

## Going back to school. An interpretative analysis of a dialogical interview with adult women during the pandemic

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### Abstract

This paper offers an extensive guide for researchers who wish to pay greater attention to the reflexivity in their own research. The author provides an example of self-observation and critical self-reflection of her own involvement in the process of doing research and being part of the moment of co-shaping (new) knowledge. The work focuses on the educational experiences of women placed in the context of their lifelong experience, women's learning through shared experience, and the role of cultural context in these processes. A non-standard structure was used, in which analysis of the author's own experiences is interwoven with analysis of the biographies of the women studied, and the researcher's individual analysis is compared with the group analysis among other women. The aim is to present an interpretive perspective of feminist ethnography on these experiences and emphasizes the role of informal learning through experiencing relationships in everyday life, including through art.

### Keywords

feminism, auto/biography, autoethnography, conversational method, interpretative analysis

### Introduction

In this paper I wish to pay close attention both to the element of reflexivity in my research and to the transformative potential of conversations between women.

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This work provides an example of auto/biographical research (Merrill & West, 2009) and insight with the interpretative perspective of feminist autoethnography. I combine elements between the (return to) learning and feminism, and I interrogate the role of aesthetics representation in fostering reflexivity through the story of my experience. The story, narrated in the first person, is organized in three interconnected parts. In the first part, I describe my personal experience during the COVID-19 pandemic in Milan (Italy) with photography and aesthetical expression, and I create a connection between feminism in Italy and adult education through a narration of my visit to an exhibition dedicated to feminism and photography. In the second part, I reflect on my research experience with three adult women that have returned to education, who I interviewed a few days after visiting the exhibition. The interactive exchange, which took place in a school for adult students (Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti, hereafter CPIA) in the metropolitan city of Milan, was also attended by two of their teachers and by a young professional photographer invited by me, also women, who participated in the discussion. The result was a long and active exchange about the participants' personal choice to go back to school and on the implications of this experience for their social roles as women, wives, mothers, and workers (Merrill, 2003). We also discussed migration, because two of the interviewees have a migratory background. The co-created materials were so rich that initially I found it difficult to decide how to best analyze it. Eventually I decided, in accordance with a suggestion that I received in March 2021 following a presentation I delivered at the online conference of the Life History and Biography Network of ESREA, to gather together a small group of different women to both undertake a creative, interpretative analysis of this plurivocal interaction and to share ideas connected with women's lives; the third part of the paper describes this meeting and its results. This group comprised six women: Two university students undertaking a Master's Science of Education course and four of my acquaintances – a theatre actor and teacher, a psychotherapist, a psychiatrist, and a lawyer. All of these women were recruited by chance: Each voluntarily responded to a WhatsApp announcement that I shared in different groups of acquaintances during the Covid-19 pandemic. The advantage of using this random group is that it utilizes informal contributions from women that are interested in reflecting on women's condition and who bring different experiences and perspectives to the research. Collaborating online, these six women and I worked together to create a learning process in which the stories that emerged from the participants in the original interviews could resonate with our experiences as women to create experiences of togetherness. In fact, in an

individualistic and accelerated society like the one in which we live in Milan, there is often very little space and time for people to consider the complexities of their own life in a critical and open way. Therefore undertaking biographical research as an activist “is often to do with creating sufficient hope in individuals and communities by building meaningful dialogue and creating good enough experiences of togetherness, across difference” (Bainbridge, Formenti and West, 2021, p.1), because in listening to the stories of others, we are also reflecting upon our own histories, social and cultural backgrounds, as well as our values and subjectivities.

### My Imagined Social Capital

I visited the exhibition *Gestures of revolt. Art, photography, and feminism in Milan 1975/1980*<sup>2</sup> on an early October morning in 2020 with Gaia Del Negro, a dear friend and researcher colleague, with whom I have undertaken duoethnographic research for many years (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) on the aesthetic languages used in museums and in contemporary photography more generally to enhance self-awareness, dialogue, and critical narratives (Formenti, Luraschi, & Del Negro, 2019). The exhibition was organized by a group of feminist artists and activists (some of who are also adult educators) that have variously been active at different times in Milan, to explore the condition of women in the last 30 years in this part of northern Italy. It was the first time that I had seen her after the long months of the first wave of the pandemic and the summer where we lost touch, so I was very excited to spend time together and was looking forward to again start reflecting together with a feminist perspective. I think for this reason I arrived at the appointment well in advance and I had time to walk around the historic center of the city. Milan that morning was deserted: I saw only a solitary man walking in an empty Piazza del Duomo (Figure 1).

