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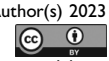

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Challenging methodologies: Deploying liberatory epistemologies to unlock creative research practices

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Abstract

Departing from the methodological story of my doctoral research and deploying feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial epistemologies, this article explores the double connotation of the phrase 'challenging methodologies'. On the one hand, the article reviews the process of my doctoral research, the challenges I faced, and how these oriented my methodological decisions. On the other hand, it examines the three methodologies I chose – grounded theory, online research, and narrative inquiry – to understand how they originated to challenge unjust canonical research processes that undermine different ways of generating knowledge and reinforce epistemic silencing. By exploring 'challenging methodologies', the article invites (novice) researchers to contest unjust research processes and embark on their own creative, albeit challenging, methodological paths.

Keywords

methodology, epistemology, feminist, decolonial, postcolonial, grounded theory, online research, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Our biographies influence the ways we chose to know the world around us. To write about our methodological decisions inevitably requires us to reveal how we see the world and how we set out to understand it. In this article, I recount the methodological challenges pertaining to the process of my doctoral research and deploy three liberatory epistemologies to analyse my methodological decisions to understand how these methodologies challenge unjust forms of generating knowledge. The article is necessarily personal. However, I

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share this experience hoping to inspire other researchers to share similar stories and that it finds its way to novice researchers wanting to challenge canonical research processes that may constrain the ways they chose to know the world around them.

Initial formulations of this article were presented within the framework of the PhD workshop, titled Dislocating Urban Studies: Rethinking Theory, Shifting Practices (Dislocating Urban Studies, 2021). The workshop was held online and responded to growing concerns from scholars all over the world about Europe remaining the 'centre of the field' of urban studies where theory, concepts, and methodologies are generated, legitimized, and employed to understand urbanization in the rest of the world and which often neglects to study places considered 'off the map' of urban studies (Robinson, 2002). Thus, the workshop invited scholars working 'on/in/out' of the margins of urban studies to discuss theories emerging from geographies beyond Europe, present research focused on places 'elsewhere' (Robinson, 2016), explore alternative methodologies to study such geographies, and evaluate and challenge the usefulness of existing concepts when deployed elsewhere.

Challenging Methodologies and Methods was the session where I presented an initial iteration of this article. It reflected on the methodological challenges I am facing while conducting my doctoral research and the approaches I am employing to navigate through them. The research, conducted from Europe (first challenge), is located at the intersection of architecture, urban planning, and critical urban studies. It investigates a transient urban phenomenon (second challenge), often referred to in European urban planning scholarship as 'temporary uses' (a term I no longer use, but I will return to this later), unfolding in different Latin American cities (third challenge) whereby individuals or groups of people take (or appropriate) abandoned urban spaces, physically transform them, provide them new uses, whilst endowing them with new meaning and unleashing unexpected processes well beyond locale and life-cycle of each case. This article builds on the fruitful discussions of that session.

However, the workshop also introduced me to feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives in urban scholarship and awoke a desire to learn more about these perspectives more broadly. In the process, certain beliefs I had about research were unsettled and I started to understand that aspects of research that I had accepted as golden standard are still open to scrutiny. Here are some of the beliefs I had before engaging with these perspectives and that, I now know, are linked to a positivist research paradigm and objectivist (androcentric and colonial) epistemologies: (1) the belief that research about the social world should be objective, value-free, and that we must seek for dissociative forms of inquiry to achieve such 'objectivity'; (2) the belief that researchers must strive for grand generalizations that do not account for difference and particularities but, nonetheless, must claim universality; (3) the belief that theory is, thus, value-free and is universally valid and applicable; (4) the belief that research must and indeed can be planned from the outset and that our theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches must be decided before we start our research journeys; (5) the belief that research will then be straightforward and that we can know the right methods to employ just by reading about them; (6) and, equally important, the belief that there is no space for emotions and creativity in valid research practices.

I write this article to continue my dialogue with these perspectives and tease out the double connotation of the title of the session, Challenging Methodologies. On the one

hand, I will briefly recount the story of my research to reveal the methodological complications I faced, which methodological approaches I chose to navigate through them, and the challenges presented when operationalized. On the other hand, I will illustrate how these methodologies emerged to challenge objectivist, positivist, androcentric, and colonial forms of generating knowledge.

The article begins by briefly examining three liberatory epistemologies: feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial. This section is followed by the (brief) story of my research to help contextualize the three methodological moves I used in my research and illustrate the challenges implicated with each methodological decision. Subsequently, I explain each methodology – grounded theory, online research, and narrative inquiry – and discuss how they challenge canonical and entrenched research procedures. I argue that these methodologies, albeit their shortcomings, can be starting points for researchers, experienced or not, to address feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial forms of generating knowledge and engage in more creative research processes to learn about our diverse world here or elsewhere.

Liberatory epistemologies

In 1974, Dorothy Smith put into question the presumption that it is possible to separate 'the knower from what he knows' (Smith, 1974: 8). She wondered how (male) sociologists could disassociate their personal lives, beliefs, and interests from the research they conducted and believed that they could study the social world from a position outside of it. More specifically, she questioned the way in which male sociologists were studying women from that perspective and felt entitled to make authoritative and universal claims about women, their bodies, lives, beliefs, and interests from such a standpoint. What Dorothy Smith does – of course, not alone and not for the first time (Hesse-Biber, 2012) – is shed light on the body politics of knowledge and the impossibility of an objective social science because researchers, like the rest of people, are mired in their experiences, situatedness, and subjectivities. Inasmuch, the stage is set for theories of knowledge that address 'the inextricable connections between politics and knowledge production' (Tuana, 2017: 125).

