

MAIN SECTION

Embodied Epistemologies and Ethics of Care: Rethinking the City as a Passionate public space

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the nexus between politics, bodies, and urban spaces from an intersectional, transfeminist, and queer perspective. By questioning traditional approaches to public space, it argues that the relationship between bodies and the city is historical, contingent, and rooted in power dynamics, while also constituting a key site for practices of resistance and political creation.

Drawing on trans/feminist tools—namely the practice of positioning, the embodied gaze, and the ethics of care—the paper re-reads urban dynamics as inherently political, taking into account bodies, emotions, postures, and collective gestures, and challenging the foundational private/public dichotomy. Transfeminist and queer movements thus point toward a new epistemology of the city, one that disrupts the public space of Western patriarchal traditions and their claims to homogeneity and universality, revealing cities as traversed, contested, teeming, and passionate spaces.

KEYWORDS

Public Space; Ethics of Care; Embodied Subjectivities; Political Practices; Emotions

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Power, politics, public space

It is well established, both in the scientific literature and in political activism, that politics, power, and urban space are deeply intertwined. Academic scholarship on this topic is extensive, and over the past twenty years there has been a strong re-emergence of political groups emphasizing the inextricability of this relationship. These movements have given renewed life to the idea—originally articulated by Henri Lefebvre in the 1970s—that space is inherently political.¹

On the one hand, we know that the very idea of space is intrinsically political and changes across historical contexts and social cultures. Urban spaces, far from being merely material backdrops for social interactions, are also symbolic spaces that transcend their physical boundaries and transform in relation to each society's understanding of itself, of otherness, and of politics. Public space is thus contingent and mutable: its interpretations—and even the emotional relationships we establish with it—shift over time and according to our position within society.

The city is the space we inhabit, where social activities and interactions are conceived and enacted; it is where taxonomies, exclusions, and relationships among social actors are defined, and where our relationship with otherness is articulated. It is also the space in which we emerge as social and political subjects, and where politics takes on specific, situated forms. As such, the city is the site of both individual and collective dynamics that shape everyday experience.

If, following Hannah Arendt,² we define politics not merely as an institutional domain but as a space of acting together—“in concert”—an *in-between* marked by initiative, relation, contingency, and the unexpected, brought onto the scene by singular, unique, and unrepeatable subjects, then it becomes evident that politics itself is relational and deeply connected to material space. The notion of politics as a *space of appearance*³ highlights the relationship between physical sites and political subjects as corporeal, situated beings.

Within this framework, space entails the physical and corporeal materiality of politics. It is not closed and, like Arendt's space of politics, does not pre-exist the individual and collective actions that take place within it. Rather, it is populated and constituted through conflict; it is 'striated'.⁴ Like the space of the *agora*, it does not have a fixed or definite form but instead functions as a *void* that enables the free movement of people and

1 Henri Lefebvre, *Espace et politique. Le droit à la ville II* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1958)

3 Ibid.

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 474-500.

opinions.⁵ Here, “void” does not signify a lack of reality or an emptiness to be filled or managed, but rather an indeterminate space without pre-established identities.⁶

On the other hand, feminist political theory has long emphasized that power and politics are not the same thing.⁷ Thus, while the city is a space that enables interactions, relations, and political practices, it is also the site where power is articulated and continuously reconfigured. Urban space can be understood as power made stone: power materialized in buildings, squares, and streets, but also in walls and fences. Its forms and structures reflect the power relations that traverse it, such that social and political transformations—even the most traumatic ones—are always accompanied by changes in urban routes, profiles, and spatial arrangements.

Lines of power and domination shape both society and its spatial organization. Urban space is conceived, designed, and governed through specific cultural, social, economic, and political dynamics that orient human experiences and possibilities, defining access to and participation in public space in unequal ways across different subjects and social groups. In this sense, the city functions as a *dispositif* of power—in Foucauldian terms—shaping subjects’ perceptions and relationships while simultaneously opening or closing spaces of political possibility by positioning bodies at the center or the margins of public space.⁸

If physical barriers such as walls, enclosures, and fences restrict movement and circulation, exclusion also operates through narratives and rhetoric that determine what—and who—is considered legitimate within public space. Being a man, a non-racialized woman, a migrant, a non-heteronormative subject, or a poor and marginalized person produces profoundly different urban experiences. Even when crossing the same square, in the same city, at the same time, these subjectivities are exposed to different gazes: indifference, suspicion, fear, disapproval, or objectification. Such divisions translate into unequal possibilities of speaking and acting in public space.

