The 'Anti-gender' City of Verona and Grassroots Spatial Resistance: An Interspatial Analysis of Contentious Politics

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Abstract

Internationally renowned as the romantic setting of Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet, the formulation of 'love' the city of Verona has come to champion is premised on heteronormative scripts, where the 'natural family' between 'natives' is espoused as the panacea against the ills of a globalizing society. It is no coincidence that Verona was the choice of venue for the World Congress of Families in 2019, as the city has become a laboratory of the anti-gender movement amidst the decades-long resistance of feminist and LGBTQ+ groups. Premised on three years of fieldwork, this article employs a tripartite interspatial analysis to unpack the making of an ideal 'anti-gender space' on the one hand, and the protracted grassroots resistance on the other hand in the mid-sized Italian city of Verona. Starting with the traditional field of political space, the article first addresses conflict over

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citizenship rights in the city between the anti-gender alliance among institutional and non-institutional actors and the grassroots struggle for the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights. The second dimension explores everyday dynamics of contentious movements in shared urban spaces involving border-drawing and border-erasing in cityspace. And thirdly, representations of territoriality and counter-territoriality on semantic space is analyzed, where urban imaginaries can act as stimulus for connecting with transnational actors. The article seeks to expand the interdisciplinary dialogue on the spatialities of sexual politics between critical geography and political sociology. It is argued that a spatial analysis of contentious sexual politics needs to take into account all three interwoven dimensions to fully understand the role of the 'local' within the 'transnational' in the nexus of state-movement-countermovement.

A political idea cannot find ground
and grounding without localization.
Without a site, a place, or a location,
a political idea is impotent (Hatuka 2021).

1. Introduction

On 26th of July 2018, the city council of Verona witnessed a peculiar controversy during the discussion of a motion proposing to proclaim Verona 'a pro-life city', when a councilor rose up from the benches to pose the fascist salute against the silent protest of a feminist group dressed as handmaids after the TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*[1]. The motion itself was defended by its creator from the populist

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[1] For more information on the incident, see: https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/07/27/news/saluto_romano_destra_verona_consiglio_comunale-202795134/

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right *Lega* party as an opportunity to encourage Italian births against the threat of being "invaded by Muslims" who will impose on the native population "the Islamic law once they gain majority"[2]. While the motion eventually passed paving the way for other cities to follow suit, the councilor who made the controversial gesture during its discussion, with strong ties to the local far-right movement scene of Verona, made a public presence dressed as a handmaid himself for the occasion of the Verona carnival celebrations, using this local tradition to trivialize a transnational symbol of pro-choice mobilization.

The last decade has been marked by a steady rise of populist right and far-right actors around the world, who have become ever more united in promoting traditionalism and moral conservatism as a panacea against the perceived threat of plurality, including the sexual rights of women and equal treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals (Mudde 2000; Köttig *et. al.* 2017; Browne and Nash 2017; Rydgren 2018; Youngs, 2018; Caiani 2019; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). It is at this historical conjuncture that the city of Verona not only foreshadowed such political process since the early 1990s, but also became the 'ideal space' of what is considered on the transnational scale as a 'return to the traditional family'[3]. In defense of native identity and traditional values, the so-called 'anti-gender' position (Stoeckl 2016; Garbagnoli and Prearo 2018; Trappolin 2022) has been a common thread that unites various institutional and non-institutional actors from the far end of the political spectrum (what Youngs [2018] refers to as the rise of conservative civil society), who view feminism and LGBTQ+ rights movements not only as a menace to the Christian tradition, but also to the future of white European populations. This political trend has been documented in a recent report by the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, pointing out the transnational

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[2] Interview with the Verona city councillor Alberto Zelger: https://video.repubblica.it/politica/verona-il-leghista-della-mozione-anti-aborto-senza-bimbi-italiani-saremo-invasi-dagli-islamici/316126/316755

[3] For more information, see 'Verona Declaration' adopted at the end of World Congress of Families 2019: https://profam.org/verona-declaration-adopted-at-wcf-xiii-on-31-march-2019/

network composed by over 100 anti-women's rights and anti-LGBT organizations working for to 'restore the natural order' (Datta 2018).

Internationally renowned as the romantic setting of Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet, the formulation of 'love' the city of Verona has come to champion on the political scene is thus premised on traditionalist heteronormative scripts, where the 'natural family' between 'natives' is espoused against the ills of a globalizing society. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Verona was the choice of venue for the World Congress of Families (hereafter WCF) in 2019, as the city administration has been historically pioneering anti-gender policies backed up by local far-right movements authoring everyday forms of boundary-drawing, which are countered by resistance of feminist and LGBTQ+ groups. These groups are being accused of corroding public morality and consequently leading to low birth rates with their 'gender ideology' (Trappolin 2022), the latter frame finding much resonance in the Italian context given the country's aging population. While scholarship on sexual politics so far has tended to focus either on national contexts and governmental policies (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Köttig *et. al*. 2017; Lavizzari and Prearo 2018; Tranfić 2022), or the transnational movement network with frames and repertoires of action that travel across borders (Kováts 2017; Pavan 2019; Pavan 2020; Graff and Korolczuk 2022), hitherto little attention has been dedicated to the role played by space and socio-spatial constructions in the local when it comes to the functioning of the anti-gender network and resistance thereof (with some exceptions in critical geography in the works of Hubbard 2000; Misgav 2016; Brown and Browne 2016; Browne and Nash 2017; Browne, Brown and Nash 2021). Insights from critical geography help us unpack the ways in which the appropriation *of* and the meaning attributed *to* space (Martin and Miller 2010), understood as a product of social relations, is a fundamental dimension in the building of a transnational anti-gender movement on the one hand, and in the unfolding of state-movement-counter-movement interactions on the other hand.

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The aim of this article is to employ a social space approach in the analysis of contending social movements around the issue of gender and sexuality with respect to the multifaceted albeit interwoven manifestations of social conflict in urban life. It seeks to elaborate on the situatedness of collective action amidst transnational activism and global themes, not only with respect to their locally deciphered expressions, but on the ways in which the *local* can be capitalized materially and symbolically in building the transnational network of mobilization. Hence, the *interspatiality* of mobilization is investigated in treating our political orientations as products of situated identities through which cross-cutting transnational trends are performed in the everyday with respect to an anti-gender alliance and a resistance for the recognition of sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI rights). Such analysis is premised on 3 years of fieldwork in the city of Verona, composed of the triangulation of online and offline ethnography, archival research, in-depth interviews with activists, and finally the use of visual data.