Feminist epistemology

Feminist epistemology enquires into and elucidates the machinations of power in the construction of knowledge. It pays attention to the subject of knowledge to 'illuminate the various means by which oppressive practices can result in or reinforce epistemic inequalities, exclusion, and marginalization' (Tuana, 2017: 125). It questions who the subject of knowledge is to crystalize his or her situatedness and subjectivities.

Furthermore, this interrogative is followed by the question who is considered to be a knowing subject (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Spivak, 1988; Tuana, 2017); a politically loaded question that 'involves not only whose knowledge is deemed worthy, but whose lives are so deemed' (Tuana, 2017: 127). As black feminist activists and scholars point out, women are diverse and differently positioned and introduced the term of intersectionality, not as a theory of multiple identities (Collins, 2017), but as a 'critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually

exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities' (Collins, 2017: 115).

These questions and intersectional dimensions as well as (geographical) positionalities of knowledge are further explored in the influential essay *Can the subaltern speak?* Here, feminist postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) draws on Antonio Gramsci's work on the 'subaltern classes' and Michael Foucault's conception of 'epistemic violence' to illustrate the disqualifications and erasures of histories, experiences, and knowledges of the subaltern colonial subject.

While drawing inspiration from these European philosophers, Spivak also directed her critique to their continued focus on 'the subject of the West, or the West as Subject' (Spivak, 1988: 66) and how they 'ignore the epistemic violence of imperialism and international division of labour' even when referencing Third World issues in their work. The 'subaltern' in Spivak's question refers to the one located in the 'context of colonial production'; a context within which 'the subaltern has no history and cannot speak' (Spivak, 1988); a violent epistemic silencing that doubly compounds the female subaltern colonial subject (Spivak, 1988).

These violent epistemic silencing is not only addressed in feminist epistemology, but it is also at the centre of postcolonial and decolonial epistemologies, which not only analyse the body-politics of knowledge but also its geo-politics.

Postcolonial epistemology

In postcolonial as well as decolonial epistemology the questions who is the subject of knowledge and who is considered to be a knowing subject are followed by the question 'from where in the map we produce the body of authoritative knowledge that we are willing to acknowledge' as such (Roy, 2016a: 12). While postcolonial and decolonial scholarship may raise similar questions, they emerge from different geographies, colonial experiences, theoretical underpinnings, and their aims might slightly diverge.

Postcolonial scholarship originates and focuses mainly on the experience of British colonialism, particularly as it unfolded in India and parts of Africa. Its interlocutors are mainly (but not only) scholars from these geographical regions working inside and outside of them (Bhambra, 2014). Postcolonial thinking takes off in the late 1970s with the publication of Orientalism, a book in which Palestinian American Edward Said put into question the geographies and geo-politics of knowledge and expanded 'the historical frame, cartography, and intellectual purchase of colonialism' (Mendoza, 2015: 101). Postcolonial thinking and scholarship were further developed in the 1990s by the South Asia Subaltern Studies group – to which Spivak belonged to – who, inspired by, but also remaining critical to, European philosophers 'offered sophisticated critiques of capitalism, modernity, and Western colonialism' (Mendoza, 2015: 107).

Postcolonial epistemology foregrounds the ways in which Eurocentrism, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism have produced a distorted version of history that violently erased other global histories and ways of being in and knowing the world. It critiques and rejects universalizing knowledge claims, western categories of analysis and recognizes and values diverse, local, and situated knowledges and ways of being (Bhambra, 2014; Mendoza, 2015). It also pays attention to 'the knowing subject', his/her subjectivities, and situatedness.

The last point, however, has been called into question, particularly as the Subaltern academic group is socially (and often geographically) positioned far from the subaltern they want to give a voice to (Asher and Ramamurthy, 2020; Mendoza, 2015). Other critiques come from feminists within the Subaltern group who call for attention to the dimensions of sex and gender in the analysis of the subaltern colonial subject (Mendoza, 2015; Spivak, 1988). Spivak has also faced scrutiny after she questioned 'the subaltern's capacity to overturn its colonial condition' (Mendoza, 2015: 111), leading decolonial scholars to ask what, then, is the ultimate goal of the postcolonial intellectual project (Mendoza, 2015). Other decolonial thinkers fervently criticize postcolonial scholars for 'privileging the western epistemic canon' (Grosfoguel, 2007). Grosfoguel (2007), for example, calls for the decolonization of postcolonial scholarship.

