que nous apprenons de ces rencontres, je propose que nous aussi pouvons produire des histoires et des objets qui deviennent éloquents par leur circulation : des interventions ethnographiques qui utilisent l'espace public, mettent en branle l'affect et deviennent des compagnons des voyages incarnés des citoyens dans les espaces urbains.

Mots-clés : ethnographie expérimentale, Milan, Italie, anthropologie urbaine, espace public

"*I was riding on bus #92, from the Quartiere Bovisa, an old industrial and working class neighbourhood that now has no factories left, toward a more central area of the city of Milan where I was staying. It was 5:30 in the afternoon, the bus was full, and the traffic terrible. From my position close to the front door I overheard a conversation between the bus driver, a man about my age, and another passenger, an older woman. Talking, at first, about the traffic, the woman—who said she had been working with youth at risk for decades—and the driver quickly moved on to the situation of families and of society more generally. "Ah," said then the bus driver, "in our society there is a disjuncture between reality and the collective imaginary."*

Searching as I was for insights on a city in crisis but which represents itself as rich and glamorous, this sentence struck me because it so nicely encapsulated some of the contemporary paradoxes of Milan. Indeed, just after this comment, I reached my bus stop: an area where within a few blocks one can find an immense wasteland left by an abandoned train station, the headquarters of two of the most prestigious fashion houses, and several large social housing buildings where Italian low-income seniors and migrant families live. Two days later, I was talking to a friend in the Department of Anthropology at the University, and told her about what the bus driver said. "Ah, but that must be my friend," she said, "he graduated a short while ago with a thesis on the collective imaginary, and now he works as a transit driver!"

In 2009, when this encounter took place, I had returned to Milan, the largest urban centre in northern Italy, to continue the fieldwork I started in 2004 on the lives of public spaces in the city. I was interested in tracing some of the ways in which different Milanese conceptualize, narrate and participate in streets, plazas, and parks, and some of the contentions associated with their everyday use. In 2009, I was particularly intrigued

by the intersections of memory and imagination as they emerged in discourses and lived experiences connected to different urban locales. To quote, once again, the bus driver, I wanted to know how different "collective imaginaries" were being fostered or challenged by the construction, appropriation or interpretation of particular sites. Because public space is inherently unfinished and it does not "belong" to everyone in the same way (Dines 2002; Maritano 2004; Mitchell 1995), this is necessarily a difficult affair.

In Milan, like in most other cities in fact, those who have more resources at their disposal have an easier time claiming a legitimate presence in public space than do less-advantaged residents like low-income people, visible minorities and anyone who is understood as an immigrant or non-Italian. Although ideally public space should be the medium through which people can be confronted with "difference without exclusion" in Young's terms (Caldeira 2000:301), often streets and plazas become an experiential field where those who consider themselves Milanese can distinguish "others" because they act, look, or speak differently than them. Discussions and varying interpretations of public space then reflect and negotiate different inhabitants' sense of entitlement to the city. Moreover, in a rich metropolis where many live in poverty (see Benassi 2005), the construction of new neighbourhoods and public spaces in conjunction with massive redevelopment projects had become a fertile ground for debating the past, the present and the future.

Milan has been often characterized as a particularly fragmented city due to a series of important changes that took place over the past 60 years. Once a major industrial centre with a strong working class and unionist culture, it very rapidly became a city of empty factories, gentrifying neighbourhoods and a tertiary economy centred on fashion and design (see Foot 2001). The transition from the factory to the catwalk starting at the end of the 1970s was, moreover, accompanied by a wave of international migrants who, as a group, encounter difficult social and economic conditions.[1] Today, an uneasy multiculturalism, deepening social inequalities and the lack of affordable housing are all contributing to a widespread sense of crisis in the city. In spite of this, Milan's metropolitan region has become one of the hottest real estate markets in Italy (Aalbers 2007) and it is currently being transformed through sweeping redevelopment projects (Bolocan Goldstein and Bonfantini 2007). Building—both materially and figuratively—on massive construction sites, developers, city officials and the major players in the fashion sector seem intent on narrating Milan to itself as a city which grows and glitters.

Paradoxically, while these projects are creating countless new residences, they are doing little to make them affordable to those who are in dire need of housing. As urban activists often decry, Milan is a city of empty apartments and homeless people (see, for example, Copyriot et al. 2005). In this context, the premises of empty factories and abandoned train stations, where major urban redevelopment projects are taking place, are becoming sites where the dreamlike plans of developers clash with urban activists' utopian desires and with the dramatic everyday life of the homeless people who take refuge there.[2]

The bus driver's comment then struck me as a well-suited description of some of these situations and processes. The "collective imaginary" that is currently being promoted sees spaces and people projected towards the future less through common commitments to an inclusive and just society than through identification with a cosmopolitan and aesthetic creativity. While this imaginary plays an important role in the redevelopment of the city, it does not seem to benefit or include more marginal sections of the population, who, on the contrary, have been further displaced from the city because of continuing gentrification.