Similarly, the dichotomies of public/private, domestic/political, individual/social—and, consequently, production/reproduction—structure social imaginaries and self-perceptions, shaping individual and collective experiences along lines of gender, racialization, class, religion, and ableism. These distinctions determine whether one is recognized—or not—as a political subject in public space and are often internalized through bodily habits. Moving through the city, accessing certain areas, being prevented

5 Dario Gentili, “Topografie della piazza: *agorà, arengo, square*”, in *Dire, fare, pensare il presente*, cur. Laboratorio Verlan (Macerata: Quodlibet), 69.

6 Dario Gentili, “Spazi di aspettativa,” *Aut Aut* 368 (2015): 113.

7 Diotima, *Potere e politica non sono la stessa cosa* (Napoli: Liguori, 2009).

8 Pierre Bourdieu, *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1993), trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

from entering others, and appearing in public are all deeply political matters. Space is political not only because it hosts political action, but because it is produced and organized through power relations.

The inability to access or appear in public space has specific political consequences. Those who cannot cross it, who cannot be visible within it, are effectively excluded from public life, experiencing a partial or hollow form of citizenship. Citizenship is inextricably bound to the spatiality of politics: both to the material conditions of place and to the possibility of appearing and acting in public, which, as Arendt reminds us, grounds political action. As this analysis suggests, any attempt to articulate a new understanding of public space requires a critical reconsideration of the public/private distinction. These terms do not merely designate separate social spheres; they also operate as cultural and social classifications, discursive strategies that produce oppression, marginalization, and hierarchy. In doing so, they legitimize certain interests and claims while delegitimizing others, ultimately calling into question the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere as a space of discursive interaction among equal actors.⁹

One of the main ambiguities in debates on public space stems from the constant oscillation between its understanding as a physical and material site and its metaphorical meaning as a political arena. By engaging in this overlap, it becomes possible to show how public space, even when conceived as a political space, is always rooted in a physical and material dimension.

In the neoliberal context, it is impossible to overlook a renewed convergence between the question of public space and that of territory. Here, the term “public” no longer refers to a sphere in its own right, nor to the abstract, immaterial, and rational space imagined by Jürgen Habermas. Instead, it takes on a material, physical, embodied, and deeply conflictual meaning, one that binds it closely to urban spaces. This physicality becomes particularly evident in its entanglement with the digital—whose developments dematerialize neither bodies, nor relations, nor politics—and with the dynamics of global finance, processes that sharply intensify the nexus between embodied subjectivities, politics, and space.

For these reasons, it is crucial to emphasize the interconnection between the political and the spatial, as well as between symbolic and material dimensions, within the concept of “public space.” We deliberately prefer this term to the English and Italian translations of Habermas’s concept of *Öffentlichkeit* as “public sphere,” a formulation that carries significant critical limitations due to its implicit connotations of homogeneity, closure, and separateness. While the notion of a “sphere” evokes a bounded, closed, and ostensibly egalitarian entity, a “space” is traversed, inhabited, constituted, and animated by actors and relations.

9 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (1981), trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1987).

Rather than being defined by borders and limits that determine what is legitimate and what is not, space can be understood as open and continually produced through the practices that take place within it. Urban spaces are not homogeneous; they are shaped by the diverse uses and practices of those who inhabit them and who constantly reconfigure them through desires, everyday actions, and often creative and unexpected forms of appropriation. The city can thus also function as a space of reappropriation, legitimation, and self-determination. As a public space, it emerges as a battleground in which different visions of politics, social relations, and modes of coexistence confront one another.

Neoliberal public spaces

As discussed above, relations of social domination can be directly correlated with the organization of urban space. In neoliberal public spaces, these geographies of expulsion produce precarious, degraded, and marginalized areas, increasingly separated from political action and characterized by forms of confinement from which escape appears impossible.¹⁰ Over recent decades, processes such as the proliferation of gated communities, the construction of new enclosures, and dynamics of dispossession, ghettoization, and gentrification have generated conditions of isolation for specific social groups, thereby defining who is allowed to be visible in public space.¹¹ Within these dynamics, some subjectivities become more invisible than others, more vulnerable, and more exposed to violence.