Colonial scholarship, which represents the colonial subject as 'backward' and 'the world in simple binaries: west/the rest, modernity/tradition, civilized/barbaric' (Asher, 2017: 517), still marks much of Western academia, its scholarship, methodologies, and theories as well as its (mis)representations of the non-Western. It also dictates what is worthy of knowing, further marginalizing knowledge from and about elsewhere. Therefore, despite the frictions between postcolonial and decolonial scholars, Asher and Ramamurthy (2020) call for postcolonial and decolonial transnational solidarity to challenge colonial practices in scholarship and beyond. Scholars from both perspectives would agree that while colonialism, as an administration, has (mostly) come to an end, colonial frames of thought and ways of seeing, knowing, and acting upon the world, its nature, and its people, are very much alive. As Asher and Ramamurthy (2020) point out, postcolonial and decolonial epistemologies are ultimately anticolonial because they foreground how colonial practices (racist and gendered) and epistemic violence and silencing constitute Eurocentric forms of generating knowledge. In addition, scholars from both trenches 'concur that the political task of working toward liberation, decolonization and social justice must accompany scholarly and academic task of analysis' (Asher, 2017: 516).

Besides their obvious geographical and historical origins and focus as well as their theoretical references, it is difficult to locate at which points deep down scholars from postcolonial and decolonial trenches would not agree with one another. In fact, the call for transnational solidarity between scholars of both perspectives is to achieve their ultimate goal: to dislocate the centre of knowledge and work towards epistemic justice. It is their similarities that made it hard for me, as a newcomer to the world of post- and decolonial thinking, to write about decolonial epistemology without referring to postcolonial positions. Not to mention that I was introduced to anticolonial thinking through postcolonial urban scholars, such as Jennifer Robinson (2016) and Ananya Roy (2016b), who have opened my mind to the possibility of another reading of urbanity and ways to study 'the urban'.

Notwithstanding their similarities, it is the following very specific features of decolonial epistemology that draw me to it: its 'certitude that the subaltern can speak' (Mendoza, 2015: 112); its invitation to engage in 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2011a); and 'its commitment to change the world' (Asher and Ramamurthy, 2020: 3).

Decolonial epistemology

Decolonial thinking (and being) originates during and as a response to the colonial experience of the Americas dating back to the 16th – 19th centuries (Mignolo, 2011a).

At the time, its interlocutors were members of indigenous communities as well as mestizo and criollo elites who had already then recognized the imposition of a European episteme which had positioned itself as the only legitimate form of knowing and being in the world annihilating all other forms (Mendoza, 2015; Mignolo, 2011a). Today, however, decolonial thinking mobilizes social movements and scholarly work well beyond the Americas and, therefore, there are splintered decolonial perspectives that respond to particular colonial experiences (e.g. see Behari-Leak, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Decoloniality as a concept, however, has its origins during the Bandung Era (1955–1977), a time in which diverse recently independent nations and social movements from Asia and Africa began to collaborate and 'develop tools for anticolonial and anti-imperial resistance' (Pitts, 2017: 151) and to seek (diverse) alternatives to capitalism and communism (Mignolo, 2011b).

Around the same time, Peruvian scholar, Aníbal Quijano, developed the concept of coloniality of power. He and the Modernity/Coloniality collective (today, Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality collective) argue that, different from colonialism – understood as a form of political administration and which has been (mostly) eradicated – coloniality superseded colonial administrations and should be understood as a constitutive (and dark) dimension of modernity (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). According to Maldonado-Torres, coloniality

> 'refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerge in the context of colonialism, which redefine culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, aspirations of the self, commons sense and knowledge production in ways that credit the superiority of the colonizer … as modern subjects', he argues, 'we breath coloniality all the time and everyday' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243).

Decoloniality follows decolonization – the latter is understood as the process whereby a colony is allowed to become an independent, self-governing State. Rather than focusing on the State, the task of decoloniality is 'focused on epistemology and knowledge' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018: 121). In these terms, decoloniality is a

> redemptive epistemology which inaugurates and legitimates telling the story of the modern world from the experience of colonial difference (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 3).

An often-noted difference between postcolonial and decolonial epistemology is that decoloniality changes the 'locus of enunciations' departing from the 'colonial wound' as opposed to the Western rationality and canon of thought. Decolonial epistemology de-links from the stories of modernity told by the West, which claim to universality, and from Western categories of thought and ways of being and knowing the world. Inasmuch, it changes 'not only the content but also the terms of the conversation' (Mignolo, 2011a: 46). This process of de-linking is what decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo refers to as 'epistemic disobedience'.

Building on the work on the body-politics of knowledge from diverse perspectives of feminist scholarship, decolonial epistemology also focuses on its geo-politics and recognizes subjective and situated, local knowledges, and that knowledge can be constructed differently depending from where we speak, and it can be informed and depart from

experience and praxis, not only from theory. The decolonial option reveals epistemic silences but also 'affirms the epistemic rights' of those who have been historically devalued and allows those 'silences to build arguments' that confront global epistemic injustices (Mignolo, 2009).

Liberating and decolonizing the imagination

In short, the three epistemological positions I have presented above work to reveal the different ways in which epistemic injustices are enacted but also attempt to find emancipatory epistemological paths to 'enhance the human condition and create a more just and caring world' (Brabeck and Brabeck, 2009: 50). For this reason, and despite their differences, feminist scholar Nancy Tuana (2017) refers to them as liberatory epistemologies.