The 'spatial turn' in social movements scholarship is an expanding field with leading studies that explore new angles to the *space-place-collective action* nexus (Melucci 1984 and 1996; Tilly 2000; Hubbard 2000; Martin 2003; Martin and Miller 2003; Della Porta and Diani 2006; Leitner, Sheppard and Stiarto 2008; Beaumont and Nicholls 2007; Dochartaigh and Bosi 2010; Routledge 2010, 2013; Wahlström 2010; Miller 2013; Nicholls 2008; Nicholls 2009; Nicholls *et. al.* 2013; Uitermark, Nicholls and Loopmans 2012; Halvorsen 2015; Halvorsen, Fernandes and Torres 2019; Hatuka 2021; Della Porta *et. al.* 2022). Within this literature, pioneering studies have pointed out the relationship between a sense of place and collective action (Melucci 1984 and 1996; Martin 2003; Routledge 2010 and 2013), the role of space in social movement networks (Beaumont and Nicholls 2007; Nicholls 2008 e 2009; Cumber and Routledge 2013; Golsalves and Velasco 2022), as well as territoriality and territorialization practices (Wahlström 2010; Halvorsen 2015; Hal-

vorsen, Fernandes and Torres 2019). This includes studies focusing on the multiscalar sexual politics (Hubbard 2000; Grundy and Smith 2005; Gorman-Murray 2011; Eleftheriadis 2017), on feminist and queer urban spaces (Brown and Browne 2010; Vacchelli 2014; Misgav 2016; Becchetta, El-Tayeb and Haritaworn 2019; Visser 2016; Misgav 2016a), spatialities of homonormativity and heteroactivism (Browne and Nash 2017; Browne, Brown and Nash 2021), and everyday spatiality of intersectional solidarities (Loopmans, Brown and De Craene 2020).

It is at this intersection of spatialities of social movements and sexual politics that this study aims to contribute to the burgeoning literature in demonstrating the multiple layers of the state-movement-countermovement dynamics in shared urban spaces by employing an *interspatial* analysis. This position distinguishes itself from an interscalar/multiscalar analysis (Sack 1986; Miller 2000) where local, regional, national, and transnational connections are investigated, or a relational sense of space (Massey 2004) that emphasized the mutual constitution of the local and the global. Instead, it takes forward recent work on multiple spatialities of social movements (Leitner, Sheppard and Stiarto 2008; Miller 2013; Halvorsen 2017), by offering a framework to analyze the overlapping spatialities of contentious politics *within* cityspace, which also allows to better distinguish local-transnational entanglements. Hence, focusing on the city of Verona and two opposing movements that operate within, the aim is to unearth multiple dimensions of social space in a given locality. In this respect, following the steps of critical geographers working on social movements, the article moves beyond a container/surface treatment of space in analyzing the social embeddedness and multidimensionality of sexual politics, by employing the heuristic categories of *territoriality in cityspace*, *practices of territorialization in the everyday*, with that of *political space in local policy-making*.

As such, the article demonstrates interspatial contestation among institutional and non-institutional actors who co-inhabit the same city extended over a long

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period of time. The novelty in the study resides in its analysis of the interconnect-edness of local governance, everyday city life, and the symbolic representation of place on the semantic plane when it comes to the making of an anti-gender social space and SOGI grassroots resistance thereof. In what follows, the article will thus firstly present a discussion on the conceptualization of space, territoriality, and territorialization in putting critical geography in dialogue with social movement scholarship to respatialize contentious social movements dynamics. It will then offer an interspatial analysis of Verona (1) firstly as an 'anti-gender' *political space* from a policy perspective and the configuration of antagonistic groups involved, (2) secondly as an *everyday space* of territorialization and deterritorialization, and finally (3) as a semantic space of (re)writing *territoriality* and counter-territoriality by attributing contending identities to place.

2. Interspatiality of Social Movements: Political Contestation, Territoriality, and Territorialization

This article opts to operationalize space as a socially constructed entity that not only accommodates plurality of actors conveying different stories of the place they live, but also one that is shaped by such social actors, their interactions, and their outlooks. Thus, a conceptualization of space is not simply understood as a source of resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jenkins 1983; Mayer 1991), possibilities for networking (Diani and McAdam 2003; Beaumont and Nicholls 2007; Nicholls 2009), or strategic action fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Instead, it is treated as a product of social relations in the making (or as Doreen Massey would call a 'co-existing heterogeneity'), that helps us understand the mutually constitutive relationship between space and politics (Massey 2005; Featherstone and Painter 2013). Lived experiences in social space and its contending imaginings can translate into different, even antagonistic, constructions of political agency. It is an affective

reality which involves "different ways of living in already socially determined locations, different possibilities of the forms and configurations of belonging and identification, subjectification and agency" (Grossberg 2013, 37). It is at this intersection that the concept of political space is understood as the sphere of citizenship struggles, where claims-making is addressed to state actors (Gleiss 2017). This notion is essentially tied to the conceptualization of the city as a space of politics (Dikeç 2002), which does not merely involve formal participation through legal status, but more generally a participation in political struggles (Dikeç 2001). In this sense, it is similar to Castell's third major theme in urban movements involving mobilization in relation to the state, and particularly to local government (1983, XVIII).

The concept of *territoriality,* on the other hand, is defined as "a behavioral phenomenon associated with the organization of space into spheres of influence or clearly demarcated territories which are made distinctive and considered at least partially exclusive by their occupants or definers" (Soja 1971, 19). Territories are understood as 'constitutively imagined' entities, created by expressive work and acts of coexistence, which render them living carriers of meaning (Brighenti 2014). They are relational processes created by practices, acts, or imaginings, rather than simply physical space. Therefore, not only a setting for social relations, but also a form of social relation in itself, territories do not only offer access to resources, but they are also an indispensable resource of identity formation (Brighenti 2010). As bounded space, territoriality begets geographical exclusiveness to human interaction; and therefore, harbors the tension between power and identity (Soja 1971; Herb and Kaplan 1999). In fact, Niall Dochartaigh and Lorenzo Bosi (2010) argue that "territory is both the site and the object of social movement mobilization" (Ivi, 405). Notwithstanding its centrality for social movement dy-

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namics, it has been noted that "[t]he production of territoriality by social movements has been little explored in the Anglophone literature, presenting a research lacuna" (Halvorsen 2015, 315).