During the early months of the pandemic, the square became one of the most powerful symbols of lockdown in Italy. Despite this, the deserted square was not an image familiar to me, in other words something I had become accustomed to, because I had seen it only on digital media, having not having been able to reach the center from the suburban neighborhood of Milan where I live due to the limitations placed on travel. It was like looking at something unthinkable, while at the same time it was a moment of epiphany where I felt the beauty and the magnificence of

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<sup>2</sup> *Gesti di rivolta. Arte, fotografia e femminismo a Milano 1975/1980*, <http://www.nuova-galleriamorone.com/portfolio-item/gesti-di-rivolta/?lang=en>.



Figure 1: Piazza del Duomo, Milan, October 2020.

Piazza del Duomo, and I also perceived my desire to imagine new ways of telling life and the world about the interdependence of humans and the environment. To fix this poetic moment, I took a picture with my smartphone (Figure 1).

I am not a photographer, but in recent years photographs have become important to my way of doing research. I use photography to give body to embodied narratives (Formenti et al. 2014) and to reflect on my experience as a woman, feminist adult educator, and researcher. For example, along with Gaia and Laura Formenti I searched for the place of the body, artistic imagination, and ecology in society and education (Formenti, Luraschi, & Del Negro, 2020). I consider feminist, autoethnographic methods (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) an important source of experience and knowledge, because researchers with this perspective “critique and question their positionality in relation to critical issues and constructs and reconceptualize their own narrative constructions in the face of the other person” (Sawyer, 2021, p. 96). During the pandemic crisis, I started to use photography during my solitary walks in the periphery of Milan, where I live, to snap evocative objects (Bollas, 2009) expressive of my innermost condition<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One of my pictures with an autobiographic text intitled *Small thing of unquantifiable value* is part of the *Visualising the Feminist Imaginary exhibition*, an initiative of the Gender Justice, Creative Pedagogies and Arts-Based Research Group, Faculty of Education

or to realize interdependent self-portraits where my figure is entangled with the environment (Figure 2) to develop my ability and power to imagine the world for myself, because as a woman I am aware that I am subject to the problematic imagining of others (de Beauvoir, 1949).



Figure 2: Self-portrait during the pandemic crisis.

Therefore, my Imagined Social Capital (Quinn, 2010) is represented by Italian feminism in the seventies (Lonzi, 1970) in which photographic art was extremely powerful (Casero, 2021). In fact, in these years the feminist discourse focuses on the possibility of creating an art made by women with the aim of deconstructing stereotypes and letting women stand out as free beings. Feminist art and the feminist imaginary are, of course, not the mainstream, so in Italy, for example, institutional museums rarely dedicated space for women's photography. For this reason, the Municipality of Milan invited museums, galleries, and cultural associations of the city to organize events to celebrate *I talenti delle donne*<sup>4</sup> (Women's talents). Part of the program was made up by the exhibition *Gestures of revolt* that took place in a small and private gallery called *Nuova Galleria Morone* located ten minutes' walk from *Piazza del Duomo*.

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at the University of Victoria, Canada. Here picture and text: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ONBdrviSSyErgJR94BZMIM00cvDX3Qob/edit#slide=id.p12>.

<sup>4</sup> *I talenti delle donne*, <https://italentidelledonne.comune.milano.it/>

At the beginning of the visit, Gaia and I were attracted to a wall full of photos and videos. I focused my attention on a photo of *Piazza del Duomo* with a completely different scenario from the deserted one seen by me only a few minutes before. In fact, this picture depicted a group of smiling girls demonstrating in the middle of the square with their hands raised in a triangle to form a vagina. In the seventies in Italy, as well as all Western countries, the “gesture of the vagina” was a gesture of revolt which indicated a threshold, a limit between the inside and the outside, not only the internal and the external of the female sexual organ, but especially the threshold to cross in order to affirm the desire for a cultural and social change and gender justice (Bussoni & Perna, 2014). Looking at this picture, it seemed that the girls were calling me: I realized that I very much needed to be physically close to my friends and to laugh with them, so I moved my gaze away from the photo to place it on Gaia, my friend, who was immersed in watching a video. I took a picture (Figure 3) and, after a long pause, I walked over to her.