Expelled or only partially included subjects move through urban imaginaries like ghosts: relegated to the background, perceived as negative presences or as threats. They appear as absences, evoked only through details, through elements that remain 'out of place' with respect to the order of the 'decent' city.¹²

As anticipated, transformations in spatial organization also correspond to a redefinition of what counts as human, political, and social.¹³ If the subject of modern public space was historically constituted by the collective of civil society, this connection is progressively disrupted by processes of globalization and by the emergence, within neoliberal rationality, of new configurations of the social-individual relationship. With the rise of consumer society, massification through atomization intensifies:

10 Bourdieu, *Weight of the World*.

11 Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge: hup, 2014); Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (San Francisco: pm 2018).

12 Serena Olcuire, "Città a misura di donne o donne a misura di città? La mappatura come strumento di governo e sovversione del rapporto tra sicurezza e genere," in *La libertà è una passeggiata. Donne e spazi urbani tra violenza strutturale e autodeterminazione*, cur. Ead., Chiara Belingardi e Federica Castelli (Roma: iaph Italia, 2019), 85-100.

13 Tiziana Villani, "Ethos e Pathos: Mutazioni del corpo-territorio nel tempo dell'adesso," *Millepiani* 28 (2004): 51.

the isolation of individuals proceeds alongside the homogenization of behaviors, commodification, and conformism. Under neoliberalism, however, this nexus is further reconfigured through forms of passive and non-subjectivizing aggregation, produced by flows, data, and algorithms that classify individuals according to consumer preferences rather than political agency. At the same time, neoliberal labor organization undermines the possibility of autonomous collective subjectivation, producing a fragmented multiplicity of social subjects unified only by their shared subjection to market logics.

Cities thus become sites of a troubling convergence between neoliberal rationality and functionalist approaches to urban design. Together, these frameworks regulate spaces, behaviors, and individuals, giving rise to de-urbanizing and de-subjectifying processes.¹⁴ Even in the governance of urban space, a technocratic vision prevails—one that redefines spaces, and consequently behaviors, through indices, data, and rules presumed to be neutral and universally applicable. In the attempt to reduce urban complexity, cities increasingly experience fragmentation, the crisis of coexistence, isolation, the defensive erection of boundaries, and the desertification of spaces. Yet the lived city, by contrast, operates through incoherence, temporality, and conflict.¹⁵

While neoliberalism could be read simply as a moment of destruction or disappearance of public space, such an interpretation would be incomplete. Even as spaces fragment or dissolve, new physical and virtual arenas of political action are emerging. Many global protest movements since 2010–2011 have not only exposed and contested the neoliberal reorganization of citizenship and space, but have also produced sites of collective reappropriation, disrupting exclusions and generating what can be described as “passionate public spaces.”¹⁶

Movements such as Occupy, Ni Una Menos, the Indignados in Spain, Right to the City initiatives, the Arab Spring, and more recently Fridays for Future or the university encampments protesting the genocide in Palestine, have all sought to reclaim the capacity for collective action beyond the traditional representational forms of institutional politics. This reappropriation of political agency has unfolded through the reappropriation of urban space itself. These new and unforeseen forms of resistance have placed different corporealities and their relationships to urban space at the center of political struggle, redefining the boundaries

14 Cristina Bianchetti, *Spazi che contano: Il progetto urbanistico in epoca neoliberale* (Milano: Donzelli, 2016).

15 *ibid.*, 11–14.

16 Federica Castelli, “Spazio pubblico appassionato: Corpi e protesta tra esposizione, vulnerabilità e relazioni,” *Leussein* 9, no. 1–3 (2016): 85–93.

and exclusions of contemporary public space and restoring the collective power of bodies to the heart of political debate.¹⁷

Bodies assembled in squares pose urgent questions to politics: they interrogate the meaning of the “public” and challenge its dichotomies, structures, and hierarchies. Understood as sites of resistance, expression, relation, and political creation, bodies reweave, within the shared political imagination, the fundamental connection between embodiment and politics.