Contending sets of social actors engage in acts of *territorialization*, *deterritorialization*, and *reterritorialization* through social space in everyday practices, with material and immaterial repercussions for those who inhabit it (Halvorsen 2015). These processes involve practices of boundary-drawing as the kernel of territory-making, which is a visible and public endeavor (Brighenti 2010a). Lefebvre (1991 [1974]) illustrates how boundary drawing of social space can involve natural boundaries such as mountains and rivers, as well as artificial boundaries such as city walls, or conceptual boundaries marked by discourse and signs. As the 'skeleton' of everyday life (Raffestin 2012), territoriality comes to denote "sociospatial power relations that are shaping (and shaped by) everyday life" (Klauser 2012, 113). Territoriality, therefore, encapsulates 'everyday bordering practices' (Halvorsen 2015; Yuval-Davis *et*. *al*. 2018), which redefine the political constructions of belonging, and as a result that of identity and membership to a political community. The act of bordering also involves sexual identities or sexual desires and practices, by drawing the boundaries of appropriate sexual behavior and policing of sexual relations or representations in a given space (Brown and Browne 2016). Urban public spaces tend to be underwritten by heteronormative scripts of appropriateness, and those that defy these markers of accepted sexuality are punished verbally, physically, or excluded equal recognition as urban citizens. Such everyday forms of discrimination endured by sexual others can work also as a stimulus for creating alternative constructions of belonging in space and therefore mobilizing collective action (Ivi, 3).

While the 'everydayness' of social space with its daily encounters and corporeality is a stimulating venue to explore movement-countermovement dynamics of

gender identity and sexual rights, another interrelated sphere is the symbolic writing of such space. The appropriation of a territory can also take place on the semantic plane through its selective representation, impacting social practices in a given place and the forms of place-based belonging (Banini and Ilovan 2021). Hence, on a symbolic dimension the appropriation of social space by movements can take the form of reconstructing the 'identity of place' (Banini 2017), or as Castells (1983) referred to as the 'cultural identity' tied to a territory, assigning certain characteristics undergirded by representations/narratives pertaining to it that echo in its material and immaterial elements, its historical memory, and its current state. It is at this juncture that imaginaries of 'place' play an indispensable role in the formation of collective identification and political inclinations (Wills 2013). Different social actors can assign different meanings to a given space, hence rendering them sites of social conflict. The impact of meaning-production by local movements in the urban context constitutes "an essential component of cities, throughout history, as the built environment, and its meaning, is constructed through a conflictive process between the interests and values of opposing social actors". (Castells 2010, 64) This point has been accentuated also by Schwarz and Streule (2022) who argue that spatial contestation among social actor is also manifested in urban imaginaries and representations of territories as a collective endeavor in shaping social relations within.

Social movements, like all political and social mechanisms, are inherently spatial and inevitably extend across different spatialities (Tilly 2000; Martin and Miller 2003; Miller 2013; Routledge 2013). There is an existing vast literature on 'right to the city' movements focusing on collective action that takes access to cityspace and its resources as objects of mobilization (Castells 1983; Pickvance 2003; Harvey 2012; Mayer 2009; Soja 2010; Nello 2016; Dikeç 2017; Domaradzka 2018). Moreover, the 'spatial turn' in social sciences has ever since extended into the wider field of social movements literature giving way to studies that explore the ways in

which collective action from diverse political orientations and social backgrounds 'take place' (Agnew and Brusa 1999; McFarlane 2009; Dochartaigh and Bosi 2010; Routledge 2010; Wahlstörm 2010; Cumber and Routledge 2013; Nicholls *et. al.* 2013; Işın 2013). The study, therefore, seeks to contribute at this intersection by adopting *an interspatial approach* in the utilization of the heuristic categories of territoriality and territorialization, alongside the more traditional sphere of struggles over policy-making in unpacking their spatial interconnection for social movements. Hence, the interspatiality of contending social movements in a given place is manifested in three interconnected dimensions: the political space of claims-making addressing state actors, the everyday space of urban border-drawing and border-erasing among contesting actors, and lastly the semantic space of representations. Here, a particular spatial dimension is not reserved to state actors or movement dynamics, but instead the state-movement-countermovement process is present across three levels. While the first spatiality refers to a citizenship struggles in the city involving political contestation in relation to local government (Castells 1983; Gleiss 2017), the latter two entail respectively b. the everyday situated experiences and c. the symbolic representation of cityspace, or what some have referred to as 'place-framing' (Martin 2003), with respect to the territorial identity as complementary forms of interspatial collective action around the issues of gender identity and sexual rights. It must be noted that the conceptualization of territorialization starkly differs from the description suggested by Beaumont and Nicholls to convey "the institutionalizing of network connections in a specific place," (2007, 2559) whereby a network approach to resource mobilization is employed to analyze spatialities of social movements. Instead, territorialization in this analysis is more attuned to Halvorsen's conceptualization in understanding "how territoriality is produced in and of itself as a spatiality of activism" (2015, 315).

Given the dialectical character of spatial struggles, rather than concentrating all attention to the working of one particular group (the work of Vacchelli [2014] on feminist spatial strategies is a valuable contribution in this direction), a bird's eye view of the whole panorama of 'conflict' involving sexual politics can convey a deeper understanding of the movement-space-identity nexus (Nicholls *et. al.* 2013). Finally, these situated social conflicts in the city ultimately provide us a glimpse into the microcosmos from which to make sense of global trends, demonstrating how the 'locality' is capitalized to establish connections across borders in the building of a transnational network. The following section will provide an analysis of the ties between institutional and non-institutional actors in the city of Verona that has led to the city becoming the ideal 'anti-gender' city, depicting a long series of controversial policy decisions by the local government backed up by far-right movements, unremittingly countered over decades of situated struggles by local grassroots actors. As such, the interspatial analysis will begin with the more traditionally studied dimension of political space (Gleiss 2017) in mapping out support and resistance by social movements on urban policies by the city administration regarding gender and sexuality.

3. Fieldwork Along the Online/Offline Continuum

The research is premised on 3 years of fieldwork in the city of Verona along the online/offline continuum, starting from 2018 lasting until late 2021, with two breaks to participant observation due to lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. When I first started the fieldwork as a Turkish migrant woman living in Italy since 2 years, I was not aware how critical had been the historical conjecture in which I had the chance to investigate some of the most groundbreaking historical events unfold in Verona with respect to sexual politics, reflected on all three layers interspatial social conflict in the city with significant repercussions on different

scales. I had started the fieldwork with the motion declaring Verona a 'pro-life city', took part in numerous feminist rallies, anti-abortion rallies, Prides, Family Day rallies, silent protests against the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, as well as witnessing the three-day organization of WCF and taking part in the organization of Verona Città Transfeminista.