The transit conversation, however, fascinated me also because of its unlikely location. In particular, it left me with a keen sense of anthropology and anthropological insight literally circulating through the city, entering people's conversations, and existing in the most ordinary public spaces. (Transit is perhaps not officially a public space, but it is generally used and perceived as such.) Sparked by the bus commentary, and from other exchanges in and about Milanese streets and plazas, my paper is then an invitation to imagine an anthropology that could circulate and live in city locales and could avail itself of the very medium of public space—particularly of the ephemerality and intimacy of its encounters.

The driver's phrase was all the more striking because it resonated with a wider traffic of commentaries that I learned about in the city, from activists' interventions to cultural projects of various kinds, to the stories of the inhabitants who took me for city walks and showed me places that were significant to "their" Milan. More to the point, it was its form as a circulating intervention that mirrored a wider sensibility, or strategy, which seemed to animate the city.

The bus incident, in fact, occurred in a context where several ideas and things were circulating and appearing in interesting ways. As soon as I arrived in Italy in January 2009, for example, I came across a large billboard that read, in white letters over an all-black background: "looking for Gramsci in Milan." I was puzzled. Who was

looking for Gramsci and why? Wanting to take a picture of the billboard, I returned a few days later with my camera, only to discover that it was covered by an advertisement for a wrestling match. Gramsci's disappearance left me wondering for weeks: are they still looking for him? Who else are they searching for? Some weeks later, I saw a postcard pinned on a wall, with the same writing and background as the billboard, that read, "is culture politics?" and led me to a public art exhibition by Alfredo Jaar on the role of culture in society.[3]

The same day I saw the postcard, I found a shelf in the subway station where people could leave books for others to read, and that evening, I heard about a group of people active in Milan who leave books of their choosing in places such as parks, streets or popular stores, for other people to encounter them randomly. Another interesting example was stencilled, unsigned sentences in green ink which started to show up on building walls in one of the neighbourhoods of the city. They were insistently asking: "who will defend us from vigilante squads?" This last circulation was a bitter, critical response to a proposed law on security which sought to institute groups of volunteers to patrol the streets at night with the alleged goal of keeping women safe but the suspected aim of further harassing and intimidating non-Italian immigrants. Some more, some less directly, these circulations seemed to mirror and feed into more general social themes and concerns, such as the creation of something called culture, and various political engagements. In the words of Stewart, as an "opening onto something," they showed "a thicket of connections between vague yet forceful and affecting elements" (Stewart 2008:72).

So we have: Gramsci on a wall; Calvino on a park bench; Yourcenar in one of the fridges of an Ikea store; and, an anthropologist on the bus. Without implying that what circulates in the city is always progressive and inspiring, and indeed exactly because often it is not, these encounters made me wish for an alternative ethnographic representation that could follow de Certeau's "thick and thins" of urban movements (de Certeau 1984:93) and emerge within Stewart's "ordinary life" (2005:1029). Both Stewart and de Certeau suggest that we pay attention to practices, ideas, and relationships that emerge in the nooks of the everyday. Although not fully formed into systems, social objects, definite opinions or publicized truth, these events and "ruptures" (Stewart 2008:73) can nonetheless tell us something about what is going on.

De Certeau, for example, was inspired by how the movement of people through streets can escape dominant representations of space, thus making room for other stories, itineraries and sources of critique. And Stewart calls

us to listen for "emergent vitalities and the ordinary practices that instantiate or articulate them, if only partially and fleetingly" (2005:1028). According to Stewart, this requires a different approach to theory and a different mode of doing research. She talks about a "weak theory" (2008), one that does not result in "perfect links between theoretical categories and the real world" but rather is a tentative reflection by "a subject caught in the powerful tension between what can be known and told and what remains obscure or unspeakable but is nonetheless real" (2005:1028). Instead of an encompassing framework for understanding, what is needed is a sensibility for the jarring coexistence and coming apart of aspects of the social.