Because, as decolonial thinkers point out, coloniality represents not only the colonization of space, time, and bodies, but also 'of the imagination' (Quijano, 2007: 169), it is then part of the task of liberatory epistemologies to work towards liberating and decolonizing the imagination as well. The question that follows is how to unlock that imagination, particularly when researchers, like me, are intending to do so from within the institution of the university, an institution that, as Mignolo tells us, has secured the coloniality of knowledge and being (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

In what follows, I will re-tell the story of my research and illustrate how I, unintentionally, engaged in my own way of epistemic disobedience within the institution of the university and in the interstices of two disciplines, architecture, and (institutional) urban planning, that have a history of utilizing knowledge for the self-serving interests of hegemonic power (Baeten, 2017; Lefebvre, 1991; Porter, 2017; Sandercock, 1998).

A brief story of my research

Starting from personal experience

My doctoral research was motivated and builds on a course I taught during four consecutive semesters from 2015 to 2016 in Mexico (my native country), at the *Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro*,[1] titled *Arquitectura Efímera* (Ephemeral Architecture). During this course, students and I started to explore and document how we could, with our bodies and little materials, occupy an abandoned space, appropriate it (make it our own without permission) and temporarily transform it for cultural purposes and collective uses.[2] The aim was to be critical to and challenge current forms of neoliberal spatial production. Initially, our experimentations began on a central yet neglected open square at the university. However, these were quickly transported outside the university boundaries into abandoned urban spaces, both private and public, including buildings, plots, and urban infrastructure, such as bus stops and streets. The task was to learn as much as possible about the (hi)story of these abandoned spaces and, informed on this (hi)story and our experiences on site, propose new public and cultural uses for them, and report back through discussion and documentation.[3]

These actions raised a series of issues and questions, some of which would later help frame my doctoral research. First, while looking for cases in which people have occupied, appropriated, and transformed abandoned urban spaces, our search led to cases and

stories taking place in Europe or the United States. Little comprehensive information was available to us of similar cases in Mexico and we wondered if there were any examples like ours unfolding there and what could we learn from them. Secondly, during the four semesters I organized this course, I became aware of the vast number of abandoned constructions scattered across the city. I wondered about the (hi)story of these spaces, why are they abandoned, and what would it imply and mean to occupy them with our bodies and materially transform them.

Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this article. I present them to foreground that my research problem and questions emerged from praxis. It was through my situatedness, praxis, and experience that I was able to locate a 'gap in research', literature, and knowledge. This fact has not only made my doctoral research a worthwhile, meaningful, and, sometimes, emotional experience, but it also makes the research and its findings of societal value (e.g. in the education of architecture and urban planning).

Dislocated

Based on the course and the questions that were raised during our explorations and experimentations, I started to plan my doctoral research. However, in the process and for personal reasons, I moved to Finland. Luckily, I found a supervisor at a Finnish university who was interested in further exploring these issues from the perspective of Latin America.[4]

Conducting this research in Finland, however, raised other questions. One, mostly asked by others, was: why to study Latin America if you are living in Finland? This question made me very insecure about the validity of my decision and about receiving the academic support I would require throughout the research. Other questions, I mostly asked myself, were more practical and with methodological implications: How will I study a phenomenon unfolding in Latin America while being in Finland? How will I find cases to study if the cases I am looking for are temporary in nature, and therefore, might not exist anymore in the first place? What kind of information can I find, collect, and analyse? And what will I learn? These are the questions I will be dealing with in the remaining of this section.

Located online

I opted to conduct my research fully online and delve into the internet and World Wide Web to find cases to study of people who are appropriating abandoned urban spaces in Latin America. I took this decision due to the distance from me to cities in Latin America and the possibility that the cases might no longer exist (physically). But there were other, more personal, reasons: my parental duties, lack of financial resources, ecological concerns, and fear of flying. Reasons that are often not taken seriously but which have tangible implications on what and where receives scholarly attention.

I also decided to do an inductive and exploratory kind of research and to approach the research as grounded theory (GT). I understood that GT was a good methodological strategy to investigate phenomena that had been little researched. Moreover, GT would allow me to start from an exploratory position, a broad set of questions, and develop new ones in the process. It also promised that its step-by-step procedures would guide and give structure to my qualitative research and help me generate theory. Most importantly,

GT would enable me to start the research with a few theoretical concepts. Indeed, the aim of GT is to 'discover' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or 'construct' (Charmaz, 1990) those theoretical concepts.

Locating cases

In my initial search, I found 24 cases (Author A, 2020). These cases represent abandoned urban spaces that have been occupied, appropriated (sometimes illegally), physically transformed, and provided new uses. These once abandoned spaces had been transformed into open-air cinemas, public playgrounds for children and families, street-, community-, nomad-, and urban-art galleries, centres for urban agriculture, spaces for social and circular economies, spaces to plan collective actions, community theatres, boutiques, and kitchens. It is very unlikely that any of these spatial transformations will appear in mainstream architectural literature or be valued as legitimate sources of practical and theoretical knowledge to inform spatial practices let alone spatialized policies. Yet they are all around us.

For each case, I collected different textual and visual information from all sorts of online sources.[5] Throughout the years, new cases have emerged, and others have been dropped off due to a lack of information. To this date, the research follows 28 cases from seven countries, including Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Puerto Rico.

With the information I gathered, I learned more about the cases and started to group and categorize them and to write short descriptions and stories of each (see Author A, 2019; Author A and others, 2019). However, during the process of writing the short descriptions of the first set of cases, I started to wonder about the people behind the cases: who, exactly, were they? What motivated them to take on such an endeavour? What were they aiming to achieve? What was the meaning they attributed to their work? I also wanted to know more about the process of their work and about the sites they were occupying, appropriating for their own use, physically transforming, and what kinds of other (political) processes were unleashed.