The fieldwork was hence composed of participant observation with both local and transnational SOGI rights groups, non-participant observation with anti-gender groups and their events, digital ethnography of the social media accounts mostly of the latter but also the former, 29 in-depth interviews with activists and volunteers in local organizations, visual methods of urban spaces, and lastly archival research of official documents and news. Participant observation firstly involved the historical LGBTQ+ association *Circolo Pink* from Verona and its refugee branch *Pink Refugees*, which despite being a small local group enjoys a nation-wide impact since the 1990s. Secondly, participant observation was made with *Non Una di Meno Verona*, a transnational and intersectional feminist network with autonomous local branches, providing invaluable insights into the conflict around abortion in Verona and beyond, as well as the organization of *Verona Città Transfeminista* in opposition to the WCF. In addition to these leading groups, other collectives and associations in Verona who do not strictly operate on SOGI rights yet collaborate with the above groups were also included in the fieldwork, some of which operating as a grassroots archive provided invalueble documentation on the ongoing conflict in Verona on sexual politics.

On the other hand, fieldwork on anti-gender groups operating in Verona has been pursued through non-participant observation in public events such as conferences, rallies, sit-ins, and public talks. This has been mostly due to my positionality in the field as a Turkish migrant woman living in Verona, given that most of these groups are part of a larger far-right nativist agenda, including: extreme right groups such as *Forza Nuova* and their ultra-Catholic ally *Christus Rex*, exponents

of the *Lega* right populist party, Verona branch of the neofascist *Casa Pound*, nativist local movement *Fortezza Europea*, the anti-abortion group *Comitato No-194*, and *Sentinelle in Piedi* against 'gender theory'. While most of these groups have been non-institutional actors, their strong ties with Lega has allowed them to have the upper hand in the city administration, with some of their members holding positions in the city council. Hence, operating in Verona and beyond, these actors have been investigated through both non-participant observation and digital ethnography by systematically following their social media content. Moreover, archival data on historical fundamentalist Catholic groups such as *Famiglia e Civiltà*, *Comitato Principe Eugenio*, and *Pasque Veronesi* have been part of the analysis.

As a result, an online-offline approach to fieldwork has been employed in the study, both as a strategy to overcome a possible discrepancy in the representation of contending actors, as well as a means to highlight the indispensability of such continuum for an interspatial analysis of sexual politics. While our cultural and political experiences have become more and more mediated by digital technologies, online spaces in turn, have become embedded in and continuous with lived social spaces. The impact of the Internet on social relations and interaction being ever more present, it has become an ordinary part of our everyday rituals (Markham 2017). It has even been suggested that it is not plausible any longer to conduct ethnography without taking into account online spaces (Airoldi 2018). As such, this three-year multimethod research to unearth interspatiality in political contestation over sexuality and gender has taken into account both digital and urban spaces of conflict.

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4. The Making of an 'Anti-gender' Political Space and Protracted Local Resistance

The city of Verona is located in the northeast region of Veneto in the Italian peninsula, historically distinguished in the post-war period by the cultural homogeneity of traditionalist Catholicism in the territory, which has shaped this political space for years to come. While piousness has been a general trait shared in this region characterized as 'white' referring to its adherence to the Christian Democrat party (Franzina 2010), such religiosity had also manifested in more radical variants upholding undemocratic values that had found it easier to flourish in a socio-political space as the city of Verona (Bonatelli 2007), with local religious associations such as *Famiglia e Civiltà*, dividing their representation of the city (Banini and Ilovan 2021) into those who support 'homosexual immorality' and those that defend traditional values (Original pamplet from the archive of Circolo Pink 2000). The city's history as the *de facto* capital of the Republic of Salò (The Italian Social Republic) between 1943-1945 has undoubtedly played a major role in the high presence of and remarkable tolerance for actors from the far-right, who have become ever more institutionalized in the local administration with the rise of the right-wing populist Lega party forming a bridge between ultra-Catholic elements and the latter (Del Medico 2004; La Terza 2009). Such holy alliance between institutional and non-institutional actors from the right end of the political spectrum, embedded in the socio-political history of the city, eventually offered a fertile soil from which to forge an 'anti-gender' political space marked with heteronormative markings, perfectly aligned with a nativist, white, and 'middle-European' outlook promoted by this alliance (Merrill 2014).

Certain discourses among non-institutional actors were thus carried also within the city administration, with the 'anti-gender' political stance (Stoeckl 2016; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Köttig *et. al.* 2017; Garbagnoli and Prearo 2018; Trappolin 2022) gaining the upper hand, giving way to instances in which a councilor

from Lega Nord would suggest the castration of gay men in the city council in 1995.[4] The episode took place during the discussions leading to a groundbreaking motion passed by the city council (motion no.336, still in force in time of writing)[5] bringing Verona on the international stage as the city officially refusing to acknowledge equal treatment of LGBTQ individuals. Hence, Verona became the first and only European city in 1995 negating on the local scale the *A3-0028/94 European Parliament resolution* which recommended member states to implement equal rights for individuals of different sexual orientation and the abolishment of legal provisions that criminalize or discriminate against same sex individuals[6]. The EU resolution was rejected by a majority in the Verona city council on the grounds that it could invoke "negative effects on the psychological development of young members of society, and the corrosive impact of 'promiscuity' that can be present in homosexual or heterosexual families, and could lead to the demise of one of the fundamental tenets of the family order, namely the stable union between a man and a woman"[7]. The fact that the Municipality was financing 'pro-family' groups composed of ultra-conservative associations the same year that the notorious motion was passed, followed by other two motions consolidating the official stance on the 'traditional natural family' (motions no. 361 and no.393) filled local LGBTQ+ activists groups with a burning sensation of injustice. The latter thus launched what would become a national mobilization of rewriting citizenship in cityspace to include equal recognition of sexual minorities, under the slogan *Cittadinanza Va Scritta* (Citizenship Is To Be Written):

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[4] For more information, see: http://www.deportati.it/aned/le-sezioni/verona/verona-in-consiglio-comunale-saluto-romano/

[5] Consiglio Comunale di Verona (1995) Mozione no. 336, Unità Affari Consiglio (14 July1995), Verona. Translated from the original Italian text.

[6] European Parliament (1994) Report of the Committee on Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs on equal rights for homosexuals and lesbians in the EC, A3-0028/94 (26 January 1994), [Accessed on 23 September 2020] Available at: http://aei.pitt.edu/49350/1/A10612.pdf

[7] Consiglio Comunale di Verona (1995) Mozione no. 336, Unità Affari Consiglio (14 July1995), Verona. Translated from the original Italian text.

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> At that point our struggle was born to put the term 'family' in discussion. It's not 'family' but 'families'. We departed from this conception and initiated a legal battle with ultra-Catholic groups and city councilors that were involved. These battles had one goal, that goal was to get justice, to become a legal subject as homosexuals, so that one could not attack a person because they are gay, because that gay person was now part of a legal subjectivity. This would mean that they could not claim that homosexual people cannot have equal rights as them (Interview with C. Z., 10 February 2021).

