Personal is Metropolitan:
Narratives of Self and the Poetics of the Intimate Sphere[1]

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This article focuses on current narratives of daily life among young dwellers of metropolitan cities as a particular genre in the growing relevance and visibility of the intimate sphere. The ethnography is highly experimental. It results from workshops based on the collective exploration of the participants' inhabiting practices and consists mostly of micro-narratives. Although most of these data were gathered in Madrid between 2010 and 2014, I also use material from fieldwork carried out in México DF and Montevideo during the same period. The analysis addresses the form of the storytelling, the conventions of modern living as background and a plot where the Ego is the main character. Such discourses must be understood in the light of silent processes transforming city life from the inside. They speak from a strong 'I': a subject committed to autonomy, mobility and self-design. This individualizing tendency compels a young generation of dwellers to 'become oneself' through a personal, reflexive quest that entails being open to the future and breaking with the past (thus establishing discontinuities with class, family, local or ethnic determinations). At the same time, daily routines allow them to discover an emerging order of their own through a process of production of meaning that is amazingly conservative, as it consists in the permanent integration of collective memories and traditional and familial forms of domestic practice. These processes take place at a historical time in which the intimate sphere is given visibility and legitimacy. Classical definitions and metaphors of public space fail to recognize fully these silent processes.
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Intimacies *at Home*

Doing fieldwork in your own society is always a sticky task. First, you have to combine your daily life with participant agendas. Then, you have to follow people that in turn follow their own agendas and have to find ways to locate yourself 'where the action is' (Goffman 1967), in a metropolis where, by definition, there are countless sites of action.

This is probably why most urban ethnographers choose to document collective events taking place in the public space. This was my approach in the 1990s, doing fieldwork in Madrid, México DF and Bogotá on urban festivals, political demonstrations, music consumption and oral histories (Cruces 2007). Then I studied Madrilenian organizations (Cruces et al. 2002), finding that specialist organizations are based on a tight division of labour that sets strict limits on intruder-observers. This means that the researcher has to look for formal entry to the organizational body or, more often, has to opt for a somewhat furtive access through the backstage of bureaux, hospitals, airports, ministries, banks, schools and companies; again, where the action is.

This methodological predicament of urban ethnography increases exponentially in the study of intimacy, because everyone in the city becomes a locus of action. Every woman, man, child, young or old persons have a life of their own, an intimacy to build, a work to do, an engagement in the task of self-making, purposefully, endlessly. How to cope with this De Certeaunian (1990) proliferation? Although this may seem a merely quantitative consideration, it links substantial issues. One is the singularity of everyone's world; what one finds in studying others' intimacies is what the subjects experience as the unique and unrepeatable character of their own lives. More than with a predictable repetition of the same, one is confronted with the serendipitous and animated ups-and-downs in the life of urban dwellers. Ethnography is a pale, graceless resemblance of daily life. Of course there are patterns and categories that the analyst can (and must) impose, but in the exchanges with one's informants one soon discovers that one's view of other's lives is poorer, somehow reductive and thin, when compared to the richness and meaning of their practices, stories and actions.

A further problem has to do with intrusion. The canonical ethnographic strategy used to be, in Marcus terms, 'to follow the people' (1995). In order to document new practices in the intimate realm (to grasp its situated poetics-cum-politics), I could have reasonably chosen four or five homes and be there when meals were cooked, when children were bathed, when TV family sessions took place or when couples quarrelled over the share of chores and errands. Gullestad's *Kitchen-Table Society* (1989) and Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989) are masterworks in this line. A different option would be the sociological path set by J-C. Kauffman in *Le coeur a l'ouvrage* (1997), where he originally theorized *action ménagère* drawing on a lively exchange by mail with informants on the petty details of laundry, ironing and housekeeping.

The ethnography analyzed here follows the path of authors who have shed light on the historical significance of the rise of the intimate sphere, like De Certeau (1990), Giddens (1991, 1992), Gullestad (1989), Hochschild and Machung (1989), Hochschild (1997, 2003 and 2012), Löfgren (2014), Nippert-Eng (1995, 2010) and Kauffman (1997, 2004). The discussion is also inspired by a narratological approach of the kind used by Finnegan (1998) and Brunvand (2001) in order to understand urban life through the analytical lens of its oral genres, discourses and performances.