Figure 3: Gaia in front of photos and video at *Gestures of revolt*, October 2020.

After taking the picture, I became aware of being at the same time an observer and observed, always part of a system, in a network with others, with their story and mine, in a world to which different meanings are attributed (Bateson, 1972) and where a plurality of versions of the stories are present in the discourses that we live by (Høyen & Wright 2020, p. 2). In the same moment, Gaia was watching a video about an extraordinary social and educational experiment

in the seventies when, based on a victory scored by the metalworkers' unions with regard to fixed employment contracts, workers were granted entitled to receive up 150 paid hours of education every three years. The aim was to give the members of the working-class the opportunity to obtain the standard middle-school qualification (Causarano, 2016). The video entitled *Feminism and 150 hours*<sup>5</sup> describes the decision of the Milanese feminist movement to extend the initiative to housewives and the educational path that teachers and activists (often the two roles coexisted in the same woman) realized for and with housewives. The narrator of the video is Lea Melandri, one of Italy's best-known feminist thinkers and activists (Melandri, 2019), who in those years had worked as an adult educator in a suburban neighborhood of Milan. She recounts her autobiographical path to becoming an activist teacher who had given centrality to the themes of the body in her work as a clear result of her being the daughter of a peasant family who had personally had the singular privilege of being able to study. Listening to her I was struck by her sincerity as she explained the difficulties she had encountered in her path of emancipation that had dualism as an initial condition. Thus, there were the dualisms, for example, of body-thought and nature-culture, so I felt her experience as being very close to mine, as I am, too, a first-generation student from a working-class family with a deep research interest related to the themes of the body (Luraschi, 2020). She also describes the pleasure of becoming an adult educator who had worked with a particular creative method to engage women in "writing from experience" (Melandri 2017, p. 10, my translation), in life learning and emancipation courses for 150 hours. Her story created connections with my current experience of auto/biographical research with students who are attending courses at a school for adult students (CPIA) in the metropolitan area of the city of Milan. In conclusion, when conversing with Gaia during the visit to the exhibition *Gestures of revolt* I reflected on how much learning can represent for me and many other women: An experience of self-recognition and human flourishing (Honneth, 1995, p.131).

### Women Who Have Returned to Education

There is a connection between the feminist tradition of adult education underlined by the exhibition I visited and my research experience with various groups of women, some of whom had a migratory background, that took place some weeks

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5 The video is available in Italian, link: <https://memomi.it/il-femminismo-a-milano-puntata-7-femminismo-e-150-ore>.

after the exhibition visit. In fact, in that period I was invited by the Lombardy Center of Research, Experimentation and Development to conduct auto/biographical interviews describing the relational experiences of non-traditional adult students who have returned to learning to obtain a middle school or high school diploma and who attended CPIA courses in Lombardy during the pandemic crisis. The aim was to collect significant stories and publish them in a journal dedicated to teachers' lifelong learning to increase teachers' awareness of the potential of relational networks between students, teachers, and territories. Thus, I created a participatory study with 11 adult learners and nine teachers during the pandemic in Milan, more precisely between the summer and autumn of 2020. Biographical materials were generated using the auto/biographical method, a process of research that recognizes an "inter-relationship between the construction of our own lives through autobiography and the construction of others' lives through biography" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 8). I engaged in this research with a young professional photographer, also called Gaia – Gaia Bonanomi<sup>6</sup> – to dialogue informally with her on the evocative power of images to give voice to the body. She is a young fashion photographer who began to question her work during the lockdown and decided to carry out more personal research on social issues. She offered to observe the interviews and from time to time, with the participants' agreement, to take photos of them at the end of the interviews.

Gaia amazed me with her ability to focus on a single detail right from the first interview in which she participated. In fact, she had managed to involve a young refugee with a passion for athletics to recreate a training session in a room. Looking at that photo (Figure 4) during the analysis of the interview, I was fascinated to realize that all the strength and determination of the young migrant to continue his studies, despite the work commitments necessary to sustain himself, were condensed in that image.

This experience encouraged me to follow my intuition of intertwining words and images in my quest to give substance to narratives (Banks, 2007). The results, which were published in a journal dedicated to teachers and adult education, explore the social capital in learning for students going back to school, most of whom have a migratory background (Luraschi, 2021). Research on non-traditional students (see Finnegan et al. 2014) indicates that for the students both Social Capital and Imagined Social Capital are important. The latter is based on symbolic networks made up of people who are most likely not personally known to the subject but to whom significant power is attributed to inspire the resilience

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<sup>6</sup> Gaia Bonanomi, <https://gaiabonanomi.com/>.