Locating stories

Although the internet has become the *space* where I follow what my supervisor calls the 'digital footprint' of the cases, the information readily available online has not been sufficient to answer these emerging questions. To answer them, it was time to seek the people behind the cases, listen, document, analyse, and retell their stories. That is when I decided to embark on a narrative inquiry and delve online once more to communicate with those who would become the research participants. Between January 2018 and December 2020, I interviewed one main actor per case, resulting in 14 (mostly) online narrative interviews which were recorded and transcribed manually and verbatim (by me).

Analysing the stories

Then came the time to analyse these narratives/texts. As a novice in narrative inquiry, I found myself lost, not knowing how to begin to analyse the interview transcripts.

Initially, I planned to analyse them following what Riessman (2005) described as thematic narrative analysis, a process through which pre-existing themes are found in the narratives. Looking for examples from Riessman's own research (Riessman, 2000), I was reunited with grounded theory approaches. In her research, Riessman analysed interviews using what she referred to as 'a version of grounded theory procedures' based on Kathy Charmaz's (1990) constructivist grounded theory (CGT).

I began to analyse the interview transcriptions using 'a version of' constructivist grounded theory procedures. Because these procedures are systematic, they provided me with clear steps to start analysing the transcribed interviews, beginning by coding line-by-line, using gerunds when possible, and writing memos about the codes and analytical notes of codes I would like to pursue in subsequent phases of the research. I liked that this analytical method kept me close to the narrations.

Amid this analytical process, which focuses on people's actions, I noticed that I needed an extra layer of analysis to capture elements of the stories which were not human (the sites, for example). Therefore, I introduced Adele Clarke's Situational Analysis (2003) to my research, which follows CGT procedures to map human and non-human elements and discourses present in a given situation to generate situational maps.

However, these two analytical methods deconstruct the narratives into inductively extracted concepts which become useful to compare amongst different cases but, in the process, the cases became abstract, decontextualized, and anonymous. Therefore, after analysing one interview, I started to write the story of the case to try reconstructing it with the information I had. This was yet another analytical tool I, unknowingly, used referred to as 'narrative analysis' (Polkinghorne, 1995) or 'storying stories' (McCormack, 2004).

While the narrations elicited vivid images of the spaces and their transformation, I decided to include an extra layer of analysis to be able to also reconstruct the material (hi)story of the sites. Specially, because the cases are temporary and often leave no traces on the sites where they took place, images have become an important source of information. On some occasions, the research participants have shared these images with me, but images were also available on social media platforms, usually in chronological order, and often include short descriptions. I have also utilized other visual media obtained from sources, such as Google Earth Pro and Google Maps.

All these steps and turns and decisions have helped me learn more about the phenomenon I am studying. Moreover, I have had to think on the go and employ different methodological approaches or strategies to be able to engage with each new piece of information and finding or even emerging challenges (often generated from the methodology itself) that I needed to deal with. In the process, I have tested various methods just to end up bewildered by the fact that I could not grasp in which way a certain form of analysis could be relevant to my research, dropping the method altogether, only to find it useful and returning to it at a later stage. In this sense, all of these have been quite challenging methodologies when operationalized to study a transient urban phenomenon from afar.

Of course, to a great extent, it has all been part of the learning process and it is surely not exceptional to my doctoral research journey. However, I believe that these, sometimes clumsy, steps and turns are not coincidental. To some extent, I am sure it has

been the cracking of my colonized imagination that made me scrutinize these methods and seek analytical tools that aligned with my (research) ethics. Particularly, the great abstractions of grounded theory and its dehumanizing and homogenizing rhetoric started to open those cracks and made me search for methods that could help overcome such practices.

All the methods I have been employing are part of larger methodological frameworks, including grounded theory, online research, and narrative inquiry. While it is important to recognize that operating these methods has been challenging, it is as important to understand that they emerged as a way to confront traditional positivistic methodologies and established scientific methods borrowed from the natural sciences to be employed in the many fields of social sciences, including in urban research. In what follows, I will briefly explain each methodology and attempt to demonstrate how they challenge well-established, if not entrenched, beliefs of a value-free, objectivist, disembodied research and respond to feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial epistemological concerns.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory was first developed by Robert Glaser and Anselmo Strauss in the mid-1960s as a response and critique to 'the predominant statistical-quantitative' approaches to social research applied at that time (Bryant and Charmaz, 2012: 33). Their aim was to 'strengthen the mandate for generating theory, to help provide a defence against doctrinaire approaches to verification [of existing theory], and to reawaken and broaden the picture of what sociologists can do with their time and efforts' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 7).

There are several strands of Grounded Theory: Glaserian (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), Straussian (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), Constructivist (Charmaz, 1990), and Critical (Denzin, 2010). While all of them aim to generate new theory, their views on how long to delay the literature review varies from one perspective to the other; the procedures of analysis are just slightly different, with the exception of Denzin's Grounded Critical Theory, which invites a broader range of methods; and Glaser's idea that theory can be 'discovered', as opposed to constructed, has been strongly contested (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007).