We live in a time marked by tendency to what could be called *extimacy*; that is, a growing social pressure to disclose intimate life, a social urge to overexpose it to cameras, the internet and other media. So, I decided to try a slightly different approach to data gathering. To put it simply, I did not want to intrude too much; I did not want to be a kind of *Big Brother* in other people's space. This was not merely an ethical, dialogical stance; it was also a theoretical and epistemological one. We must certainly question the old, classical urban common sense which subordinated and undervalued the domestic realm tracing a sanitary line between public/private, production/reproduction, work/home and similar divides. At the same time, how can we avoid to succumb to the opposite, contemporary fascination with intimate

life? In the new urbanity,[2] there seems to be an overrepresentation of the creative, the intimate and the affective which invites to render transparent one's entire life and to melt its separate domains into a fluid continuum (as, in fact, often happens in our daily lives). There seems to be something cool about 'intimacy' today. But this should be the problem to study, not a perspective acritically taken to shed light into this aspect of life.

Some few cultural institutions in Madrid are our partners in this research project. I proposed to one of them, Medialab-Prado, a media laboratory of the City Council, to organize jointly a series of workshops on intimacy to be attended by volunteers. We called these workshops 'collective explorations'. The weekly sessions were advertised through the lab's website[3] and participation was open to its wide network of users. These were mainly students, young professionals and entrepreneurs mostly engaged in technological, artistic or cultural initiatives, who were interested in this collaborative proposal for various reasons. A few were carrying out architecture or planning research, others were activists in social movements, still others were artists engaged in projects on photography, performance or design in the private and domestic spaces. However, most participants shared a genuine curiosity about intimate life — a desire to catch a glimpse of others' internal life while showing some of their own.

I developed most of my fieldwork in this rather unconventional setting. Other, more classical, sources of material have included an online survey of a thousand young internet users in Spain and Mexico; a series of in-depth interviews with young cultural producers ('trend-setters') in their homes and ateliers (Cruces 2012) and filming at some informants' homes. In this last case, the inner space of the house and its system of objects add their own 'voices' to a sort of indoors urban symphony.[4]

The workshop was structured as follows. We talked and interacted for two or three hours around a topic or activity which I suggested; things like bringing personal photos, arranging a meal, making a sketch of the house equipment, inventing a music repertoire, dancing, story-telling and drawing. We have commented on beds, laptops, lullabies and *Tupperwares*. We invented nicknames, shared childhood memories, confided about family quarrels, favourite songs and body noises. Everything went. The task at hand focused the

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[2] I use this word not in the restricted meaning of 'good manners' — a set of rules to behave in society — but in a broader theoretical sense, as a set of dispositions — schemes for perception, evaluation and action — that are linked to the urbanization process. This implies a dynamic relationship between urban life and the formation of the subject, as it is classically argued by Wirth's 'urbanism', Elías' 'civilizatory process' and Simmel's 'metropolitan mental life' (I discuss these authors in Cruces 2007).

[3] http://medialab-prado.es/article/prosumidores2;
http://medialab-prado.es/article/intimidades_metropolitanas;
http://medialab-prado.es/article/intimidades_metropolitanas_2. All internet links included in this article were last consulted in June 2015.

[4] I refer the reader to the film, *The order I live in*, produced with Jorge Moreno Andrés. A teaser is available at: https://vimeo.com/131186909.

group's attention, and became a common goal allowing the group to constitute itself and prompting lively exchanges of experiences, anecdotes and confidences.

Given the co-authorial nature of the exploration, the ethnographer becomes involved in this setting not only as producer of the event, but also at a more intimate level, contributing his/her own experiences and personal condition. The collective focus swings from concrete details to abstract reflections — something explicitly stated as a goal of the meeting. The ethnographer is subtly requested to intervene as host and as interpreter of the situation. This takes him or her away from an ideal, non-intrusive role as a detached observer. However, this loss in neutrality is compensated by a gain in proximity and trust. This kind of setting also makes possible for the ethnographer to obtain more than a mere discourse, as it invites the group to explore the existing diversity of *manières de faire*, idiosincracies and micronarratives.

Narratives of the Metropolitan Self

'Your sketch has reminded me of something I always yearned for as a little girl; because at home, we never had this kind of situation. In my house everything was hyper ordered, always. It was so not because my mother tidied up a lot, but mostly because we had few things and there were so many rules at home... Especially whenever we visited relatives. Then it was: "Watch what are you gonna say", "Please behave", "Mind how you seat at the table"… There were four pieces of cutlery on one side and four on the other, you never knew how to use them. Like in *Pretty Woman*! I lived this typical scene many times at my grandmother's house. I have the feeling things now are not this way anymore'.