Taking inspiration from the bus driver, the stencils, and more, in this paper I argue, so to speak, also for a "weak" representation, for ethnographic interventions and stories that could become enmeshed in the unfinished production of the everyday. I ask: could we create "things which speak by circulating"—interventions that aim at getting lost, so that they could be found and used in the everyday traffic of bodies, discourses, and ideas? The many stories, interrogations and critiques I learned about are too small and quotidian to constitute a movement or to be noticed as a social phenomenon, yet they nonetheless leave traces in the city. What if they mattered exactly because they are small enough to travel?

Words and Walks

My interest in circulating and emerging moments of insight was a direct result of one of my research practices: I had been asking different people—nine women and three men of different classes, nationalities and ages—to guide me on a walking tour of "their Milan" as a way to explore varying conceptions and uses of urban public space. These walking tours alerted me to small, travelling forms of social critique, because, like them, they yielded moments of insight that emerged from temporary folds of daily life, and which depended on an embodied, moving positionality. Using streets and plazas as sites of intervention, the itineraries remained open, contextual and ephemeral, feeding from and yet resisting Milanese everyday life. Let me describe one example.

The encounter with the bus driver took place at the end of a very long day. Earlier, I had met one of my research participants, a low-income elderly woman with a keen passion for her city, who had agreed to show me the Bovisa neighbourhood where she had lived all her life. The walk with Eliza turned out to be only the first segment of a seven hour walk we concluded over the course of two additional days. The main reason as to why we needed that much time is because her neighbourhood had

been radically transformed in past decades. So, almost street-by-street, Eliza presented and narrated to me the places that are now invisible, what remained the same, and the new buildings, plazas, and churches that she had seen being constructed. The following is an excerpt from one of our tours:

> There was this house...and I remember that when I was a child people said that it was a strange house... then it happened that it became offices, and after the offices it became a post office...
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> This house here is where I was born...It was called the big barrack...because there lived 110 families. It was a village. People also lived in the attics. There were cellars, where we escaped to during the war...it was a house, but it was also a village.
>
> Then the municipality took it. They wanted to do homes for rail workers, and then they wanted to do offices...So people started to move out...So they gave social housing to the ones who had remained, and they walled it up, until the time they would know what to do with it. They walled it in the 1970s, from 1970 to 1974. "Today we will demolish it" [they would say], "tomorrow," who knows?" So the 1990s came. At a certain point we saw the scaffolding...they were restructuring it...And so it lived anew. The house is more than one hundred years old because when my parents moved there in the thirties it was already old.
>
> When we were children, it was not like this. Here it was not like this. The trolley car passed here, but there were gardens, and there we went to play...We would be looking at the stars, we would look for the big dipper...There was a radio that was bombarded during the war...There is an enormous change. That house remained, and this one they are redeveloping it. This one is still there but as you see [is also being transformed]...Now here is the Porsche [car dealer], and before it there was a paper factory...
>
> Here there was a business, a foundry. Now there is a wall, before there was a courtyard. They made a garden of it, but it was my playing courtyard...
>
> [This was] a telecommunication factory...It was a postwar factory, I think that five thousand people worked there, it was a resource [for the neighbourhood]...When they demolished it, we all kept asking ourselves: "my goodness, was it...was it so big?" And when we would see the empty space inside, passing by with the bus, we would say to each other "my goodness, what was inside?" It was a marvel! [February 18, 2009]

Bovisa is a striking example of some of the forces and processes that have shaped Milan in the last decades. Central to Eliza's recollections was growing up in a self-consciously left-leaning, working class area of the city, where factories were central landmarks, and dictated much of the rhythm of everyday life (Parsi and Tacchi 2003; Petrillo 2004). With the advent of deindustrialization in Milan at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, all of the large factories in Bovisa closed. As Eliza recalls, when its last one, the Face, was demolished at the beginning of the 1990s, impressing one last time its vastness and centrality on the neighbourhood, Bovisa was already on its way to becoming a very different place. Now it houses part of the University of Milan, many of its students, as well as several immigrant communities. Manufacturing businesses have been replaced by service companies and even its main plaza has been redesigned.

As Eliza guided me through the neighbourhood recounting these changes, her commentary was accompanied by striking landscapes: older streets and plazas sat side by side with empty fields and massive new buildings made of glass. With the precision of a mapmaker, Eliza's narration equally took hold of all parts of the neighbourhood, from the new tunnels covered in graffiti, to the remainders of abandoned industrial premises, to the older churches and courtyards. Yet this was not simply an inventory of things or locations. Our walking tour became a way to construct a space from where Eliza could tell about the area and its transformations as a subject in space who could anchor the past and the future. From this point of view, however, the movement of time was less the succession of buildings and forms, than a simultaneous appearance of the old and the new in the streets and landscapes of the neighbourhood.