An embodied epistemology

In recent years, the relationship between space and politics has been at the center of numerous feminist and queer debates. Many of these approaches locate this nexus precisely in the political nature of bodies that inhabit and appear within space.¹⁸ From this perspective, space emerges as relational: a contingent event generated through practices of care and sharing among embodied subjectivities.¹⁹

Among the political tools developed within these frameworks, at least three key practices stand out for their capacity to disrupt one of the most effective dispositifs of political oppression and exclusion in public space—namely, the gendered dichotomy between public and private, together with the oppositions it produces (production/reproduction, political/unpolitical, male/female). These practices include feminist positioning, the concept of situated knowledge,²⁰ and the intersectional approach.²¹

When the “public” is read through the feminist practice of positioning—where the personal is understood as political—it reveals itself as a symbolic and material dimension that is historical, contingent, and continuously in the making, rather than given once and for all. The intersectional approach, by demonstrating how different social categories operate within mechanisms of marginalization, calls into question both the application of these categories and the relations between subjects and collectivity.

Together, intersectional analysis, feminist embodied thinking, and gender and queer theory contribute to the deconstruction of Western dichotomies—first and foremost that between public and private. In doing so,

17 Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler, *Dispossession: The performative in the political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: hup, 2015); David Harvey, *Rebel Cities* (New York and London: Verso, 2012).

18 Rosi Braidotti, *Per una politica affermativa: Itinerari etici* (Milano e Udine: Mimesis, 2017); Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

19 Adriana Cavarero, “Il locale assoluto,” *Micromega* 5 (2001): 64-73.

20 Adrienne Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location” in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (London: Little Brown & Co., 1984); Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985), in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

21 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.

they open new reflections on agency and performativity, shifting the focus from the problem of inclusion to that of self-determination in public space. In recent years, urban feminist, transfeminist, and queer movements have emphasized the *creation* of spaces for self-determined interactions and the *occupation* of public spaces—especially those from which certain bodies are excluded—as a radical political practice.²²

By applying an intersectional gaze to discourses of exclusion, these movements have exposed how the purported neutrality of public space functions as a mechanism of oppression, organizing and closing spaces while preventing crossings. Public space is in fact structured through a gaze that presents itself as neutral and universal while concealing its own partiality. This gaze is predominantly Western, masculine, ableist, and bourgeois, organizing space through rigid and oppositional categories that claim to represent—by means of fixed crystallizations—the plurality of ways of being in the world.

Bodies have a spatial dimension. This may seem obvious yet traces of it appear in our most original experiences: as children, we encounter the world not only visually but also tactically, learning to move by sensing the boundaries of the surrounding space.²³ This tactile engagement with places is accompanied by an awareness of our own body as a spatial entity—a place among other places. Feminist movements remind us that bodies are inherently political. They are sites of openness, relationality, rootedness, and resistance. Every action involves a cohabitation of body and world—echoing Maurice Merleau-Ponty²⁴—and the gestures and movements that occur in public space encode and sediment social and political universes.²⁵ The corporeal materiality of the body constitutes the point where space and politics intersect. Feminist theorists have long emphasized the relational, gendered, and material nature of bodies through the concept of embodied subjectivities, highlighting the intimate link between bodily, political, and spatial dimensions.²⁶

From this perspective, bodies are spatial, situated, and gendered: individual and collective experiences are inseparable from the contexts in which bodies are immersed. The body, always situated, cannot disregard the surrounding physical space, which shapes orientation and action. Traversed by material, symbolic, cultural, and social forces, bodies occupy the center of power dynamics operating at multiple levels, opening and

22 Giada Bonu Rosenkranz, Federica Castelli e Serena Olcuire, *Bruci la città: Generi, transfemminismi e spazi urbani* (Firenze: edifir, 2023).

23 Giuliana Bruno, "Frammenti di città," *DWF* 52 (2001): 68.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Donald A. Landes (Milton Park: Routledge, 2014).

25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

26 Elizabeth Grozs, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the politics of bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke up, 2006).

closing spaces of self-determination. At the same time, the body serves as the locus through which relational and political engagement with the world occurs—the point at which Arendtian “acting in concert,” at the heart of politics, takes root. Similarly, the representation of space is linked to a subject’s capacity to locate itself as a reference point within its surroundings: space is occupied, perceived, and traversed. It is never abstracted from this grounding. Even when imagined, space is experienced. The spatiality of scientific observation can never be separated entirely from lived spatial experience, as Merleau-Ponty emphasized in *Phenomenology of Perception*.²⁷ The “objective” space of scientific analysis is always mediated by this lived experience. Space is not passive, with the body merely subjected to it, nor is it a neutral container independent of what it holds. Rather, space enables and is transformed by relationships. Its spatiality does not exist independently: space exists in relation to objects and through movement. Shape, size, direction, location, dimension, and orientation derive from perceptual relations and the ways space is experienced; they are not inherent scientific properties of space.²⁸