Following this landmark decision on part of the city administration, anti-gender sentiments in the public sphere among far-right, ultra-conservative, and populist actors proliferated, strengthening the alliance between institutional and non-institutional actors. The city hosted numerous Family Day events and counterdemonstrations protesting Gay Pride in Verona throughout the early 2000s. In fact, the most noted mayor of the city who served two terms from 2007 until 2017 came to be known as a champion of Christian family values, negating LGBTQ+ rights. Such heteronormative values are promoted using local symbols of territorial identity (Banini and Pollice 2015) in order to assign a certain traditionalist territoriality to Verona (Soja 1971; Raffestin 2012), such as the city's trademark link with Shakespeare's play Romeo and Juliet coming to represent the union between a native heterosexual man and woman. This framing is carried even further by a local traditionalist group called *Christus Rex* who functions as a bridge between the far-right and ultra-conservative circles in Verona, with the claim that the LGBTQ+ cause is the contemporary 'Sodom and Gomorrah' against the image of the white Christian union between Romeo and Juliet evoked in defense of the natural family[8]. This is done so by highlighting 'locality' of heteronormativity represented by

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[8]   For more information, see: https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/treviso/notizie/politica/2011/8-aprile-2011/giunta-sponsor-spettacolo-gay-urla-magliette-bufera-consiglio-190397669039.shtml

the celebrated fictional couple. The legacy of Romeo and Juliet on urban culture and its appropriation by local anti-gender circles provided the background from which to organize the international WCF in Verona based on this timeless hetero-sexual love[9].

In 2018, the city pioneered once again the 'anti-gender' cause in Italy by declaring itself officially as a 'pro-life city'. On the 26th of July 2018 during the discussion of the proposed anti-abortion motion entitled *Initiative for the prevention of abortion and support for motherhood in the 40th anniversary of the Law 194/1978*[10], the local branch of the transnational feminist group *Non Una di Meno* (Not One Woman Less, hereafter NUDM) presented themselves utilizing a global symbology of pro-choice movement in the city council dressed as the Handmaids from the TV series Handmaid's Tale in a flash mob protest. The conflict was escalated into a scandal when a city councilor from the political list of the mayor, *Battiti per Verona*, rose up to pose the fascist Roman salute against the protestors inside the city council[11]. The latter's choice of 'costume' for the traditional carnival celebrations of Verona dressed as a handmaid himself to trivialize this symbolism escalated the tension even further (Online ethnography fieldnotes, 1 March 2019).

Eventually, on the 6th of October 2018, the revised motion proposed by the councilor Alberto Zelger from Lega was passed with 21 votes in favor and 6 against, declaring the city as '*Verona città in favore della vita*' (Verona the city in favor of life), officially paving the way for the public funding of anti-abortion groups. The

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[9] Repetitive reference to the 'timeless love' in the organization of 2019 WCF can be found in their official website: https://wcfverona.org/en/about-verona/

[10] *Comune di Verona*, "Iniziative per la prevenzione dell'aborto e il sostegno alla maternità nel 40° anniversario della Legge 194/1978", Mozione 434 NV, 1 October 2018, Verona. Original copy of the motion - https://www.comune.verona.it/media/_ComVR/Cdr/SegreteriaConsiglio/Allegati/mozioni/2017-2022/434_moz.pdf

[11] For this incident he is undergoing a legal process, see: https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/07/27/news/saluto_romano_destra_verona_consiglio_comunale-202795134/

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motion worked as a precedent for other cities around Italy[12], justified on nativist grounds of promoting Italian birthrates against the threat of Muslim minority taking over the homeland: "We need to help women have kids, otherwise we will be invaded by Muslims who will impose on us the Islamic law once they gain majority"[13]. Hence, the leitmotif of the motion was an outlook viewing Italian women as the reproducers of the white Christian nation (Yuval-Davis 1999) imbued in a nativist 'racial anxiety' about the reproduction of Muslim men (Goldberg 2006), whereby immigration has worked as a substitute of race (Balibar 1991). As such, Verona was deemed a political space where the local government supported by its far-right allies undertakes the task of defending privileges of the white Christian native populations for all European localities, against the perceived threats of not only the right abortion but also that of 'migrant invasion'. Two years later, the councilor who posed the Roman salute against NUDM activists proposed a motion against the draft Zan-Scalfarotto bill presented in the Italian parliament that foresaw the punishment of discrimination and incitement to violence against gay, lesbian, and transgender people. While yet another reactionary motion was subsequently approved in Verona city council on 9th of July 2020[14], the decision was justified by its creator on the grounds of defending the nuclear family "as the last refuge of Man in a disintegrated and globalized society" (Online ethnography fieldnotes on Facebook, 17 July, 2020). Once again, it is against this backdrop that Verona became the choice of venue for the WCF, a US-based international organization renowned for bringing together the transnational anti-gender coalition of Christian ultra-conservatives, far-right groups, and the populist right from different countries around the world to redeem the values of the traditional family as

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[12] See: https://www.valigiablu.it/mozioni-attacco-aborto/

[13] Interview with Zelger: https://video.repubblica.it/politica/verona-il-leghista-della-mozione-anti-aborto-senza-bimbi-italiani-saremo-invasi-dagli-islamici/316126/316755

[14] Comune di Verona, Mozione 1527 "Il Comune di Verona Appoggia il Comunicato della CEI Contro le Discriminazioni," 9 July 2020, Verona. Original copy of the motion is available at: https://www.comune.verona.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=14555&onum=1527&odata=2020&tipo=5

the foundation of society, to oppose the practice of abortion as well as same-sex relationships.

Fig.1 - NUDM Verona activists performing a flash mob inside Verona City Council
Source: Photo from the Facebook Page of NUDM Verona, 26 July 2018

As such, it is against this political space (Dikeç 2001 and 2002; Gleiss 2017) that a prolonged conflict in cityspace among feminist and LGBTQ+ rights groups on the one hand an anti-gender alliance reaching from local movements to the city administration on the other hand has characterized Verona. It is this particular social space in which institutional and non-institutional ties of the anti-gender alliance brought together actors from different walks of life, managed to pass controversial motions by the local government that resonated in the rest of the country and beyond, ultimately rendering the city an internationally renowned hub in the defense of traditional Christian family values and the future of white Europeans in

their own territories. Yet, such conventional confrontation among antagonistic actors on policy-making in the city administration is just one dimension of interspatial manifestations of social conflict. In what follows, the article will explore other two interconnected dimensions of the socio-political cleavage on gender and sexuality by focusing on the everyday and the semantic spaces.