Particularly later strands can be powerful methodological tools to be employed by (urban) researchers aiming to decolonize (urban) theory. Grounded theory opens the possibility to generate new insights from standpoints other than the European/Western view and formulate new sets of theoretical concepts grounded in the study of other territories, contexts, and human experiences. However, grounded theory is not fully unproblematic. Ultimately, its initial iterations emerge from a positivist stance and grounded theory always aims towards generalization and thus produces great abstractions. I also found its rhetoric can be objectivist, homogenizing, and dehumanizing, thus, diminishing its decolonizing potential. Moreover, grounded theory procedures, which can be helpful to start engaging with our research material, must be more flexible, able to adapt to contemporary issues and/or particular contexts, and cease to assume authority over other methods which might be employed in particular places by particular communities.

In my case, however, this methodological approach permitted me to embark on my doctoral research journey with a non-exhaustive literature review, broad questions

derived from praxis, no hypothesis, and little theoretical background and concepts, thereby challenging established research and methodological procedures.

While I am not sure that I will be able to generate new theory from my research, delaying the literature review allowed me to gather data and analyse it at an early stage and to have the time to find the right theoretical frameworks that will help me make sense of the research phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, the phenomenon I investigate is referred to as 'temporary uses' in European urban planning scholarship and has often been studied for the self-serving purposes of institutional urban planning practices. Furthermore, it has become a European urban planning strategy (a practice) whereby diverse urban actors are allowed to temporarily utilize an otherwise underused space often to raise land values and push through questionable neoliberal urban development projects (Colomb, 2012). Employing this theoretical concept would legitimize, what I believe to be, an unjust practice that takes advantage of people's needs and utilizes their energy, work, and creativity to attract future investments. As we see, theoretical concepts, while abstract, are not value-free.

Online research

While the use of the internet is ubiquitous in our lives, Hine (2016) argues that it is 'often taken-for-granted and only occasionally noticed as a topic of discussion or an influence to be questioned' (2016: 27). Notwithstanding, the internet has become part of broader discussions amongst academics from different disciplines and for different reasons. Particularly amongst ethnographers, online research has opened debates about what may be considered as the field site and ways of conducting fieldwork.

'Cyberspace', wrote Hine in 2000, 'is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to "real life" and face-to-face interaction. It has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used' (Hine, 2000: 65). Furthermore, the field can be a single online space, multiple online spaces, or even a network of online-offline spaces (Hine, 2016). Postill and Pink's study about social media in the context of social movements and activism has highlighted the 'connections between online and locality-based realities' (Postill and Pink, 2012: 123). They argue that 'the issues with which internet ethnography engages can also become particularly relevant in relation to specific localities' (Postill and Pink, 2012: 123).

Even though my research is not an ethnography *per se*, this debate is still relevant for urban studies because it valorizes site specificity. Due to the circumstances listed above, I was unable to visit the localities of my research and even if I could have, many cases would no longer be there to study. Therefore, the internet became the field site where my fieldwork took place.

However, our use of the internet in research must be conscious and better comprehended and our methodologies, methods, and data must also respond to particular circumstances. When I began my research, I had not fully comprehended the online nature of it until one of the reviewers of the first article I wrote introduced me to the notion of 'webnography'. The idea of conducting urban research by delving into the internet and not visiting the sites was certainly a topic of debate with my supervisors, particularly those doing ethnography. As I write this article, the discussion about and acceptance of online research has changed. During the global Covid-19 pandemic, researchers, locked-

out of their sites of interaction and distanced from their research participants, have rekindled the discussions regarding the notions of the field, methods for conducting fieldwork (Howlett, 2021), and how to do research from afar (Social and Cultural Geography Research Group, 2020).

However, even before the pandemic, researchers have been confronted by locality-based realities. Postill (2016) argues that remote fieldwork should be understood as another way of engaging with offline localities and communities of our research and viewing them from another perspective. He recounts how some anthropologists studying nations such as Japan or Germany during World War II, instead of turning their attention away from those localities, studied them from afar through film, novels, and poetry.

Increasingly, the internet is a medium that renders it possible to reach offline localities and communities and challenges established understandings of what constitutes a field site and ways to conduct fieldwork. For researchers, like me, who want to generate knowledge about places far away from where they stand and unreachable under all sorts of circumstances, online research opens an interesting space where we can locate places and people and engage with them in creative ways. I decided to engage with the cases of my research and the people involved in them not only online but also through their experiences, situatedness, and stories through a narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry

Entering the world of narrative inquiry has been an interesting, rewarding, yet overwhelming process. The lack of consistency about the definition of the word 'narrative' presented by different authors and the use of the word 'story' as synonymous of 'narrative' often created confusion. In addition, I have encountered so many different methods of narrative analysis that it has been difficult to know which one best answers emerging research questions. As Riessman (2008) put it, 'narrative analysis refers to a family of methods … [and] as in all families, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives' (2008: 11). Not in vain, Mishler (1995) referred to the narrative inquiry as being in a state of near-anarchy (1995: 88). Possibly, from all three methodological approaches presented in this article, narrative inquiry represents the biggest challenge to the research establishment as it is often chaotic, non-linear, and, most importantly, it takes people's experiences, subjectivities, situatedness, narratives, and stories seriously as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Kim contends that 'a narrative is a form of knowledge' that is passed through generations and that has been utilized across different societies around the world, thus transcending time and space Kim (2016: 6). Both Kim (2016) and Polkinghorne (1995) cite cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner as establishing narrative inquiry as a legitimate form of knowledge generation. In his research, Bruner recognized 'two modes of thought', paradigmatic and narrative (Bruner, 1986; Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). The former is related to a mode of knowing influenced by positivism, which utilizes methods, concepts, and procedures borrowed from the natural sciences to understand social phenomena (Salkind, 2010). The latter 'uses stories to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences' (Kim, 2016: 11). A narrative inquiry is, therefore, 'a methodology that inquires into narratives and stories of people's life experiences' (Kim, 2016: 304).