Our itinerary also embodied Eliza's acute sense of displacement. Our walk became a struggle with surveillance cameras and security guards as Eliza tried to take photographs of the neighbourhood she considered her home. People in uniforms rushed to us at the gates of the glittering new buildings of various businesses and of the local university. Although an older woman and her small-statured companion could have not looked particularly threatening, the guards glared at the camera in our hands with suspicion and unceremoniously made sure that we crossed the street and went elsewhere. The feeling that we were being controlled while trying to witness these transformations became visible in Eliza's disconcertion at having to play spy in the streets and plazas that she had known so intimately since the time of her childhood and of which she could narrate so exactly the stories and events—much more exactly than the people who now guarded them so carefully.

Without criticizing new developments, and indeed wondering at the beauty of new buildings, Eliza's walk became an oblique commentary on some of the faultlines

of disconnection between different eras of the neighbourhood. One of the things that struck me during this itinerary was the extent to which Eliza's story created an uneasy location, as it stepped to the side of the trope of a glorified passage from the past to the future through a promising present. While official discourses in town have been celebrating the swift succession of eras, Eliza's words and walk paced the widening gap between the old and the new. The sense that the former had not just passed and gone but rather, had been lost, and the insight that what was found in its place was so different than what had gone missing invited ghostly inhabitants. These ranged from industrial equipment left resting on the lush grass between residences, to vacant fields and abandoned industrial buildings.

During our third walk, for example, we started to note with an eerie surprise that the metallic frame of the gasometer (a very large industrial structure which was used from the early 1900s to store gas, see Photographs 1 and 2 below) that had been left as a historical landmark, was visible from almost all areas of the neighbourhood. Its skeletal metal frame seemed to follow us around, and was casting its shadow on abandoned lots as well as on shiny new buildings. "It is the spirit of the place," summarized Eliza. Either as a spirit's blessing or a ghostly haunting, this and other pieces of industrial archaeology are handy reminders that Milan today is crisscrossed by the tangled connections between "the city in which we were living, the ruins of the city in which we were born, and the city in which we wanted to live" (Copyriot et al. 2005).

Walking tours, like the one with Eliza, became for me a helpful model for people's connections to the city, for public space and for ethnography itself. As Nicolini (1998) so poignantly shows in her article on San Francisco, a simple walk through the city can awaken memories and social critique and generally reveal aspects of the city that differ radically from one person to the next. For this reason, Guano (2003) also suggests that a person's itinerary can help us understand how social relations shape spaces and in turn how our presence and movements through particular locales help to define our identities within a social landscape. It is not surprising then, that my interlocutors pointed to different sites and told me a variety of stories.

What I found particularly interesting, however, was less the actual locations that they showed me, than the form of their commentaries. For, if the itineraries created a space of intervention from which to comment on the city, this speaking position was a walking position, realized as a nexus of physical, social and metaphorical journeys. For one, it was deeply dependent on my guides' symbolic and material place in the city, the ease of their movements and the constraints and possibilities they lived with. One of my interlocutors, for example, walked me through the places that are particularly significant for an immigrant working as a street vendor, as he had once been. From this perspective, some locations appear obscure and inaccessible, while others, like train stations and plaza, are important places for work and they appear open and invite social interaction. Another one of my guides talked about the difficulty of being a low-income, visible-minority woman in a city that greatly values and judges appearances. The walking tour that we did together became a search for inexpensive stores that offer resources for dressing beautifully and thus becoming "Milanese" in the
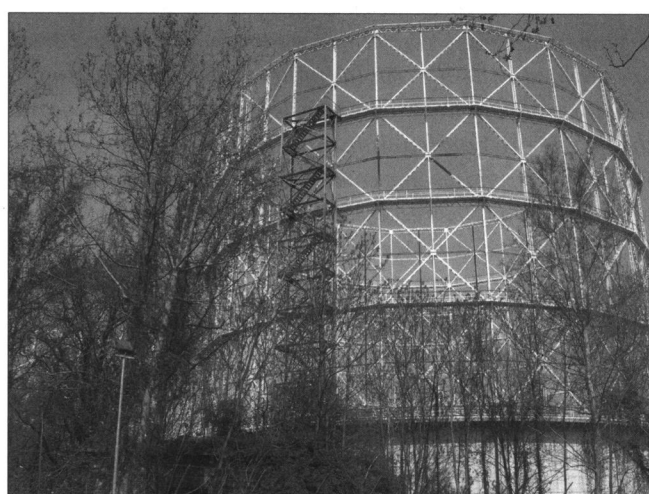
Photographs 1 and 2: Remnants of a gas storage structure in Bovisa, Milan, visible throughout the neighbourhood. (Photographed by the author, 2009).