Juana said this during *Doing Home*, a workshop convened to share stories of daily life with a dozen participants.[5] She was commenting on a short performance we, the convenors, had offered earlier. Disguised as a traditional couple, we parodied a familial scene, including the cleaning and sweeping of the place, the gender division of roles and a little quarrelling between husband and wife. Prior to this we had stated:

> 'Our home is made of stories. Little, funny, cruel, depressing, nasty, faithful, disconcerting, arranged, chaotic, calculated, improvised, desperate, dull or hopeful.

> To tell stories. Why not? We do it every time. A day at home is a day of telling: storytelling, self-telling.

> Let's build a home together. For a couple of hours. By sharing stories.'

A sociolinguistic view argues that each discourse has to be understood as an answer to a prior discourse. We could say then that, in a way, in these workshops we found nothing more than what we were asking for. Actually, this should be turned on its head. In our call we put a stress on micro-stories precisely because, as a general rule, this 'short stories of the self' have proven to be the basic genre resulting from collective explorations. Certainly, they could be

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[5] http://medialab-prado.es/article/hacer_la_casa

easily induced by the convenor. But they also sprang spontaneously from the exchanges in the group, whether the topic was photographs, computers, couple troubles or childbearing. Furthermore, these stories reflect the structure of other pervasive urban genres (like media chronicles, institutional complaints and chats about illness) which do arise in natural settings. The key point is that this kind of spoken performance puts the self and its vicissitudes at the centre of a moral narrative. It is therefore suitable for systematic analysis (Finnegan 1998).

Some of the best workshops revolved around accounts like those mentioned above, in which a lively give-and-take of stories, with much laughter and emotion, developed following our opening performance. We had the girl who escaped her family's rules; the girl who instead grew up in an apartment filled with books but with no rules; the man who inhabited an 'uninhabited home' — because he was unable to finish the refurbishing he continuously started, over and over; the young man who quarrelled with his girlfriend about the right way to do the chores; the woman whose boyfriend, obsessed with cleanliness and order, made her feel a dirty person; the amateur artist looking after the hidden beauty of the laundry basket (of which she took a series of photographic *still-lives*; and we had the young woman with a strong drive for chaos 'growing inside her chest'.

Three levels of organization can be noticed here. First, a strong narrative structure; as speech acts, these accounts show a form — or a search for it — that often reminds us of other, more formal, storytelling in literary, dramatic and cinematographic genres. Second, the focus on a specific topic: the conventions of living. Through these stories, different ways of living are portrayed, discussed, understood and negotiated against the unspoken background of 'modern living', the subtext being taken-for-granted, shared cultural values, practices and assumptions. Third, these stories are marked by the speaker's perspective. They are definitely stories of the self, of one's own deeds, vicissitudes and predicaments in daily life. In order to articulate the plot, the speaker's leading role does not exclude, but indeed requires, the intervention of a variety of characters: a couple, a family, friends, landlords, furniture, domestic objects, electronic devices, kids, pets, the fate, and so on.

These three aspects appear to be somehow related to each other. This invites an analysis of this kind of micro-story as a genre.

A Search for Form

These stories have form. Many have a definite narrative structure. In others the structure may be incomplete or merely drafted, but the listener can still detect the storyteller's search for style, his or her definite search for form. What modern folklorists have called poetic justice can be found in the best stories. 'Hunter hunted', 'winner by accident', 'happy ending' or 'what a bad luck' conclusions are temporal narrative endings that, by surprising the listener, bring out the story's hidden rationale. Poetic justice is one of the formal traits that make urban legends recognizable (Brunvand 2001) but that also seems to be present in much of our daily storytelling. For example:

> 'This is the most curious [of my family photos]. Here is my aunt Amalia, with a
> suitor of hers who came back from America with my grandfather. He came back,

got in love with her, wooed her, but nothing. Nothing, she didn't want him. Then, on the very day she was going to say "yes" — because he had made an ultimatum: "Well, I leave, I will wait for you in the fairground. If you appear, it will be all right. If you don't, I do give up with you". And it happens that this time she was going to say yes. But alas! Her little sister got sick that day. And she had to stay at home, taking care of her. Thus he left, forever. She never married. And to the last day of her life, she missed him very much.'

Poetic justice can be said to be naturally inscribed in this kind of family saga. It may well extend to the photographs in the family album. Whether or not the album is conceived as a place where the gaze of family members will meet, some may want to act as Alba did:

'This [photo] is from my graduation trip. We went to Rome. I had previously seen a photo of my mother when she visited there. She appeared with this same skirt over the stairs of Piazza de Spagna. Then, I did want to make a similar photo myself. So I took the skirt with me [to Rome] and posed, more or less as she was [in the photograph] on an similar stairway in Trastevere.