5. Everyday forms of boundary-drawing and boundary-erasing

Given the more traditional focus on contesting movements on a policy-level in relation to institutional actors in the political space, this section introduces another layer to the spatiality of movement-counter movement dynamics by offering insights into the everydayness of contentious politics, taking place across cityspace in acts of *territorialization, deterritorialization,* and *reterritorialization* (Brighenti 2010 and 2014; Halvorsen 2015; Soja 1971). Despite the incremental use digital platforms by social movements (Caiani *et. al.* 2012), the street remains a 'privileged site' (Pavoni *et. al* 2021) of political expression through the visibility (Brighenti 2010a) of everyday realities. At the intersection of lived and material spaces (Miller 2013), street art has been a lasting medium of micropolitics in urban space, involving not only the graffiti subculture, but also posters, stickers, collages, and other drawings, particularly prominent in areas with competing social movements and contending identities (Tarrow 2011; Pavoni *et. al.* 2021). The city offers a conducive setting for these forms of mediated interactions, which can evolve into prolonged dialogues, owing to the visible surfaces 'written' over by actors that seek public attention (Brighenti 2010b). Some of these textual and visual messages on urban space are everyday visible attempts of boundary-drawing and boundary-erasing, in which walls become 'territorial devices' for marking a certain type of belonging (*Ibidem*).

Fig. 2 - Poster hanged on a tree with an offensive anti-LGBTQ message signed as 'Verona' by a far-right actor using crossover of the scala sign of Verona and the neonazi Wolfsangel
Source: From the online archive of InfoSpazio 161)

One striking example of visible boundary-drawing upon material reality by far-right actors was found in a park which has been historically used as a safe meeting place for gay men at the southern borders of the city in the early 2000s, through a sarcastic poster hanged on a tree that is used as a territorial device (see *Fig. 2*). The poster is signed as 'Verona' claiming to speak on behalf of the city, with a symbol uniting the neo-Nazi *Wolfsangel* sign with the traditional Veronese coat of arms *scala* sign representing the legacy of the local Scaligeri dynasty. The poster reads: "Warning, the area is highly polluted by garbage and infested by faggots

and molest. Keep the environment clean, defend the nature!" Hence, the 'protection' of this green area is used as a metaphor to invoke the 'natural sexual relationships' against what is considered as homosexual promiscuity, and thereby territorializing the area with scripts of heteronormative righteousness (Hubbard 2000; Brown and Browne 2016). The poster exemplifies an attempt to reterritorialize an area deemed to be governed by moral decay by invoking 'nature' in defense of traditional values. Likewise, LGBTQ+ actors also resort to expressions on urban material realities for visibility, resorting to humor as a strategy to trivialize those territories of authority that deny them equal recognition. One example to such acts of deterritorialization through a textual graffiti was found on a church entrance with the writing "I LOVE GAY" (Fieldnotes, 12 November 2018).

Urban art is thus also by the transfeminist resistance to deterritorialize exclusionary markings upon the materiality of cityspace that resonate in the everyday situated experiences of individuals, and to reterritorialize it with a pluralist rewriting (Brighenti 2014 and 2010a; Halvorsen 2015). *Figure 3* below demonstrating two stickers placed on top of one another is an example of this practice in which the meaning and identity assigned to this place is overwritten by contesting actors who have left visible traces of their conflict. Below we see a sticker of the local branch of the far-right group CasaPound upon a street pole, which is a way of rendering their presence and thus their territorial influence visible to others (Soja 1971; Brighenti 2010a and 2010b). On top, a sticker by NUDM is intentionally placed to deterritorialize this marking and to reterritorialize it with feminist motifs through a message of sisterhood that reads "Sister, I believe you".

Fig. 3 - NUDM sticker reading 'sister I believe you' placed over a CasaPound sticker *Source*:
Source: Photo taken in fieldwork

A similar example of movement contestation through visible markings of urban space was found near the university campus. An initial textual graffiti was left once again by the local branch of CasaPound, referring to themselves as the 'Mastino Gang' (M.G.), with reference to the medieval Veronese ruler Mastino della Scala, read: *"You are on Facebook whining, we are on Tinder with the [female] comrades,"* implying that while male antifascist activists were busy doing politics on social media, far-right militants were busy hooking up with leftist girls on the dating application Tinder. This message demonstrates cogently the online-offline continuity of space utilized in collective action (Caiani 2019; Pavoni *et*. *al*. 2021) regarding sexual politics, and how the online can also be expressed on material urban spaces in acts of territorialization (Brighenti 2010a; Brighenti 2010b). The response given by transfeminist associations was overwriting this message that re-duces female sexuality as a matter of male conquest, with the drawings of vaginas to invoke female empowerment. A local feminist activist provided her account of the episode:

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> On the walls there is a battle of writings. Once they directly targeted us, they wrote slogans aiming at us near the university campus. What did we do? We went to correct these writings. It's a conflict over the walls of Verona, of slogans, on the Internet and physically (Interview with F.M., 12 February 2021).

Another form of everyday spatial manifestation of contentious politics is the controlling the borders in cityspace undertaken by antagonistic social movement actors. This is especially visible when it comes to the historical center as the touristic face of the city to the outside world, kept meticulously as a white, Christian, and heteronormative territory. These practices involve the guarding of *cognitive borders* of the touristic center, monitored against unwanted entries in order to maintain a traditionalist social space ingrained in heteronormative demarcations (Hubbard, 2000; Brown and Browne 2016). One heightened tension took place back in 2001, when two prominent LGBTQ+ activists from Verona were violently assaulted at the entrance of the historical center near Porta Leoni, one being beaten in the face with a belt by local members of the far-right group Forza Nuova[15]. The underlying cause for the tension was the fact that LGBTQ+ activists were planning to organize a manifestation in *Piazza Brà*, one of the most important piazzas of the city accommodating the world-famous Roman Arena (see *Fig. 4*). The LGBTQ+ community who has been by and large marginalized in the heteronormative everydayness of the historical center sought to deterritorialize it though their consecutive rallies, manifestations, flash mobs, and sit-ins to erase the cognitive borders of this 'anti-gender' social space, thereby opening it up to individuals with a different gender identity and sexual orientation (Fieldnotes, from 2018 until 2021). As extraordinary events break the routine of the everyday and create a temporary space of their own, it has been previously argued that a protest can come to construe a sense of place in itself (Della Porta *et. al.* 2013). Whilst these actors thus

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[15] From the archival dossier *A Verona tutta l'erba e uno (s)fascio* - https://movimentandocia verona.files. wordpress.com/2018/03/dossier-verona-corretto.pdf

sought to negotiate their entrance in the historical center as a legal subjectivity exercising their constitutional rights in a city championing a return to Christian family values, far-right actors undertook to 'defend' the borders of what they have been perceiving as their native territory from which they take pride in.