eyes of other inhabitants. For the other, because these commentaries and stories were made possible by walking, much of what my guides taught me emerged from the surprises of sudden encounters and from the process of looking for something—remembered, lost, known, or suspected—in the midst of urban daily life. Rather than establishing a body of facts, the itineraries were about knowing and representing in a moment in time. As a particular form of commentary they were then similar to the other things that spoke by circulating. Like them, their insights did not generate comprehensive explanations or new theories on the city, but wedged themselves between awkward conjunctures of social realities. As such, they were stark reflections on some of the rifts that accompany Milanese daily life.

To put it differently, the walks seemed to be such apt interventions because, as Boeri (2007) points out, Milan is perhaps best understood by following the intricate, small movements that compose the city. This is because much of its social reality is notoriously fragmented, contradictory and hard to narrate (see also Bolocan Goldstein and Bonfantini 2007; Foot 2001); in short, it is a city for subjectivities that are at the brink of things. Consider, for example, the following two incidents from my fieldwork in the city. I include them here because—with Boeri and the other authors of an extraordinary collection on living arrangements and forms of inhabiting Milan—I am seeking ways to give room to "diffuse" and fleeting social instances which do not add up to a neat anatomy of the city but rather produce a "multitude of small shudders in the urban body" (Boeri 2007).

I

It is noon at the local medical office in a street close to the periphery. A busy crowd of women, men and children, speaking many different languages, has been waiting in line for much of the morning. The office just closed and the people are now leaving: most have finally seen a representative and in some cases had their queries answered and their problems resolved. As the old doors of the offices are locked and a new silence envelopes the halls of the building, a dozen seniors linger on. Outside, it is cold and raining and perhaps they want to delay an unpleasant journey home. As I prepare to leave, I am struck by their conversation, and by the particular atmosphere of the place. Some of the seniors have started talking in dialect and one of them begins to recall what it was like, decades ago, when she had a family and prepared pasta for her husband, who has now passed away. It was always at noon, like now, that she would place the pot on the stove. The other people respond in quiet voices. As this

conversation grips me, I am surprised by how easily this group of seniors could be described as a snapshot of the old Milan, in contrast to the cosmopolitan population inhabiting the city today. As quintessential Milanese, the seniors seem to speak a common language and refer to shared, familiar gestures.

Yet being in this moment and encountering this scene also reminds me that it is exactly a longing for this familiar past that fuels many heated debates on who should be welcomed in Milan. For many inhabitants, non-Italian newcomers cannot contribute to the culture and long-standing identity of the city. At noon in the halls of the medical building, it is tempting to either romanticize the seniors' Milanese-ness and the loss of an era, or on the contrary, discount this moment in which it emerges, as insignificant. What are we then to make of this awkward gap between the closing of one door and the opening of another? Of this small, ordinary encounter, with its echo and trajectory that can cause both strife and the possibility of memory and history?

A couple of days after, as I walk in the same area of the city under the rain, I pass by the immigrant street seller who always peddles his wares in front of the supermarket. Over the past months, I have always seen him alone. Today, he is huddled under an umbrella with an older white Italian man and they are chatting. Their quiet conversation, under the supermarket awning and the umbrella, looks as intimate and striking as the one I witnessed at the medical building. This encounter, however, suggests different possibilities: an alliance which is not dependent on essential identities but is a momentary juncture between complex itineraries. To put it differently: the question here is not what we have lost, but what we seek to find in its place. (January 23, 2009)

II

A man with a violin gets on the subway. His violin is repaired with tape; his backpack has holes cut into it to allow the loudspeaker inside to sound through, the bow is already in his hand, and the violin almost on his shoulder. On the other side of the wagon, but facing a different direction, is a cop. He looks straight ahead, and does not see the man with a violin just a few metres away. The violinist does not look at the cop at all, but lowers his bow, looks at his shoes, and slowly sits down in an empty seat nearby. The power of authority—more specifically of the new stricter bylaws introduced in the past couple of years by the right wing municipality—becomes suddenly apparent in these two looks that do not cross. The violinist is the one who is forced to see—although pretending not to—even when and exactly because he is invisi-

ble, or better, one of those inhabitants desired to be invisible by others. (March 12, 2009).