- For whom did you take this photo?

- I took it a little for her. It was like saying: I am standing where you stood, seeing what you saw, even when you had no idea that I was going to be here.'

Standing on the stairs, disguised as her mother thirty years earlier, Alba makes a remarkable example of the use of photography to build a narrative to be shared with others. Following Alba's afterthoughts, this is a mirror-photo. The mother will be able to recognize herself through her daughter´s embodiment. Reciprocally, the photo shows the daughter looking directly into the camera, foreseeing her mother´s future gaze. So this is a 'tunnel-in-time photo' too. It binds three different moments in the lives of the mother and the daughter; the first, at the instant the mother posed; the second, when the daughter replicated it in the present; the third, when the anticipated moment comes, in the future, to look at the photo together (thus blissfully recalling that shared past). In a ritual fashion, this photograph embodies a powerful narrative in the series of mirroring images between mother and daughter; one that speaks about time, identity and the permanence of a loving bond.

Of course, not all the storytelling that we collected contained such a sophisticated treatment of form. In natural speech, scripts and narrative schemata are mostly hybrid, indefinite and sketchy. If there is structure, it is not to be found in the story itself, but in the understandings that are built between narrator and listeners in the progressive, unfinished and open process of storytelling. Here, structure belongs to the order of the dialogue, rather than to the text. Nonetheless many of the stories that we have collected bear a resemblance to classic literary, dramatic or cinematographic genres (comedy, parody, drama, tragedy and allegory) as well as to love stories, filthy stories, memories, lyrical moments and urban legends. This formal resemblance gives the stories a convincing moral strength and beautiful, pleasant endings.

This stylization of speech gets also noticeable in written micro-stories. We asked a sample of a thousand internet users in Spain and Mexico to tell us their lives in a tweet of 140 characters. [6] In this case, the pressure of the limited space tends to reduce, simplify and stereotypify the script. The result is both aphoristic in style and strongly reminiscent of the rhetoric present in our contemporary social world, including self-help literature, religious preaching, black humour, job interviewing, mission statements and other genres — written and oral. Below are some examples:

'Calm, balanced, funny, loving, cheerful, centred, mature, stable, peaceable, tender.' [Mex, w, 30]

'Good, beautiful, inexpensive.' [*bueno bonito barato*] [Sp, m, 20]

'I am the nicest healthiest most successful millionaire happy cheerful honest positive handsome sexy positive desirable loved and cared girl of the world.' [Méx, w, 33]

'I am a successful gay with much luck, I work hard and make efforts in everything I do.' [Sp, m, 20]

'Everything goes as planned, my universe is aligned in order to succeed in every aspect of my life, my family is great.' [Méx, m, 24]

'My life is happy, complete. I learn from mistakes. I grow. I smile with the good things. If I fall I get up. I move ahead. No surrender. I take challenges.' [Méx, w, 33]

'[I am] a happy person who has enjoyed wonderful moments in life. The only thing being owed is to give thanks God.. [Méx, m, 25]

'I want to stop being conformist and begin to live a life that pleases God.' [Méx, w, 23]

'A shit of life (with nothing) or almost nothing.' [Sp, w, 22]

'[My life] is shit where I will never become anything that I really like and that gives me enough to eat.' [Sp, w, 21]

'[My life] is a mistake that should be ended.' [Sp, m, 25]

'You must know me before criticizing me! For you indeed do not know how I am.' [Méx, w, 20]

'What a disgusting life. I want a job. I want a future!' [Sp, w, 20]

'Hello I wanna study fashion design but I lack financial resources.' [Méx, m, 20]

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[6] A brief comparative analysis of these narratives can be found in Guaderrama 2012: 273-298.

'I am a 24 years old girl. I love learning. I am very convivial. For me to live without friends is like being a garden without flowers, lol. I am very competitive, both when the time is to work and to study. I like to give it all.' [Sp, w, 24]

'I am a passionate about sports, I love Barça, to live with my couple and my family, to travel and enjoy and having a job in correspondence with my professional skills.' [Sp, m, 30]

'I am a very creative person, witty, amiable, honest, sincere, uncomplicated, intelligent.' [Mex, w, 23]

As we see, the formal traits of micronarratives should not be overemphasized. In most cases, their relation to the great literary forms does not go further than a resemblance. They are, by definition, tactical, opportunistic and non-sequential. They are made not to last but to be exchanged; they are made to present more than to represent. Here, structure is always in the making. It is bridged, so to speak, by the exchange between teller and listeners; it is negotiated among the schemata that the teller has in mind and the responses from her/his audience that he/she is able to anticipate contextually. In a sense, it is this exchange, this 'conversation', that gives structure, reminding us of Bakhtin's famous definition of dialogue as 'the simultaneous unity of differences in the act of enunciation' (in Holquist 1990: 36). These scripts and other textual schemata do not abide by the strictures of any specific genre; rather, they follow the speaker's poetic strategies to communicate to others his or her position in life, to give a coherent account of the singularity of his or her life.