The use of violence in territorializing the historical center has taken place also inside the main piazzas, where non-belonging subjects that do not fit the Christian heteronormative protagonist of city life are threatened and forcefully 'cancelled' from the urban scenery (Hubbard 2000; Brown and Browne 2016). An example of such everyday controlling of cognitive borders has been the aggressive attack against a same-sex couple in Piazza Brà in 2018, who were targeted by far-right actors for having demonstrated affection in public[16]. The boundary-drawing practices around the historical center of Verona sought by far-right actors in their systematic monitoring and threatening of sexual minorities is lucidly explicated by a leading LGBTQ+ activist:

> For us, it was almost dangerous crossing the bridge and going to the city center because it was controlled by the far-right. I remember the years when we had our office in *via Scrimiari*, we would go out in groups, we couldn't go out alone. Verona is a small city where everyone is recognized, the far-right most probably knows even where we live (Interview with C.Z., 10 Feb 2021).

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[16] For more information on aggression towards gay couple in the city center, see: https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/verona/cronaca/18_agosto_14/verona-coppia-gay-aggredita-un-gruppo-ragazzini-piazza-bra-39b9d0e2-9f93-11e8-b2ca-5158fc8ef2ca.shtml

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Fig. 4 - Voucher by Forza Nuova left at Circolo Pink June 2001 that reads "Homosexuals in Arena? Yes, with lions" *Source*: Original pamphlet taken from the archive of Circolo Pink

6. (Re)writing territoriality on the symbolic plane: Assigning the identity of place

Given such sociopolitical setting heavily imbued in an official anti-gender political stance by the Municipality on the one hand, heteronormative everyday appropriation of cityspace by far-right and ultra-conservative actors on the other hand, this alliance seeks to monopolize the Verona also through a symbolic rewriting of its identity on semantic space. On this third interspatial dimension of movement politics, the image of the city is promoted as a social space at the frontlines of a battle to defend the traditional natural family among white Christian Europeans

to the wider anti-gender transnational network uniting various actors. Such selective *representation of territoriality* (Soja 1971; Brighenti 2014; Raffestin 2012), or place-framing (Martin 2003), is marketed not only in inscribing the ideal protagonist of city life within, but also to the outside world, starting from Italy and going beyond, drawing to its orbit European and American counterparts. Nevertheless, this symbolic representation of Verona (Banini and Ilovan 2021) does not go uncontested, as grassroots SOGI resistance seeks constructions of *counter-territoriality*.

An important locus of identitarian mobilization premised on the espousal of the Veronese territorial identity is the carnivalesque commemoration of *Pasque Veronesi* (Veronese Easters), which is a modern reenactment of anti-Jacobin revolts during the French occupation of the city under Napoleon's rule in 1879, coming to be exalted as *Vandea Italiana* in relation to the anti-revolutionary insurgence that had taken place in Vandea, France (Romagnani 2009). The collective memory of the *Pasque Veronesi* is revoked in connecting with traditionalist and conservative counterparts elsewhere under the slogan *Verona Vandea Europea*. The representation of Verona (Banini and Ilovan 2021) as the contemporary 'Vandea' of Europe defying progressive values is utilized by the local anti-gender alliance for an anti-abortion event in 2018, with the participation of noted transnational actors from different cities in Italy and also European countries, including a populist city councilor from Trieste, the mayor of Ásotthalom in Hungary known for his extreme right position and his infamous 'migrant hunter' police force at the border of Serbia, representative from the Polish National Radical Camp known for its ultranationalist and even neo-Nazi tendencies, and another representative from People's Party Our Slovakia who had been involved in creating an anti-Rom militia unit (Fieldnotes, 24 November 2018). This group of actors coming together in their joint struggle to defend the traditional family as the fundamental social unit for defending their native population seek to create 'fortresses' where exclusionary territorialities can prevent non-heterosexual, non-Christian, and non-white elements from entering

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such traditionalist nodal points. This leitmotif is succinctly captured in the speech given by the national leader of Forza Nuova during the anti-abortion event: "For Forza Nuova, Verona represents itself as Europe's Vandea, and is a candidate for the near future to be an authentically revolutionary laboratory in the fight against the enemies of the People of Europe, liberticidal laws against the family, and against life"[17].

The city proved to be not only a particular case in the Italian peninsula, but a strategic showcase for the transnational 'anti-gender' movement when it was chosen to host the WCF the following year. This annually held international conference of ultra-conservative and far-right actors active globally united under a 'pro-family' banner, is the most prominent anti-gender forum in defense of the traditional Christian family model against women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights. While opposing a 'global liberal agenda' that is perceived to advocate birth control and gender theory, the network resorts to transnational mobilization among various actors and in diverse social contexts to pursue a sociocultural conservatism (Kalm and Meeuwisse 2020). In 2017 the event was held in Budapest, Hungary hosted by President Orban, and in 2018 in Chisinau, Moldovia hosted by President Igor Dodon who also attended as a keynote speaker of the event the following year in Verona. The choice of Verona in 2019 was thus no coincidence, neither has been the previous choices of venue for the event, all strategic social spaces for the transnational 'anti-gender' movement, whose alliance is premised on sociocultural authoritarianism (Mudde 2000; Rydgren 2018; Caiani 2019). As put by a progressive activist from Verona: "The fact that having the WCF here was absolutely not by chance, it could not have happened in another city. I mean, the first choice could not have been other than Verona" (Interview with E.N., 9 April 2019). The natural heter-

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[17] Roberto Fiore cited in the local newspaper *L'Arena*, 22 November 2018 - https://www.larena.it/ territori/citt%c3%a0/ forza-nuova-e-aborto-protesta-degli-attivisti-contro-il-convegno-1.6928732

onormative family, understood as the building block of a 'healthy' European society was praised during the panels of the event, which witnessed controversial episodes such as suggestions on how to cure homosexuality and the distribution of plastic souvenir fetuses to endorse an anti-abortion stance (Fieldnotes, 31 March 2019). The conference resulted in a joint 'Verona Declaration' communicated at the closing ceremony highlighting the choice of Verona, wherein the locality is capitalized for the transnational network owing to its successful representation as a territoriality underwritten by Christian family values: "Verona, a noble city of art, of culture, and of ancient civilization, which for centuries has been called the 'City of Love' proclaimed itself in October 2018 to be the 'City for Life'; today it is has also become the 'City for the Family'"[18].