These three encounters—with the seniors, the street seller, and the violinist—tell us about some of the current issues, anxieties and inequalities of contemporary Milan. The lingering group of seniors reminds us of the demographic crisis and how many older people in Milan, especially women, find themselves alone and with scarce resources. The medical building is located very close to several blocs of social housing where many Italian seniors and international immigrant families live. This cohabitation has often generated complex antagonisms rather than common ground. Guidicini summarizes one of these divisions, by pointing out that the only thing that these two groups of inhabitants have in common is a pervasive feeling of nostalgia. That too, writes Guidicini, seems to separate rather than unite them, as it is a longing for very different things, social relations and cultural or historical contexts (2008:20).

The man with the violin reminds me that not everyone can claim urban spaces equally. The situation is rendered worse by recent anti-immigrant backlash and legislation, and by a municipal government whose priorities are public security and control. Indeed, just a few weeks after riding the subway with the violinist, I witnessed two rather spectacular raids by the police against a group of street vendors who were selling their wares close to the doors of the Sforza Castle, one of the main tourist destinations in Milan. In this context, people at the margins who have been described as the invisible inhabitants of the city, become even more so (see, for example, Parenti 2007). The violinist also shows that sometimes pathways cross exactly by not crossing, or that avoiding another can also be a way of encountering them. Paone (2008) for example, argues that in Italy, stowing away the other through spaces of containment, such as camps, transitory centres and detention sites, has become the privileged way of welcoming, knowing, naming and encountering new migrants, seen as an "humanity in excess" (Paone 2008:85).

Caught in the movement of people, ideas, images and experiences, the violinist, the seniors, and the street seller are the results of powerful economic, social and political systems. However, they are also something more: they are, so to speak, travelling instants: parts of currents of encounters, meanings and reinterpretations. What do we make of their appearances, of their momentary emergence? More than just adding to a coherent ethnographic body of evidence, they, like the ghosts of the gasometer, keep peering up from behind the corners of social experience.

Or, think of Subway #5: starting in late 2009, several people have told me that the municipality is building it, and everyone pointed out how peculiar it is that the city is constructing a Subway #5, when only the lines 1, 2 and 3 exist. Where did the Subway #4 go? Did they forget about it? Did it get lost underground? Is it because 4 is not a good number? Or is it because the municipality wants the city and its subway to sound grander and bigger than it actually is? Of course there is an explanation—the planned #4 will be built later because of a delay in the funding—but this reason is not what is remembered. What circulates in the city is the oddity of having #5 but not #4. Most importantly, this wondering of where #4 might have been lost becomes yet another story about a city where much is bizarre, unjust and unjustified.

I am fascinated by these moments in which a difficult social reality becomes apparent and starts posing questions, and even more by the way in which these interrogations remain part of the dynamic immediacy of the streets, the plazas and the courtyards they emerged from. What I want to suggest here is that this could provide us with a helpful model for different ethnographic representations. The walking tours were inspiring for the kind of travelling ethnography I am envisioning also because they led me to appreciate the smallness and ordinariness of public spaces and alerted me to the power of ephemerality, embodiment and imagination within them. My guides showed me public space by activating it: public space emerged as that which allowed our very interaction. In this process, they reminded me that public space exists because of its constant creation by particularly positioned people—in the words of Don Felice, one of my guides, public space is a "shifting sand dune" always changing, yet inevitably reassembling under the winds of social interaction.

Moreover, while I witnessed several rallies and demonstrations during which plazas and streets work as crucial loci for representation (Mitchell 1995), for political campaigns and as potential stages for revolutions, I was greatly seduced by the subtle power of affect and imagination as my guides reinterpreted the most ordinary public spaces to suggest different perspectives and possibilities. While claiming and contesting public spaces can have important effects because streets and plazas are replete with social processes that extend beyond them, it is also accurate to say that people engage with public spaces by virtue of them also being a very immediate and common-sensical part of their lives, and one connected with their feelings, movements, sensual experiences and memories. It is telling, in this respect, that several people in Milan when I described my research said, "ah, you want to know how people *live* the city!" (field notes, 28 October 2004).

My guides taught me that public spaces can some-times work as a locus for political engagement, commen-tary and change because, by virtue of their surprises, their openness and their daily re-creation and enactment, they provide us with moments in which we are called to witness and to represent, to use fantasy and imagination along with critical thinking, thus learning, as Spivak puts it, some "lessons otherwise" (Gordon 1997:25). Walking with my guides then led me to wonder: how can we har-ness public space and its imaginations to make anthro-pology matter more in ordinary life? How can we follow circulating moments of insight to enliven and give form to our own social critique? In other words, how can we invent an ethnographic representation that can live in the space of the city, in the time of everyday life, can activate affect, and that can become a companion to people's journeys within urban spaces?