Figure 4: Student photographed at the end of the interview, June 2020,  
Gaia Bonanomi PH

necessary to continue the learning process (Quinn, 2010, p.68). However, the pandemic has reduced social relations and has modified our imaginary. What effect does it have on adults who study?

First, during the search for participants via the snowball sampling method, finding women that were willing to be interviewed individually was much more complex than finding male subjects. According to feminist theory, this difficulty refers to the traditional dichotomy between the public/private space that sees women less represented in the public and political sphere. As a result, women are generally less self-confident when it comes to making their voices heard than men, because in the past Western culture disapproved of the idea that women could speak in public (Beard, 2017) and, even today, male discourse is still the

standard – loud, authoritative, and “valued” (Holmes, 1992, p. 135). In addition, the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on women globally. The particularly heavy impact of the pandemic on women is clearly related to their care of the family, especially if they are mothers with school-age children because of the prolonged school closures. In fact, in its 2021 *Report on gender equality in the EU*, the European Commission declares that “The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities between women and men in almost all areas of life, both in Europe and beyond, rolling back on the hard-won achievements of past years.” (EU, 2021, p.3). For this reason, I thought that since the women participating in my research were certainly already overloaded with work and finding it difficult to reconcile study with job and family commitments, my research should not be yet another burden of commitment, but rather an opportunity to meet other women to engage in dialogue and reflect on their own experience. Therefore, I set up a small group interview in the hope of achieving a deeper and richer understanding of the collective construction of the stories we are immersed in, and interview was organized in such a way that it would also be educational for the participants. In fact, education creates a way of thinking and habitual points of view that we use to understand reality (Formenti & West, 2018).

The participants were three students (Figure 5), a teacher and the school’s director, all of whom were women. From the resulting conversation, in which the photographer took part in the role of participating observer (Richardson, 2000), multiple perspectives emerged (Luraschi, 2020) of what having a sustainable life can mean – in families, schools, communities, society – in this fragmented world characterized by deepest gender inequalities.

As an adult educator and activist researcher, I tried to use auto/biographical narrative methods in a search to create what Bainbridge and West (2021) call, in the spirit of Donald Winnicott (1971), a good enough transitional and even transformational space where significant and difficult life experiences can be engaged with dialogically and relationally (see West, 2016). Following Bainbridge and West, I seek to nurture deeper forms of self/other relationships, reciprocal understanding, and shared commitment to social justice. I believe that as an activist researcher I have the possibility “to encourage empathic, reflexive listening, respectfulness, openness, dialogue, trust, playfulness, equality and learning about self and the other” (Bainbridge and West 2021, p.124).

From this perspective, the interview generates a space for critical reflection on the self as well as intersubjective knowing of self in relationships, if we accept, as Evans suggests, that “the biographical research interview is interactive, co-



Figure 5: The three adult learner protagonists of the interview, October 2020, Gaia Bonanomi PH

constructed, flooded with inter-discursivity, and that it constructs and constitutes local action and meaning-making in the rich ecologies of learning and living” (Evans, 2021, p.42). As such, our time together became more than an interview, because the students not only told the story of their return to education, but they also shared emotions and struggles that relate to their social roles and status.

### **Discriminations and Solidarity**

The conversation was intense: Deeply rooted social prejudice, significant examples of gender inequality, and above all the image of three brave women emerged from the stories. The photographer described the atmosphere during the interview in the following way:

We sit in the room and in the gray of the afternoon to my eyes the colors of their clothes stand out. Cecilia, Olga, and Teresa<sup>7</sup> sit composed, formal, full of curiosity about the interview. Hands in pockets and three shy faces hidden behind the anti-covid masks. As soon as they begin to tell each other about themselves, their arms began to unfold, and they recognize each other as travelling companions.

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<sup>7</sup> Invented names.

How magical the confrontation is! To listen and be heard, understood, shared, and supported. That afternoon, sincere and powerful tears descended, filled with difficulty, but bright and full of life. (Gaia's email, January 2021, my translation.)

Once again, drawing from her professional experience in fashion photography, her artistic gaze can see details and illuminates the scene by capturing the colors of the clothes and the posture of the three women, and by grasping their depth through their stories.