According to Elizabeth Grosz, there are two models in Western thought that have conceptualized the relationship between the city and the body.²⁹ The first envisions the city as a product of human action: the city as reflection, projection, and creation of the body. In this model, the body comes first, shaping the surrounding space according to its needs. By contrast, the contemporary city is often read as a space of alienation that deprives bodies of their “natural” or “healthy” context.³⁰ This perspective places human beings at the center as sovereign subjects: they create urban space and produce history.

The second model relies on an assumed isomorphism between the human body and the city, understood as political space and, again, as the State.³¹ Its most famous formulation appears in Plato’s *Republic*, where the correspondence between the parts of the individual and those of the *polis* ensures that political order functions according to justice. This framework also appears in modern liberal thought of the seventeenth century. The political body in this model is implicitly male and constructed in opposition to nature, establishing a hierarchy between the natural and the cultural. The political body is a cultural artifact that supersedes the “natural” body, transforming its limits.³² Simultaneously, scientific, mathematical, and philosophical understandings of space have strongly influenced the ontological conception of the human.³³

27 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

28 Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 93.

29 *ibid.*, 105.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Adriana Cavarero, *Corpo in figure: Filosofia e politica della corporeità* (Milano: Feltrinelli 1995).

32 Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 106.

33 *ibid.*, 97.

The relationship between space and bodies is one of mutual and ongoing redefinition. Bodies are always situated in specific spatial and temporal contexts, in which space and time are only intelligible through corporeality, which provides the foundation for perception and representation.³⁴ The body, like subjectivity, is experienced as a spatial and temporal being. As Sara Ahmed observes, orienting or disorienting ourselves in space has both political and epistemological significance.³⁵ Even seemingly neutral distinctions—left and right, East and West, North and South, margin and center—carry social and political consequences. Space is organized according to asymmetrical distinctions, reflecting underlying power relations. Phenomenological and queer approaches, such as Ahmed's, emphasize that spaces are not external to bodies but function as a "second skin."³⁶ They also reveal absolute space as an abstraction: while space is where encounters occur, these encounters themselves, enacted by embodied subjects, produce space. Bodies acquire meaning and direction through movement, while space is continually shaped by the bodies that inhabit it.³⁷

Bodies are also socialized to move through space in particular ways, guided by specific perceptions, emotions, and possibilities. Colette Guillaumin speaks of an internalization of spatial confinement among female subjects, instilled through childhood education.³⁸ Similarly, Iris Marion Young analyzes how gender norms regulate the scope and manner of bodily movement in public space.³⁹ Earlier, Charlotte Perkins Gilman highlighted domestic space as a site of bodily domestication, illustrating the connection between space, posture, movement, and political action.⁴⁰ A body confined to the home becomes accustomed to sedentariness, shaped by everyday domestic practices. Thus, the embodied relationship to space is gendered. Western phallogocentric culture has historically assigned spatial characteristics and values that reflect a gendered vision, hierarchy, and taxonomy. Space has been subdivided according to gender roles: woman does not occupy space in the same way as man.⁴¹ Instead, she is often conceptualized as space for man, providing space for him, whereas man is associated with agency, movement, and temporality in Western thought.⁴²

34 Ibid., 84.

35 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

36 *ibid.*, 13.

37 *ibid.*, 12.

38 Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir: L'idée de nature* (Paris: iXe, 2016)

39 Iris Marion Young, "Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 2, vol. 3 (1980): 137-156.

40 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (London: William Heinemann, 1904).

41 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: cup, 1984).

42 Grozs, *Space, Time, and Perversion*.

Public emotions

The ways in which bodies move through public space are political, as are the emotions that accompany these movements. Emotions shape what bodies do—or feel able to do—in public spaces; in this sense, they function as forms of reorientation.⁴³ At the same time, our affective relations with others define proximities and distances, shaping the space between bodies.⁴⁴ The discomfort that neoliberal public spaces inscribe on bodies—particularly those of women, feminized subjects, and other “unexpected” subjectivities located at the intersection of multiple axes of power, differentiation, and discrimination—produces clear divisions that appropriate and regulate space, matter, embodied subjects, and their relations.