Booklets

Returning, however obliquely, to my initial story of anthro-pology on and in transit, I found that a helpful model for public space, and perhaps also for a possible kind of anthro-pology, could be a series of booklets produced by an organ-ization called Subway which circulate on buses and sub-way stations. They are thin, as small as a hand, and each contains a short fiction, or non-fiction story. The length of their narration is measured in the numbers of bus (or sub-way) stops needed to read them. Here are some of their titles, translated from the Italian: "DDC: One Academic Thriller for Five Stops," "Underground Travellers: Nine Poems, One per Bus Station," "The Missed Witness: A Comedy for 10 Stops."

Here, I want to talk about the booklet not so much as a particular project used by passengers in specific ways (that would require a careful ethnography of the book-lets' use in Milan, which I must postpone to a later time), but rather as an intriguing model for ethnographic com-mentary. What I find so interesting in the booklets is their capacity to speak while travelling and to become co-pas-sengers by virtue of their very smallness and ephemer-ality. Because they fit in a pocket they can be carried along and be shared. Because they come in different lengths, depending on the number of stations, they become part of the journey. As a small, fleeting companion to people's movements in the city, it seems to me that they act like a bridge, translating literature into momentary and inti-mate encounters.

In other words, they work a bit like public space as that which is small and ordinary, and close to people's everyday lives, while being at the same time, also vast and extensive, shaping and shaped by wider structures,

Photograph 3: Booklets produced by Subway-Letteratura to promote emerging writers and to find wider audiences for lit-erary works (for more information, please see www.subway-letteratura.org). (Photographed by the author, 2010) .

systems and processes. As Pratt (1988) so beautifully nar-rates, when we go for a walk, our directions, journeys and encounters are shaped by what we can do and who we can be on those streets. In turn, because history, power dif-ferentials and complex identities become intelligible as they are embodied in simple gestures, a look, a conver-sation or a walk in our neighbourhood, those itineraries and social interactions can at times realize temporary spaces from where we can comment on and possibly change the city around us.

In suggesting that we theorize an anthropology of the booklet, what I want to emphasize here is that the way in which complex social practices and structures of power intersect at an "ordinary little place"—like the bench by the bus stop and the small market plaza down the road—might provide us with a useful, albeit fleeting space of intervention. Keeping Edwards' (1997) warning in mind, that when anthropology gets trivialized and trav-els as pop culture it can have very negative results, I ask: is there a way to invent an anthropology of the booklet, as a way to practice a kind of itinerant and circulating ethnography that could speak through images, words, objects or performances and stir discussions and emerg-ing social commentary?

Another interesting feature of the booklets is that they so intimately partake in the tide of things lost and things found that seems to animate Milan and that we might find relevant in other cities as well. To put it simply, the book-lets are easy to find because they are also easy to lose—that is, to disseminate. Far from being just a practical detail, this could direct us to a useful theoretical approach

and methodological strategy. Indeed, many of the circulations I mentioned above use the familiar concept of leaving something behind and then finding it again as a way to connect people, circulate ideas and generate debate. In the context of contemporary Milan, this simple and playful strategy can be a powerful way to emphasize the ruptures between what has been forgotten or intentionally cancelled and what has taken its place. Returning to Eliza and the seniors, an attention to what has been lost and what we seek to find can help us resist too easy a nostalgia in favour of a critical questioning of the forces and subjects who are shaping the future.

Public space is a useful terrain of intervention here also because it often works as that time and space "in between." In the specific cases of my guides, it was a gap between the subtle movements of searching, losing and finding that gave depth and vitality to collective memory and brought forth lingering questions about self, others and society. Public spaces are privileged sites where these ruptures are articulated, commented and reinterpreted because in many respects they are crossroads of paths (personal, collective, research-wise) that always involve the leaving of something and the looking for something else or elsewhere. This is never an innocent or simple practice. As public space itself is always contested and relational—a nexus of journeys weaved from different life stories, positionalities, interests and interpretations—the feeling of loss of one is often claimed as the rightful appropriation of another.

Producing booklets rather than, or in addition to, ethnographies might be a way for our research to partake of this losing in order to generate little interventions which could be "found" in everyday life. These stories, ideas, questions, performances, actions, connections and traces could help us to pose questions at the intersections between what is solid and certain and what is more fleeting, and perhaps also more eerie, spectral and uncertain. Experimenting with creating booklets could then help us to invent ethnographic forms of actions and engagements which, by being part of these urban tides, could allow us to remain a small, fleeting part of the waves we aim to investigate.