Conventions for Living: The Modern Promise of Intimacy for Everyone
These micro-stories revolve around the topic of the modern conventions of life. Differences in their interpretation and application to personal cases appear in the explicit text, which becomes comprehensible against the background of the values, practices and technologies that are naturalized and interiorized.

The structural conventions of our indoor spaces have a history. Monique Eleb and Anne Debarre, respectively a social psychologist and an architect, have investigated what they call 'the invention of modern living' by analysing building plans from different periods in Paris, as well as architecture magazines and treatises on urbanity, understood as guides for the good living (*savoir-vivre*). Some elements in such a system of conventions include, for instance, notions such as 'comfort' and 'hygiene'; the division of rooms according to their function — representative, private or service; and the incorporation of technology — running water, electricity, gas, telephone and elevator (Eleb and Debarre 1995, Eleb and Bendimérad 2010, Cieraad 1999, Frykman and Löfgren 1987).

This became particularly clear in the sessions devoted to equipment. Today, smartphones and laptops occupy, as extensions of the self, a key position in the hierarchy of technologies. They easily become identity objects. For instance, given his love for gadgets and electronics of ultimate generation, one of the participants introduced himself humorously as a 'cyber-preppy' (*ciberpijo*). He explained how his living room is furnished unconventionally with three connected mega screens (plus a freezer), which makes sense only

if we consider the layout of the standard living room in Spain, with the TV set regulating family coexistence and being the predictable centrepiece in the room's furniture. In the socially desirable discourse of the younger participants, however, television has become an object touched of obsolescence and alienation, an inheritance of outdated times. Conversely, the most glamorous technologies — those which open life to the future — include the kitchen robot, 'a fantasy magic cook', as someone put it. A woman said:

> 'Thinking about the TV, when I celebrated my 30th birthday… I did not have a TV at home either. So [my parents] gave me a television set plus a blender. What I really wanted was a Thermomix! [a kitchen robot]. I did want the Thermomix, but I was rewarded with a TV! […] I did not want it, definitely. It was like "You don't know me at all! Don't you know I do not want this?" By giving me a TV, it was like they were intruding on my personality. But nowadays I watch it a lot. The computer is what takes more space, though'.

Before this woman joined the conversation, another participant had told a similar story: provincial parents who send a present to their young daughter, who is making her way alone in the big city. She receives the package. She unwraps it, expecting to see the dreamed Thermomix, just to find … a little, disappointing TV set.

Agonies (and Joys) of the Self
Self-centredness is an aspect of the narratives that we collected. In the stories, the perspective generally focuses on the narrator and they are told in the first person. This self-centred aspect is often made explicit from the outset through statements like, 'I am going to explain my case', or 'this is a little particular', 'for me it was different', 'this will be probably atypical', 'this is similar but not the same', and so on.

In line with the Goffmanian concept of face and its relevance in the presentation of the self (Goffman 1967), this strong, accented 'I' reminds us of the centrality of this genre in the framework of daily life. Kauffman (2004) has recently actualized this tradition — which he traces back to Erikson and the psychology of the self — by noting that the very concept of identity is the result of a modern (and problematic) quest that makes of every individual the locus of an open, contradictory search. For him, 'Identity is a process, historically new, linked to the emergence of the subject, whose key aspect has to do with the fabrication of sense' (2004: 82). Kauffman argues that this process is double binding. On the one hand, the modern injunction on the individual presses him or her reflexively to overcome origin, class or tradition — the objective conditions of social role that , following Goffman, he calls 'identity-carriers' (*porte-identités*). Reflexivity here means a quest for self-identity guided by critical questioning, choice and openness. On the other hand, identity, by contrast, 'never stops to glue the pieces together. It is a system of permanent closure and integration of meanings, having totality as its model' (Kauffman 2004: 82).[7]

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[7] 'Objective features are not so powerful with regard to identity. This is less so given that they are profoundly contradictory, undermined by permanent conflicts. This is a key point: objective features