Feminist movements, by linking the personal and the political, have long shown how bodily impressions and emotions are imbued with political meaning. Here, “the personal is political” signifies that politics unfolds through relationships, lived experiences, and imaginaries. It passes through embodied subjectivity, through our being situated and relational. The affective bonds or discomforts we experience in the places of everyday life are therefore political issues with tangible political effects.

In this sense, the city itself can operate as a dispositif of gender-based violence.⁴⁵ In recent years, transnational feminist and transfeminist movements—following diverse, plural, and often non-linear trajectories—have foregrounded questions of self-determination and sisterhood in opposition to securitarian and paternalistic approaches to public space and gender-based violence. Such violence has been recognized as a structural and pervasive feature of contemporary societies, manifesting through abuses, discriminations, expulsions, and hierarchies that are also embedded in the organization of urban places and spaces.⁴⁶ Mechanisms of exclusion from public space and confinement within the private sphere range from sexualizing and victimizing narratives to securitarian discourses, from populist rhetoric surrounding decorum and urban decay to the processes of fragmentation and privatization that characterize neoliberal cities.⁴⁷ Narratives surrounding female and feminized bodies in urban space thus activate processes of victimization, racialization of violence,

43 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2.

44 *ibid.*, 3.

45 Chiara Belingardi, Giada Bonu, Federica Castelli e Serena Olcuire, “Trasformare la paura: Pratiche di resistenza femminista, emozioni e spazio urbano,” *LoSquaderno* 57 (2020): 29-33.

46 Non Una Di Meno, *Abbiamo un piano: Piano femminista contro la violenza maschile sulle donne e la violenza di genere*, https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf, (2017); Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*. (London: Verso, 2020); Rosenkranz, Castelli e Olcuire, *Bruci la città*.

47 Anna Simone, “Securitarismo, rischio ed uso strumentale del corpo delle donne,” in *Città. Politiche dello spazio urbano*, a cura di Chiara Belingardi e Federica Castelli (Roma: iaph Italia, 2016); Carmen Pisanello, *In nome del decoro: Dispositivi estetici e politiche securitarie* (Verona: ombre corte, 2017); Olcuire, “Città a misura di donne o donne a misura di città?”

and expulsion—not only from streets, but also from social systems more broadly.⁴⁸

Fear of violence, together with securitarian public discourse, operates as a gendered dispositif of power that weighs heavily on experiences of the street at all times of day. As discussed earlier, the convergence of neoliberal governance and functionalist approaches to urban design has generated new forms of division, segregation, and expulsion, producing de-urbanizing and, at the same time, de-subjectivizing processes. Feminist analyses have highlighted how exclusion from public space is primarily enacted through female and migrant bodies, within a nexus of sexist victimization and racialization reinforced by securitarian rhetoric and appeals to urban “decorum.”⁴⁹

Fear has thus become the dominant emotion shaping women’s experiences of urban movement in recent years and has gained significant visibility in public debate and policy-making. At the institutional and governmental level, this visibility has often corresponded to the instrumental use of fear as a mechanism of containment and further exclusion⁵⁰—one that aligns with securitarian agendas, lacks an intersectional perspective, and fails to account for subjects who do not conform to the figure of the white, native, heterosexual, cisgender woman. In this way, fear has been mobilized to limit access to and circulation within the city, frequently pushing “unexpected” bodies back into the private sphere.

Feminist practices of urban resistance, by contrast, have been grounded in a rethinking of fear as a political emotion and oriented toward the cultivation of collective force—rooted in sisterhood, relationships, and being together.⁵¹ Through practices of re-signification and collective re-occupation, these movements have enacted a fundamental rupture: they have de-individualized fear, transforming it into a shared and political affect. In doing so, they have reimagined the city as a space of desire—a passionate public space—shifting from private fear to public desire. By challenging discourses that construct women as passive victims, feminist practices have unsettled conventional notions of “security” and advanced an intersectional, grassroots understanding of safer spaces, reshaping urban environments through collective practices of self-determination.⁵²

48 Françoise Vergès, *Une Théorie féministe de la violence: Pour une politique antiraciste de la protection* (Paris: La fabrique, 2020).