Lastly, booklets can come in different forms. Consider, for example, the following two projects that are, so to speak, a spatial versions of booklets. A few months after Alfredo Jaar's posters and postcards about culture and society had interrogated the city, Milanese designer Giulio Iaccheti presented a project called the "Feet of Memory" as part of his exhibition "Disobeying Objects" at the Triennale Design Museum (29 May to 28 June 2009). The "Feet of Memory" is a stencil that, when painted over,

leaves the imprint of a pair of shoes. It tells passersby that "someone was walking here, paused and looked in that direction." According to Iacchetti (2009), the stencil allows its user to direct other people's gaze to particular landmarks, urban sites, signs and commemorative plaques by leaving a painted trace of a person's journey and of a reflective pause within it. While being an act of narrating and commemorating, its central characteristic is that it leaves room for critique and interpretation, as it can be used to remember different things and to emphasize different aspects and locations of the city, depending on what is significant to its user. As Iacchetti described, following the exhibition in Milan, the painted pairs of feet subtly and peacefully invaded city streets, as people who had received the stencil at the Triennale exhibition used it to create footprints on sidewalks in front of different landmarks and sites, thus composing circulating, small and fleeting messages to others.

A little earlier, in April 2009, the Esterni Association presented a weeklong project to activate public spaces as sites of cultural production, sociability and debate. The organizers and participants occupied ten car-parking spaces, the "2m times 5" as they called it, to realize ten provocative and interactive public design projects in the streets of Milan, thus creating almost a spatial version of booklets. People wandering in the streets on 18 April found, instead of a parked car, a round bench where they could sit with other passers-by and swing; an eight-person bicycle to produce energy for playing music in the street; a mini workshop where for hemming pants and sewing new clothes; a mat to "park" themselves and rest; a place to have a public pedicure; and much more.

In talking about these projects, my aim here is to suggest ideas and examples that might prove "good to think with." More precisely, I want to alert us to the many interesting, witty, and inspiring practices already happening around us. I believe that we can learn a lot from these projects, ideas and circulations, but not by producing careful definitions of them or an all-encompassing description. As Stewart has recently written, the point "is not to judge the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation 'right' but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance" (2008:73).

In other words, I am interested in how they might surprise and "grip us," and shift our ways of looking, listening, walking and writing. The reason for paying attention to these practices is that they might help us explore ways of participating in the tides of things lost and things
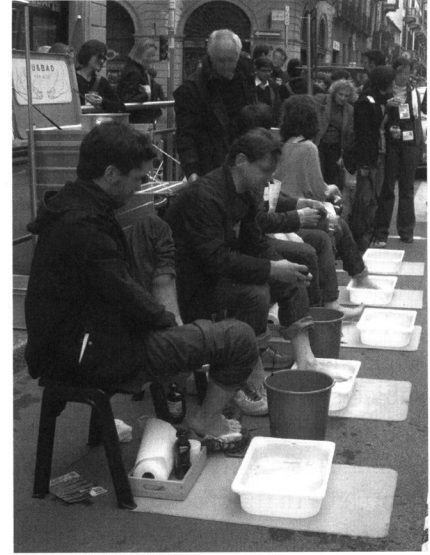
Photographs 4 and 5: Some examples of the Esterni Association's "2m times 5" project in Milan in 2009. (Photographed by the author).

found that seem to animate Milan and perhaps other cities as well. In suggesting this, my goal is to open a door rather than provide a map for the journey. I leave it up to you, the reader, to delineate the specific forms that these interventions could take. As such, this paper is like a booklet—a small provocative question that could become, for a number of stations, a companion to your own ethnographic itineraries.

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Notes

1　International migrants are, for example, more likely than Italians to work in undesirable, dangerous and lower-paid occupations, while often suffering from widespread discrimination (see Caritas/Migrantes 2008).

2　See Copyriot et al. (2005) for examples of alternative redevelopments. Osservatori Naga (2003) discusses how homeless individuals and families take refuge in abandoned areas (vacant factory buildings and industrial sites) and live there in hiding.

3　Between November 2008 and February 2009, the Chilean contemporary artist Alfredo Jaar used posters on several common advertising surfaces (the sides of buses, the walls of buildings, etc.) and free postcards to ask the city provocative questions about the meaning and role of culture. The captions included: "What is culture?"; "Is culture politics?"; "Is culture necessary?"; "Looking for Pasolini in Milan"; and "Looking for culture in Milan." This public art project was called "Questions, questions" and included public discussions led by Jaar (see, for example, Tamisari 2009).

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