On the other hand, my point of view as a researcher was oriented by my previous professional experiences in the field of pedagogical research with social workers and migrants to focus my attention and my analysis on the experience of two of them, Cecilia and Olga, who both have a migratory background. Their individual stories describe a complex scenario that, from my perspective, invites reflection on the contemporary Italian context in relation to the presence of foreigners in Italy. This is a multifaceted and changing image, indispensable from a historical point of view to understand Italy today (Colucci, 2018). In fact, Italians are struggling to consider immigration a structural phenomenon in their opinion and continue to consider it a social emergency.

At the beginning of our conversation, Cecilia introduces herself, describing her family roles and her transitions: She is a housewife who left Brazil when she was 27 years old. Today she is 41 years old, and she has been living in Europe for almost 14 years. Cecilia also tells us that she is a lawyer, but her degree is not recognized in Italy. In Brazil, she had worked for FIAT, the best-known Italian car manufacturer, and it was in this workplace that she met her husband, an Italian man. After the wedding they decided together to move to the United Kingdom (UK) where the husband had received a very advantageous job offer. Here Cecilia tells us that she felt the desire to resume studying to have the opportunity to practice as a lawyer in England, but she was unable to do so due to the very high costs of university fees. Consequently, she gladly accepted the proposal of her husband who, after a few years of work in UK, proposed to move to Italy, because she tells us that her husband was homesick for Italy, and she hoped that having worked in Brazil for an Italian company she would not have struggled to find a job.

Once she arrived in Italy, however, Cecilia realized the difficulty of finding a job, not only because her law degree was not recognized, but also because as a mother of two small children it was impossible to reconcile work ensuring they were cared for. In Italy, from her point of view, services to support parenting is

meagre and poorly organized compared to those available in the UK, so she had to become a full-time housewife and mother. Over the years, the education of the children led Cecilia to get to know and meet a group of women with whom she could exchange clothes, objects, and advice on the care of children. Over time, when the informal group of women decided to structure itself to become a cultural promotion association, Cecilia realized that some Italian mothers made her uncomfortable, saying that she spoke Italian badly and she could not be part of the board of an association that she cares about very much.

According to the way Cecilia develops her narrative, it was this episode that reignited the idea she had had in the UK of returning to studying, but with a different goal. In fact, her desire, which emerges during the conversation, is no longer to work as a lawyer but to become a social worker to support foreign mothers who are living in Italy. Cecilia's experience shows the identity struggle process characterized as a transformation (Formenti & West, 2018) and, at the same time, the tension embedded in the Italian context in relationship to people with migratory background (Formenti & Luraschi, 2020). In fact, it is important to underline that Cecilia is formally an Italian citizen, as a wife and mother of Italian citizens, but she is not recognized as such and therefore does not appear to feel Italian. Discrimination phenomena such as those experienced by Cecilia are widespread and cross all social classes and cultural contexts. For example, in the days in which I am writing this article, the news that the captain of the Italian women's volleyball team at the next Olympic Games will be Miriam Fatime Sylla, a young Italian with Ivorian origins, caused a sensation. In this regard, I was interested in a comment of the captain of the men's volleyball team, Ivan Zaytsev, a young man with Russian origins who stated in an important national newspaper:

The new captain of the women's team is Miriam Sylla, born in Palermo of African parents. I was born in Spoleto of Russian parents. Maybe we are leading the national teams because we are constantly forced to prove that we are Italian. Obviously, this prejudice towards those who have no roots here is not normal but having to convince others has made us greater warriors and more patriotic. (*Corriere della Sera*, June 2021<sup>8</sup>, my translation.)

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<sup>8</sup> Article written by Eleonora Cozzari, available in Italian: [https://www.corriere.it/sport/calcio/europei/21\\_giugno\\_17/ivan-zaytsev-politica-egonu-speranze-dell-italia-tokyo-siamo-piu-maturi-b9000c26-ced5-11eb-b2ed-71257ec75099.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/sport/calcio/europei/21_giugno_17/ivan-zaytsev-politica-egonu-speranze-dell-italia-tokyo-siamo-piu-maturi-b9000c26-ced5-11eb-b2ed-71257ec75099.shtml).