This interpretation of the dynamics of the self in contemporary culture is consistent with my own findings on the micro-stories in our workshops. Many are based on what we could call an agonistic plot; as I have mentioned, with the self as the main character. The story that I have given earlier of the dreamed kitchen robot *versus* the TV set imposed by the parents finely illustrates this point. The goal of finding oneself, of establishing autonomy and affirming one's own space provides both the rationale and the climactic tension for the unfolding of events. The singular 'I' develops her or his action in a plot that we could call, in Hegelian fashion, 'the fight for space'. The subject struggles with an alien order, as s/he tries to build his or her own. Sometimes the purpose of the action is not so much the making of space, but the need to find it or just to keep it unchanged. Parents and, more broadly, the family of origin are the preferred antagonists.

> 'I began to understand that I was in need of a place of my own. Then I looked for my own space. Of course, it was not my parents' home. There, I looked around and said, "This is not my place. It has no light, I don't like the furniture". But I couldn't tell my mother: "Let the house to me and I will do whatever I want with it". No. Therefore, it was like: "I have to look for a space of my own"'.

This view of parents and older kin contains a very ambivalent element. They may well be the gatekeepers of a normative world of impositions, restrictive norms, dubious taste and empty, meaningless conventions. However, they also always appear to be supportive of the subject in his or her worst urban, modern struggles, no matter what. Poetically even more relevant is that in the interplay between modernity and tradition they are the guardians of the subject's roots: cherished childhood memories, loving recipes from grandma, indelible experiences of the first explorations of a pristine universe. The partner in a couple may also play this role of The Antagonist in the deployment of one's self. As in the case of parents, it is easy to understand this contradictory stance. Our other half is always, ineluctably, also a source of daily negativity and resistance. This becomes noticeable in the minimal, petty details as we are forced to negotiate even the simplest arrangement of, say, things on a table. For example:

> 'I always read three or four books at the same time. I scatter my things all around: the papers, the pens, the phone. For me, this is not disorder because in this way I keep it all in sight. But every time I return home, my boyfriend has made a mountain with all my things and has set it on top of the kitchen table. This, I don't take so well, because I want the table cleared up. When he puts it there he forces

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cannot by themselves determine existence for the simple reason that they lack a stable, coherent universe. They are crossed by all kinds of oppositions, forcing the subject to get involved, whether s/he wants or not' (Kauffman 2004: 94, my translation). 'Identity is a process of closure and fixation, thus opposed to the logic of movement and openness of reflexivity. It continuously creates a unified system of values, working as a frame for the perception of the world that gives meaning to thinking and action' (2004: 110, my translation).

me to arrange it, so he interferes a little in my own chaos. But with my chaos I get on very well!'

The War on Things is a true narrative type that has the Loving Other at its humorous centre. This script also involves, by definition, a dangerous play. Natural ambivalence can fuel quick shifts from *topos* to confession, from joy to sadness, from love to rage. The most extreme (and joyful) instance of these 'wars on things' was shared by an Italian participant as he spoke about his parents. Apparently, in the heat of the summer they all used to move from room to room competing over the fresher mattress on which to take a nap. This example points to the important role that objects play in our personal world. They are not passive or silent. They appear to be true *actants*. This is not a merely discursive issue. If they are so important in the stories, it is because they have a strong structuring role in daily life. They play a crucial part in quotidian reflexivity, becoming central in what Kauffman has rightfully called 'home action' (*action ménagère*) or, more poetically, 'the dance with the things' (1997: 17).

In our workshops and interviews, objects have shown to be so materially important as to be extremely telling. They are reservoirs of memory. They impose their demands, rhythms, limitations, traces and regrets. It is important to understand, though, that they do not act nor speak alone, but only in so far as they are part of a chain of actions and relations that should be regarded as a system — a universe in which humans are the ultimate agents and the primary force. This can be illustrated with the 'war on things' type of story. Objects make their appearance as key ingredients in a relationship, be it in a couple or, more generally, among co-residents.

Is it not this in the end the deep meaning of the concept of 'home'? Home intended, that is, as a system of human relations that intensely depends on the vicissitudes of shared objects, as opposed to a mere enclosure, or a contract or a group of co-habiting kin. For, as good as objects are in separating and keeping boundaries among the members of a group, they are equally good at uniting them. For example:

> 'When my grandpa died, my mother saw me playing with his pocket watch. She told me: "When you become a responsible adult, I will give it to you". I was eight. Years passed, but still I did not feel I could rightfully ask for it. From time to time I thought about it, though, because I loved my grandfather very much. When I returned home from the military service — I was twenty one — I felt brave enough to ask for it. My mother said: "At last, my son, you are finally a grown man". As soon as I took it into my hands, I could see that the watch did not work. "But mother, have you been careless with it?" "No, son. It never worked"'. [laughs from the audience].