Fig. 5 - March for the Family in the historical center on the last day of WCF in Verona
Source: Photo taken in fieldwork

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[18] The original text of the Declaration can be found at: https://profam.org/verona-declaration-adopted-at-wcf-xiii-on-31-march-2019/

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Notwithstanding the instrumentalization of the image of Verona as the 'anti-gender' city and thereby assigning it a heteronormative identity of place, local resistance for SOGI rights have not succumbed to such labelling of the city they live in. Feminist and LGBTQ+ groups have continually undertaken efforts to represent another Verona over decades, one with porous borders as an example of pluralist possibilities for gender identities and sexual orientations even in the most hostile setting. This alternative representation does not negate the local Veronese culture, yet seeks to reappropriate it, rewrite it, and take it as a starting point for a reconstruction of *counter-territoriality*. One animated platform for this occasion has been Verona Pride which has been reappropriating symbolisms of the traditional territorial identity, and transforming them into symbols of transnational resistance. These examples include the *scala* coat of arms that represents the Scaliger golden age, the Contarina flag of the Republic of Venice coming to represent Veneto separatism, or Juliet as the touristic face of a heterosexual union, which are reclaimed and reframed with the colors of the rainbow in advocating sexual and reproductive rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals (see *Fig. 6*). In so doing, these actors turn local nativist symbolism into signifiers of translocal claims of justice for sexual rights. Progressive activists have also attempted to reclaim local Veronese traditions, such as the candidacy of a renowned gay activist to represent the mascot of the carnival in Verona, *Papa del Gnoco* (the Father of Gnoco), which is a historical ritual monopolized by traditionalist local actors as part of the Veronese territorial identity (Fieldnotes, 1 March 2019). Although the attempt to represent this local tradition with an inclusive and progressive rewriting of the locality did not find success, it nevertheless managed to stir debate on gender identities and sexual orientations in Verona.

Fig. 6 - Verona Pride 2019 reappropriating the image of Juliet as an advocate of love in all its forms, carrying the rainbow *Source*: Facebook Page of Verona Pride, 13 February 2019

Resisting monopolization of the territorial identity and the selective representation of the city by far-right, populist, and ultra-conservative actors in their counter-territorial rewritings, the grassroots SOGI resistance has sought to rebrand Verona as the 'Transfeminist City' on 30th of March 2019 in opposition to its image as 'The City of the Traditional Family' during the WCF. The alternative event by NUDM Verona resulted in a massive mobilization drawing national and transnational activists, scholars, and politicians around the world from Latin America including the founder of the movement in Argentina, to Eastern Europe and the Middle East in this mid-sized Italian city. It involved discussions by international academics, book presentations, movie-showings, art exhibits, theatrical performances, and other cultural events around the theme of sexual rights and sexual liberation. The 4-day event reached its zenith with a massive rally of *Verona Città Transfeminista* marshaling an estimated 300.000 participants from around the world, considered

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as the biggest rally in the modern history of the city, turning into a 'profestival' *par excellence* (Carmo 2012). The organization was finalized with a transnational assembly of different NUDM branches from various countries and the feminist organizations they are collaborating with in order to share local problems endured in different settings and to collectively mediate transnational responses. Verona thus came to symbolize the fight against moral conservatism in the rise of populist and far-right alliance, not only for the recognition of sexual rights and liberties, but also the rights of other minority groups:

> Everyone now is talking about the oceanic demonstration of NUDM. Before, when I used to say I'm Veronese, they would look at me with compassion saying 'oh, the city of fascists'. Now, when I say I'm Veronese they tell me, 'You guys managed to organize that incredible demonstration, I was also there!' (Interview with B.M., 8 October 2021).

The term 'transfeminism' chosen to represent Verona, as elaborated by a local historical feminist trans activist, signifies liberation of all subjectivities with the whole variety of sexual orientations to be welcomed, articulated to confront the intolerant face of Verona, as a way of giving a new face to this city, a new image that was inclusive and in becoming (Fieldnotes, 28 March 2019). This attempt to construct a counter-territoriality which ended up enjoying a far-reaching resonance in places beyond was described by a local activist: "This movement has united all diversity… it is the pulsating heart of what Verona can also be. In our recent rallies we have provided a way to demonstrate that the cultural and political construction of these people that take part in the movement shed light on a city that has been obfuscated by a pseudo-political culture that has rendered Verona as a black stain in the eyes of the entire world" (Interview with D.P., 4 February 2021).

7. Conclusion

The mid-sized Italian city of Verona located in northeast Italy offers a stimulating social laboratory from which to examine the interspatiality of sexual politics in the nexus of state-movement-countermovement. The multidimensional role played by space in the making of anti-gender hubs is indispensable for an understanding of transnational movement building of both sides of the social conflict. This article was an attempt to illustrate how strategic nodes for the anti-gender movement, such as the city of Verona, are spatially created and contested by another set of actors from feminist and LGBTQ+ circles with respective connections to transnational counterparts and cross-cutting themes. Hence, this situated analysis demonstrated how the 'locality' can be constructed, capitalized on, and acted within, concomitantly generating wider repercussions on different scales (Leitner, Sheppard and Stiarto 2008) from a social process perspective. In short, the case of Verona presented here as a complex social space does not only point out how transnational themes and connections play out in the local, but also how the local allows the production of the transnational.

As such, the article invites future research firstly to employ situated analyses of contentious politics on sexuality and gender, taking into account the conflict and interaction among competing actors (both institutional and non-institutional), and secondly to take into account the interwoven spatialities involved in this conflict *within* a specific urban setting. Here, in addition to the traditional sphere of political space in which state-movement-countermovement dynamics are explored with respect to rights-claims and local policy-making, two additional spatialities are introduced in order to explore the everyday as well as the symbolic manifestations of cityspace with respect to sexual politics. This was done so by invoking the heuristic potential of *territorialization* and *territoriality* respectively: the former offering us a glimpse into the everyday playing out of contentious politics

between the anti-gender movement and the SOGI movement across urban morphology, whilst the latter illustrated the symbolic dimension of space for this particular socio-political cleavage in unpacking the construction of territoriality in the identity attributed to place, as well as the possible formulations of counter-territoriality. In so doing, the article seeks to broaden our spatio-temporal lenses in the field of gender identity and sexual rights, proposing *interspatiality* as a novel point of departure from which to conceptualize and subsequently study the politics of contention between anti-gender and SOGI networks. This theoretical framework applied in various settings can expand our understanding of how antagonistic social movements dynamics are carried out not only in citizenship politics, but also everyday spaces and urban imaginaries, thereby elaborating our understanding of the local-transnational entanglements. Such urban explorations in contested contexts such as Warsaw, Budapest, or Istanbul can be invaluable for expanding our knowledge on the making and the operation of transnational networks, as well as their manifestations on material and immaterial layers of the city.

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