It is therefore evident how complex it is to live in a context in which a person is forced to continually prove to be Italian, while at the same time it is risky to uncritically indulge to this external request because they can end up adhering to the idea that since you do not have Italian origins you have to demonstrate that you “deserve to be” an Italian citizen. Returning to Cecilia’s experience, this could mean an uncritical acceptance of prejudice, sometimes even unconsciously, influenced perhaps by her accent, often wrongly superimposed on linguistic competences (Calamai et al., 2020) and indirectly on work-related and social-related competencies. At the same time, Cecilia’s story describes, in line with migration studies in Italy that, more generally, media and political representations of immigration in Italy (*Vita*, October 2020<sup>9</sup>) do not allow migrants to emerge as individuals with their own ideas, aspirations and capacity for action within the social context.

The drive to return to learning to overcome cultural, social, and linguistic barriers can also be found in the story of Olga, another of the interviewees. Olga was born 34 years ago in Russia and has a university degree in Engineering. Like Cecilia, she arrived in Italy to follow her husband, also a Russian engineer, after she had lived with him in Chile where they met. It was love at first sight: She was on vacation and fell in love with this Russian who was employed there. During the interview Olga told us that it was very difficult for her to live in Chile because she did not speak Spanish and, once in Italy, she decided to attend public school immediately to learn Italian. Olga explains how her Italian teacher has represented a point of reference for her because she tells us with a genuine enthusiasm that the teacher has transmitted the passion for Italian and she invited her to read many books to improve her language skills. During the conversation Olga changes her tone of voice when she talks about her: From a bright and cheerful tone to a calmer tone. Therefore, she says that she has changed her professional perspectives due to her stay in Italy and the birth of a son: She currently makes cakes and sweets for anniversaries on request and wishes to continue her training by attending a course in fashion design.

At the same time, a few months ago she started to informally help a group of women, Russian native speakers without papers, because she explains that they do not have the documents and cannot go to school to study normally as she does.

These two stories suggest, I argue, the wide socio-cultural capital of the women who are going back to school and showed their propensity to create

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<sup>9</sup> Article written in Italian and available: <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2020/10/08/la-voce-dei-migranti-non-e-rappresentata-sui-media/156917/>.

supportive relationships with other women with migratory backgrounds. Their experience convinced me that adult learners need to be together to speak openly, just as the group of women showcased in the Milan museum exhibition did in the 1970s, to create a space of their own, thinking together, with body and mind, and imagining a future based on the recognition of the ecology of life and celebration of difference.

I presented these reflections at an online conference of the network LHBN, and afterwards I received feedback from Michelle Glowacki-Dudka, a researcher expert on group development in online adult education classrooms, suggesting I carry out an interpretative and collaborative analysis of the interview to create a space of reflection online during the pandemic. The colleague suggested that I engage myself to find, in an informal manner, a small group of women to creatively re-read the material with me. This was to take place online as it was not possible to meet in person at that moment due to the lockdown in response to the pandemic.

### **Living on the Edge**

I am searching for another language, more embodied and creative, to create a new shared understanding of women returning to education and to learn about them in relation to the many complex circumstances that shape their lives and their struggles for beauty and freedom. For this reason, I invited six women: Two university students, a theatre actor and teacher, a psychotherapist, a psychiatrist, and a lawyer who came together by chance to work creatively with me online. Each had responded to an invitation from me disseminated via WhatsApp and not all of them knew each other, but they were all interested in reflecting on the condition of women. Each of them reads a selection of the transcription of the interactive exchange with Cecilia and Olga that I had anonymized before our meeting, and together we began to speak freely on the most significant passages starting from their own personal experience. Firstly, Luciana, as a lawyer, described the feeling of frustration and fatigue experienced by some women due to the impossibility of reconciling work and family, and Lara as a psychotherapist with a migratory background – she is from Brazil like Cecilia – felt it important to reiterate that it is possible to have foreign degrees recognized in Italy and that schools for adults should support students more in this recognition process. During the conversation we focused on Lara's notion, according to which:

“When you are a foreigner, you are always on the sidelines” (my translation).