49 Tamar Pitch, *Contro il decoro: L'uso politico della pubblica decenza* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2013); Simone, “Securitarismo, rischio ed uso strumentale del corpo delle donne.”

50 Belingardi, Bonu, Castelli, Olcuire, “Trasformare la paura.”

51 *ibid.*

52 Giada Bonu Rosenkranz, *Safer Spaces, Feminist Movements and Emotions: Affect into Action* (New York and London: Routledge, 2025).

Embodied care for passionate public spaces

Urban space is a crucial factor in the social and discursive processes through which bodies are defined: it shapes their contexts and coordinates while relating embodied subjectivities to one another. The city constitutes an intricate and interactive network that connects us, holding together an incalculable number of human activities, processes, and relationships, as well as economic flows, lines of power, forms of organization, and political, interpersonal, and affective modes of togetherness. At the heart of urban dynamics lies a fundamental political question: who has access to public space, and for what purposes? At the same time, space can function as the antechamber of an emancipatory spiral of social transformation.

Feminist and queer theories have clearly demonstrated that both politics and bodies are traversed by power relations while also constituting sites of resistance, conceivable from a radical perspective grounded in interdependence, situated practices, and self-determination.⁵³ These approaches have shown how spaces and their social meanings are shaped by gendered norms and behaviors through processes of sexualization of space. At the same time, they have transformed the margin into a site of resistance and political struggle, revealing how spatial positioning is deeply connected to emotional orientations and disorientations in relation to place, identity, and desire.⁵⁴

This perspective is closely linked to the political centrality that feminist thought has attributed to care. Following Joan Claire Tronto and Berenice Fisher, care can be defined as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.”⁵⁵ Feminist articulations of care disrupt neoliberal ontologies, economies, and policies by foregrounding an understanding of the human as an embodied, relational, interdependent, and vulnerable subject, and by rooting practices of care in politics rather than in relations of power.⁵⁶ From this standpoint, feminist practices of care can open up new ways of relating to the urban, centered on the commons and on practices of self-determination.

Applying feminist ethics of care to urban space entails disrupting traditional spatial approaches by reintroducing what has been “removed” from public life within social and spatial orders structured around the public/

53 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

54 bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework* 36 (1989): 15-23.

55 Joan Claire Tronto and Berenice Fisher, “Toward a feminist theory of caring,” in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, ed. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany, suny, 1990), 40, quote in Joan Claire Tronto, *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York and London: nyu Press, 2013), 19.

56 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso 2004); Tronto, *Caring Democracy*; Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (2014), trans. Amanda Minervini, Stanford: SUP, 2016.

private divide.⁵⁷ It involves a movement toward another anthropology—based on interdependence rather than liberal individualism—another conception of bodies (not as performative or functional machines, but as embodied subjectivities), and another understanding of politics and its relationship to institutions. Care, understood as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible,” encompasses bodies, subjectivities, and the environment—the space around us—within a complex and interwoven web.

These pages have sought to highlight the profound and radical nexus between politics and space—an inescapable connection that is itself intertwined with the equally radical relationship between bodies and politics. From this nexus emerge foundational relations between public space—as the space of politics—and the physical and material environments that surround subjects as corporeal, situated, and relational beings. An intersectional and embodied approach to public space brings together several key elements: publicness, visibility, openness, and accessibility; contingent crossings, conflicts, and relationships; and an understanding of the public as a site of convergence for both material and immaterial processes.

Public space thus emerges as a political, symbolic, communicative, and semiotic sphere that cannot be separated from the materiality and spatiality of the social, and that is continually traversed by processes of territorialization and deterritorialization. It escapes the public/private dichotomy, the opposition between individual and collective, and any necessary identification with the State or with a fixed social group. One cannot be the public: one can only *be in public*.⁵⁸ Public space, therefore, takes shape as an unresolved and dynamic process, continually produced through interactions, exchanges, and conflicts between positionings and postures that are simultaneously political, corporeal, and spatial—and thus contingent and relational.

57 Laura Fano Morrissey and Giorgia Serughetti, *Utopie della cura: La politica trasformativa delle pratiche di comunità* (Roma: Castelvecchi, 2024).

58 Andrea Mubi Brighenti, “The Publicness of Public Space: On the Public Domain,” *Quaderni del dipartimento di sociologia e ricerca sociale* 49 (2010): 20.

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