Kim (2016) defines narrative as 'a recounting of events that are organized in a temporal sequence, and this linear organization of events makes up a story' (2016: 9). Polkinghorne (1995: 5) defines narrative as a 'discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot' (p. 5). In rhetorical terms, Phelan (1996) defines narrative as 'the act of somebody telling somebody else on a particular occasion for some purpose that something happened'. Similarly, Riessman (2008) defines narrative as 'everyday oral storytelling [in which] a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience' (2008: 14).

To distinguish between narrative and story, Kim (2016) argues that narratives are partial descriptions of events not necessarily recounted in chronological order, while stories are full descriptions of events with a beginning, middle, and an end. To Mishler (1995), temporal order is not enough. Stories must have a point. Stories, plots, purposes, and points underscore that narratives are, what Kim calls, 'a basic meaning-making process' (2016: 22).

Building on Bruner's paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought, Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between two types of narrative inquiry, analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. An analysis of narratives, according to Polkinghorne, relates to Bruner's paradigmatic mode of cognition, whereby stories are collected as data and the analytical process follows paradigmatic procedures. It implies extracting concepts, categories, and themes from the stories, which may derive from existing theory or be 'discovered' in the stories, and seeking commonalities and relationships among data (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). This process is exactly what GT does. The paradigmatic analysis of narratives disregards the particularities of each story because it aims to generalize from them (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995).

In contrast, Polkinghorne's narrative analysis builds on Brunner's narrative cognition and implies the collection of 'descriptions of events and happenings', whereby the analytical task is to configurate 'the data into a coherent whole' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 12). Hence, the outcome of Polkinghorne's narrative analysis is a story and it is the task of the researcher to 'discover the plot that displays the linkages among data elements' (Polkinghorne, 1995: 14).

McCormack (2001, 2004), however, problematizes Polkinghorne's 'analysis of narratives' and 'narrative analysis' models. In her research, McCormack (2004) 'seeks personal experience stories and generates stories by composing stories about those experiences' (2004: 220). She calls this analytical process 'storying stories'.

Others also complicate this view. By analysing the studies of different narrative researchers, Mishler (1995) identified three categories of narrative analysis, each utilizing different methods. While some narrative researchers pay attention to reference and temporal order others will focus on narrative structures and strategies, and yet others will delve into the more political aspects of narratives, locating and analysing master and counter narratives.

In addition, some authors utilize different types of narrative analysis within one research, including a mixture between Polkinghorne's and Mishler's models or other perspectives all together. For example, in the context of feminist scholarship, Miller (2017)

conducted 'open-ended identity questions' which elicited narratives, even if not chronologically recounted. Her analytical task involved 'attention to time and the "temporal ordering of events"' and the 'construction and reconstruction of narrative accounts, using devices such as emplottment' (2017: 43). However, she also examined 'which strands of particular and culturally recognizable discourse were discernible in women's stories'(Miller, 2017: 45). Subsequently, she moved from analysis of individual narratives 'to compare data across all participants' (Miller, 2017: 45).

As I have illustrated throughout this section, narrative analysis is not a single approach, and as Miller (2017) suggests, narrative researchers should avoid rushing 'to arrive at neat, coherent findings' because people's lives are 'messier and more chaotic, contradictory and interesting than we might at first suppose' (2017: 60). What Miller is suggesting here is antithetical to established canonical views to research that imply that it can be fully planned on the outset and followed in a straight line, step-by-step, without clumsy turns.

Narrative inquiry can liberate and decolonize our imagination and does not assume a single authoritative way to do so. It is feminist and decolonial in that it takes people's stories and subjectivities seriously, including the researcher's, and helps researchers move from 'studying about to thinking with', an intrinsic decolonial move (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Moreover, and less discussed in this article, is how narrative inquiry can also challenge the way in which research is presented, opening up more creative practices, such as poetry, short stories, and beyond (Kim, 2016).

Furthermore, narrative inquiry is a powerful tool that can help reveal the macro narratives about a unilateral, legitimate way of generating knowledge and enable the co-construction of multiple counternarratives.

Conclusion

I hope that novice researchers, like myself, find my story useful and feel compelled to embark on their own creative methodological paths. My methodological journey has been challenging and messy every step of the way, but it is precisely because of the challenges that I have learned to think creatively and find the means to communicate and think with research participants on the other side of the world. That alone has been an enriching and meaningful experience – research and generating knowledge should be both.