Ritual objects symbolically bind generations, beyond death. Unlike the grandson, who believed that the watch 'did not work', I think that watch worked very well. In discourse and in action, in myth and ritual, it wstablished a continuity among three generations. It provided a bond that denied definitive farewells. In this story, as in so many others where the social life of inherited objects plays a key role, time is not objectified nor measurable; it is, instead, a

predicated, overarching entity that both embeds the family history and subtly asserts its permanence through the nuances of a good story.

This is probably why we have gathered so many touching stories about objects that maintain their capacity to act across time. Like the story of the woman who accidentally found a drawing in her deceased grandfather´s wallet, hidden in a secret fold. She realized she herself had drawn it, thirty years earlier. It depicted a little girl holding hands with an old man. Her grandfather had silently kept it throughout his whole life, close to his heart. Several stories tell of kids who appropriate their parent´s toys. Others tell of widowed fathers who move into their children's rooms, once they grow and move out. Objects may be special or ordinary, trivial or high tech, but through them all the relations through time among people living under the same roof can be felt, thought and told. This may sound like a magical appeal. This is, however, what the phenomenologist Alfred Schultz (1977), inspired by the musicians who routinely tune their instruments in order to perform together, called tuning-in relationships. He saw the model of human interaction itself in the coordination through time mediated by objects. The following statement from Ana makes an interesting example:

> 'This ring, I always have it on. It is made of gold and coral. It is from my grandmother, who had it always on. In my child memories this ring is always on her hand. When she died, my mother took it. But she has never used it. When my son was born, my mother gave it to me and I wear it, always. I am afraid to lose it, but still I use it. Whenever I go out I put it on and when I come back, it is one of the first things I take off and put aside. But if I go out sometimes without it, I feel its absence'.

Objects can mark the body, too. When they come from the past, they become present through the body, which is the most present thing we own. Ana feels the absence of the meaningful ring in her hand.[8] Through her childhood, Rafaela, another participant, had been accompanied by the chromatic accordion that now decorates her living room; the length of her fingers, the strength of her young neck tell of years of rehearsal.

Another narrative type is what we could call the Ulysses Syndrome. Here, the family appears as the origin, the point from which the traveller departs in order to recognize him or herself somewhere else. As in the Homeric account, the end of the story is bitter: when the subject returns s/he feels as a stranger in his/her homeland. One of our participants reflected with accuracy on this experience as he told us about his helplessness when, returning to his native land after years of absence, he listened to the accent of his mother tongue as if it no longer belonged to him.

Various figures or events can play the antagonist role: the anonymous urban order, the landlord, the lack of money; above all, loneliness. As in the case below, one can be one's worst enemy in the fierce battle against the vacuum brought about by the struggle of inventing oneself, of producing *ex nihilo* an independent but meaningful urban existence.

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[8] Could this be why there are so many magical rings in the fairy tales? There they also participate in the plot by whispering untold things to the actors.

'Then I went to live alone. I had been told that living alone was something great, fantastic: you did whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted, the way you wanted. This was odd for me, because 'till that moment in my life it had not been this way. There was always someone else. Then I remember some friends telling me, "Nooooo, you prepare yourself a nice dinner, with candles and everything, then you just take a sit and enjoy". On my first night alone, I came home after having done my shopping and I recalled my friend's advice. So I said, "Ok, let's do this". I prepared a dinner, lighted candles, a tablecloth — I usually don't; but I wanted to recreate a little that ritual. And I got ready to eat. In less than seven minutes I had already devoured all my food. And there I was, seated and telling myself, "Now, what?" "When does the fantastic thing come?" But there was nothing. So, that same night I decided to invent something called the "Those Who Live Alone Club"'.

At other times it is the other's gender, both loved and hated, that is lived as an incomprehensible obstacle. Partners, friends, siblings, flat-mates can be seen as facilitating or obstructing figures.

Everyone felt involved in these dramas. This is the main finding of our intimacy workshops. We laughed at the stories of fights for the bathroom and hair in the sink. We felt compassion for unconcealed loneliness and for couples in crisis. We saw ourselves in the fights for cleanliness and in the desire for a healthy disorder.