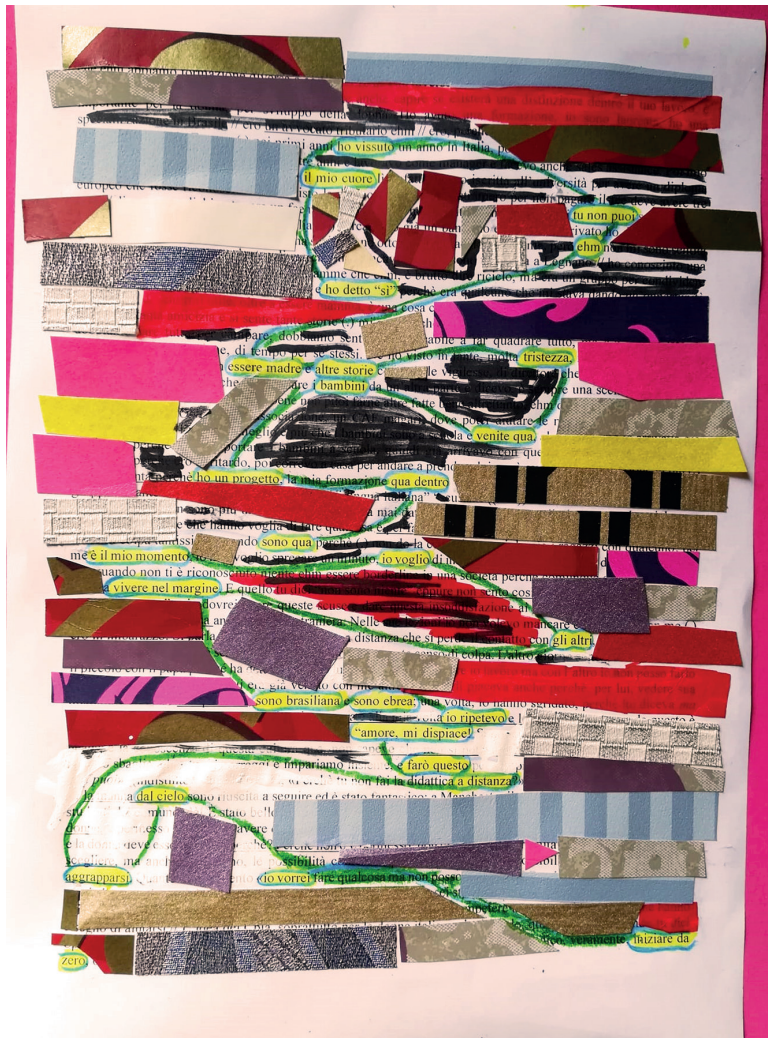


Figure 6: Beatrice's artwork, Milan, May 2021

Beatrice is an actor with experience of teaching in social and community theatre, so her gaze is oriented to search for the potential in people:

“I feel a lot of power in these women who study and wish a different future”  
(my translation).

Beatrice's focus on resources instead of women's problems effectively refocused the whole dialogue, so much so that the whole group were united in the belief that the stories of these women should be listened to more often because they arouse



reflections on adulthood by stirring emotions and touching on important issues for our society. We spent two hours together discussing the invisibility of people going through transition phases like those returning to adult education. Marina, the university student, claims that while studying pedagogical sciences she has had few opportunities to reflect on what it means for an adult to resume their studies:

“This experience has opened up a world that I did not know and that intrigues me” (my translation).

Arriving at the end of the online meeting, I had the feeling that some participants felt the desire to continue the reflection, so I proposed to work creatively on the transcription (with the authorization of Cecilia and Olga) to create a poetic text. Here, Beatrice suggested choosing an interview story and working only on that, so Lara expressed her desire to work on Cecilia’s story and her proposal found everyone’s complete agreement. We said goodbye with the promise to exchange poetic texts via WhatsApp. After a few days I received from Beatrice a photograph of a piece of artwork made by hiding part of the interview with some cuttings of colored sheets and highlighting some words (Figure 6). The highlighted words from Cecilia’s interview were used by her to create a short poetic text which ends like this:

“I will do this from a distance

I would like to cling to the sky

Starting everything from scratch” (my translation).

## Conclusion

Schools for adults and universities today tend to speak the language of indicators, metrics, rankings, competition, and productivity, so an auto/biographical approach could try to tell the experience of the margin. As researcher, I try to be critically reflexive through maintaining an attitude of openness (Gardner, 2014), but this desire to be open is often undermined by the pressure to be efficient and by the Western cultural tendency to think in binaries and dichotomies (Bateson, 1972). Therefore, in this research work I have tried to cross what Hunt and West (2012, p.150) call the border country of adult learning, a challenging territory in which learners must live with the loss of identities on the road to new learning

and new possibilities. During the pandemic I felt alone, and meeting these women allowed me to reconnect with the research work I love because it allows me to meet life stories and learn from them.

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