I do not claim that my methodological choices entirely respond to feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial concerns. For starters, all three have their origins in academic circles in the Global North, and, in the case of online research, we must be aware that some corporations operating online platforms and tools we utilize might engage in practices that are antithetical to the promotion and advancement of social justice. Furthermore, and in the backdrop of multiple social and environmental crises, the three methodologies here presented must be further scrutinized and work must be done to update them so that they can accompany research that aims to address these multiple challenges (e.g. activist research). Updating existing methodologies and/or finding other ways of generating knowledge remain open yet exciting tasks and figuring out how to legitimize emerging methodologies in a global context is a worthwhile endeavour.

I also hope that my story inspires novice and experienced researchers to challenge the many unjust forms of generating knowledge about our diverse world as many feminist,

decolonial, and postcolonial thinkers have done before us. I suggest starting by acknowledging that epistemic silencing is not something conferred to the past nor happening elsewhere; it is alive and well and enacted every day at universities in Europe and beyond. The first step to challenging such silencing or, as one reviewer put it, 'epistemicide', is recognizing the many shapes it takes. Here, I mention only a few.

Recognizing epistemic silencing

It starts with apparently innocent questions, such as why study something happening elsewhere, which make novice (non-native) researchers question the relevance of their research interests, leading them to change their minds out of fear of rejection or methodological or other challenges. Also, supervisors in European universities rejecting topics (seemingly) unrelated to Europe and funding schemes that exclude non-native speakers contribute to epistemic silencing at the outset.

Once funding and a supervisor interested in non-European-focused research has been found, then the silencing might take yet other forms. As Bruce et al. (2016) point out, often the research community, including supervisors, ethics boards, and funding agencies, require 'specificity, details and predetermined procedures' which might influence and 'thwart' methodological decisions which, they argue, jeopardizes 'the whole research enterprise' (2016: 5).

Once the detailed research plan has been accepted, emergent researchers might run into and be confronted by the unexciting methodology and methods courses that offer a very limited view of what a methodology can be, thus, provide an insipid pallet of methodologies and methods to draw from. In addition, often these courses are taught separately from ethics. This is problematic because the link between the researcher's ethics and their methodological choices becomes undone. Not to mention that ethics courses often do not include feminist and decolonial ethical perspectives (for a feminist reading on ethics, see Brabeck and Brabeck, 2009).

Challenging 'epistemicide'

After recognizing the many shapes of epistemic silencing, (novice) researchers can challenge it starting by transgressing disciplinary boundaries. Especially novice researchers in architecture or planning schools should visit seminars and symposia in faculties within the social sciences, particularly those offering critical perspectives. Schools of architecture and planning deal little with theories of power (Sandercock, 1998) and are known for their Andro-Euro-American-centrism (Ahrentzen and Groat, 1992; Harvard GSD, 2013). Transgressing disciplinary boundaries can help reflect on our disciplines, broaden our understanding of our research, and acquire the tools, theoretical or methodological, to support and defend our positions and our research processes.

Linked to transgressing disciplinary boundaries, joining and becoming active in networks that are multidisciplinary and dealing with critical perspectives and/or methodological explorations can also offer new views to research. In the absence of such networks, start your own. Networks are a good way to find like-minded people from a kaleidoscope of disciplinary and biographical backgrounds and learn about different research topics and ways to do research. Becoming active in networks not only helps

develop skills, such as communication or organization, but, because networks are loose and fluid, they also allow you to drive it in the direction you want to. Furthermore, epistemic silencing is a systemic issue that no single researcher can address on their own, networks might be a stepping stone to more organized mobilization to address 'epistemicide' at an institutional level.

Sharing our experiences can also be a potent way to reveal epistemic injustices as well as the various ways in which these are being challenged. Indeed, the PhD workshop, Dislocating Urban Studies, is where I learned about the unpleasant experiences some researchers have gone through, illustrating that racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism are still embedded within academic circles. However, it was also where I learned how a researcher in South Africa was deploying decolonial thinking to *unlearn* unjust planning theories and practices that are entrenched in colonial history; where a researcher based in Turkey clarified what it meant to do feminist urban research there and how it unveiled the ways in which neoliberal urban developments affected women's lives and livelihoods; and where renown postcolonial urban scholar, Jennifer Robinson, introduced the session Challenging Methodologies and Methods and encouraged researchers to look beyond the Western methodological repertoire and to think about methodology as a creative process.

These stories compelled me to want to know more about feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial theories, to adopt them to make sense of my methodological journey, and to write this article in the hopes that it unleashes the curiosity of other (novice) researchers starting their own liberatory, creative, albeit challenging, methodological paths.

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Notes

1. The course was held at the Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro campus Centro Universitario, located near the city centre of the city of Querétaro.
2. Our interest was on the public use of these abandoned urban spaces, not on squatting to live inside these constructions. In fact, most of the abandoned spaces we documented were in very poor conditions.
3. Each year we focused on a different space.
4. I say 'luckily' because not all colleagues have received such support and many are asked to locate their research interests in Europe.
5. Online sources included websites from the organizations and the cases; blogs, where the cases are described often in great detail; Instagram and Facebook Pages of the organizations of projects, not personal profiles, where cases are usually documented through images, short text descriptions, and often published chronologically; online news articles and video reportages announcing, documenting, or commenting on the cases; reports available online produced by the grassroots organizations; if the case had been awarded a prize or funding, often a detailed description of the case is available in the websites of the organization/institution awarding the prize or the website of the foundation granting the funds. I also revised the websites of place-making conferences held in Latin America, seeking speakers and projects relevant for this study.

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