These are ordinary stories. Then, why do we tell them as special stories? Or, if they are special, why do we hear them as if they belonged to everyone? Without a doubt, this is where the power and mystery in such narrative lies. We all identify with the stories of the self, because each one of us is also another. As with the travel story, the illness complaint and the sexy joke, the strength of this specific genre of modern speech lays precisely in the fact that it integrates that apparently opposite conditions of singularity and universality. It illustrates the poetic dictum: *je est un autre*.[9]

Towards a New Regime of Urbanness?

Néstor García Canclini (quoted in Cruces 2012) has recently argued that in order to understand contemporary cities it is necessary to complement the socio-spatial approach in urban studies — accounting for the social construction of public space — with a socio-communicational perspective which helps to account for the web of mediations, interactions and forms of agency. I would argue that we need to add an affective, socio-sentimental approach that accounts for the feelings, emotions, affective relationships, memories and structures of sentiment. This approach brings to the foreground dimensions of intimacy, subjectivity, care and social reproduction — apparently little, ordinary things — which are ultimately the stuff which daily life is made of.

These dimensions — which we could loosely lump together under the labels of the domestic, private, intimate sphere — has been underrepresented through neglect or

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[9] Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny of 15 May 1871; see
http://www.philophil.com/dissertation/autrui/Je_est_un_autre.htm (accessed 04 April 2016).

mystification both in urban theory and in the common sense of early modernity. The dominant imagery of urbanism has celebrated the built space with its skylines, towers, emblematic and iconic architectures, megaprojects, highways and infrastructures. Alternatively, it dug into the nineteenth-century, industrial-roots metaphors of the city as factory, production chain, road, agora, public square, parliament, government, market and laboratory. In recent times, urban theory has added new figures of urbanity, such as network, flow, project, screen and prototype. Above all else, the web! — all pointing to an emergent, 'new public space' that is still in becoming.

However, metropolization and globalization have also brought about an increasing visibility, politicization, universalization and aestheticization of issues of gender, reproduction, domestic life, privacy, subjectivity and intimacy which were formerly considered secondary, even subsidiary — think, for example, of how domestic life was conceptualized in old Marxian vulgate as 'the place for the reproduction of the work force'. We are witnessing the emergence of a new urban common sense, in which the very notion of 'public sphere' — and its physical surrogate, public space — is questioned.

The poetics of daily life embedded in the stories that I have presented here spring from a new regime of urbanness.

On the one hand, they both question and trespass limits that would be taken for granted from a classical, canonical perspective of urban modernity, with its eroded oppositions, public vs private, production vs consumption and home vs work. The remapping of boundaries also engenders an erosion of the invisibility, devaluation and subordination of the domestic spaces entailed by these oppositions. From now on, it will be very difficult to keep thinking the 'urban', as the early urbanism did, in terms of the predominance of the public space.

On the other hand, many of our stories — and the very process of collective research that I have outlined — suggest that this new regime embodies the current, contemporary fascination with the creative, the quotidian, the affective and the intimate. This cultural trend is undoubtedly to be welcome, for it helps to give visibility to emotions, relations and deeds that were once hidden in the shade of privacy. It critically questions the formerly pre-political issues of asymmetries of power at home, among individuals of different gender, rank and age. It gives value and permanence to the many cherished traditions, objects and identities which are so central in the daily lives of people in their search for 'an order of their own'.

Yet, the ethnographic approach that I have presented here also alerts us to the potential shortcomings and paradoxes linked to the rise of the intimate sphere — a fascination that I have tried to render through the (invented) trope *extimacy*. The forces that give value and publicity to intimate, domestic valuables formerly protected in their 'islands of privacy' — to borrow C. Nippert-Eng's expression (2010) — may also be exposing them to the risk of commodification, exposure and overrepresentation. This is evident in many contemporary phenomena, such as the popularity of reality shows of all kinds ('more real than real'), the vulnerability brought about by the spread of personal information on the web, the growing importance of 'video-politics' fuelled by celebrity revelations and media scandals, the commodification of love and friendship through match.com and many other issues that

redefine borders and defy old definitions. The self-cancelling character of intimacy in some of these dynamics points to the limits and contradictions of this process.

I suggest that instead of denouncing this process as an erosion of public virtue, or as a retreat into the private domain and a failure of the strive for the common good, we should openly explore the attendant possibilities, promises and threats. To paraphrase the feminist motto, 'personal is political'; in our times, personal has become metropolitan, and vice-versa. This may be the ultimate morale underlying our informants' micro-storytelling. Whatever may result, in the near future, from the reordering of the couplets home/work, public/private and so on, the Self and its individualizing, personalizing stories will definitely be at the very centre of the study of what it means, today, to be urban.

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