
Sylwia Chutnik

Games of Memory and the Gender City Model: A Practical Conceptualization

DOI:10.18318/td.2016.en.1.13

My aim is to showcase initiatives directed at commemorating women associated with particular Polish cities. However, in order to describe these various projects, campaigns, and discussions, I must start with the problem of the topography of the city itself.

Italo Calvino in his book *Invisible Cities*¹ focuses on interpretations of urban landscapes. In an oneiric dialogue, grounded in symbols, between the novel's two protagonists, a realistic topography fuses with the illusionary. As a result, we cannot be certain if the cities depicted by the author exist in reality, or whether they just serve as illustrations of our approach to spaces through which we travel. From these enigmatic tropes a model of a city arises, from which subsequent stories and different places are derived. One of the fragments provides a description of this model: "It is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions."² If we take a closer look at narratives relating to the history of the city from a gender perspective we will notice those "exceptions," though they are not without the aforementioned

Sylwia Chutnik – PhD student at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw. Writer and social activist. She is the author of novels (i.a. *Kieszonkowy Atlas Kobiet* for which she received the Paszport Polityki prize in 2008, *Cwaniary*, and *Jolanta*), plays, and journal articles. She focuses on the history of women, history of Warsaw, and countercultural women's movements.

1 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harvest, 1978).

2 *Ibid.*, 69.

incongruities and contradictions. As a result, an analysis of representation of the history of men and women who have influenced the development of a particular city (on various levels) is marked by shallowness and “exclusions.” Is there a model of a city, in Calvino’s sense, that we could use whenever we needed to describe space from both perspectives: male and female? And how does it relate to the Foucauldian idea of heterotopias? We could assume that a model of the “exceptional city” would be some kind of a universal and democratic template, which could be utilized to portray the biography of a certain person, to widen the context of that depiction, and to describe places of memory and ways of preserving memory. In light of the above assertion, preceding endeavors of “investigating” the female traces within the urban space would be directed exactly at validating the city as a construct made up of contradictions. Therefore, if genders conceived of as cultural phenomena were to be based on differences,³ then acknowledging them, especially in historical discourse, would be a straightforward fulfillment of the previous, dominant pattern of interpreting the city from the point of view of a single (male) gender.

Certainly, if we were to strictly adhere to the letter of Calvino’s text, we would be unsettled by the final sentence of the passage dedicated to the model city: “But I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real.”⁴ Does, therefore, a city concerned in an equal manner with both its male and female inhabitants – by considering their disparate experience – become too ideal a city, disintegrating in a general model of accountability? This is a bold statement, especially when we consider previous achievements of researchers studying the influence of men and women on the development and shape of cities.

The frameworks devised for describing the history of women in urban contexts have dangerously drifted towards matters of everyday life, like advancements in weaving, childcare and housework. This trend is hardly surprising, as the activity of women has customarily been assigned to the private sphere. This can be traced to, among other things, biological essentialism⁵ and stereotypical understanding of gender roles.⁶ We find this viewpoint

3 In this basic distinction, I omit particular sociological and philosophical theories that describe the tension between the cultural genders, and instead I rely on a standard, intuitive understanding of that term as counterweight or opposition.

4 *Ibid.*, 69.

5 Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale, 1993).

6 An interesting comparison of “female” and “male” traits can be found in the research on stereotypes by M. Korczyńska, “Co rządzi naszymi oczekiwaniami wobec partnera?” in

reflected in popular history books, as well as textbooks, where there is a visible scarcity of female heroes.⁷ This relates both to the study of contemporary times and prehistory. As psychologist Małgorzata Szarzyńska-Lichtoń points out: "Visions of prehistory of women and men and their role in life that are created by science oscillate between two opposites."⁸ Traditional concepts depict women as dependent on men and subject to one view of the world, whereas a competing interpretation focuses on the visible dominance of women in Stone Age societies, resulting from biology (childbearing, meal preparation). In both cases, the attempt at describing history mainly serves to further the hierarchic view of genders and fails to reveal a meaningful parallel past. This standard approach is worth mentioning because it often appears in context of initiatives attempting to complement historical research.

Dimensions of Tropes

For a few years now, we have been seeing in Poland a clear interest in this topic on the part of non-governmental organizations and urban activists, with Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, and Poznań leading the way. These are not only examples of grassroots initiatives seeking to preserve the history of women. A definite integration of cultural gender into the history of the city and the development of urban studies are undoubtedly the outcome of many decades of academic research on the subject.⁹

We can distinguish three main areas of interest and interpretation: architectural (the least examined by Polish researchers, it is related to functionality

Zrozumieć pleć. Studia interdyscyplinarne II, ed. Alicja Kuczyńska and Elżbieta Katarzyna Dzikowska (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2004), 307.

7 Research on this subject, as well as training for teachers, is conducted by i. a. "Toward the Girls" association, www.wstronedziewczat.org.pl, accessed Januray 1, 2014.

8 Małgorzata Szarzyńska-Lichtoń, „Stereotypy płci i ich realizowanie w rolach życiowych w kontekście historycznymi kulturowym,” in *Zrozumieć pleć. Studia interdyscyplinarne II*, 354.

9 The Research Team of the Social History of Poland in the 19th and 20th Centuries of the Institute of History, University of Warsaw, deserves a mention in this context. The team consists of several members of the university staff and doctoral candidates of the Institute of History UW and other research centers, and conducts research on the history of social and cultural change within the Polish territories in the 19th and 20th centuries. The team publishes works in large part dedicated to women and their situation in the context of various aspects of life, as well as conducts projects and seminars.

of designed space), historical (focused on memory and the emotional faculty) and social (based on interactions and creation of cultural ties).¹⁰

The first focuses mainly on urban planning, which does not always take the needs of various social groups into account. Mothers can serve as an example of such a group. The difficulty of noticing their “struggle for space” arises from the stereotype that regards mothers as passive and confined to the domestic space. Meanwhile the guardians of children under two years of age (this is on average the age at which children cease to require a stroller) and of children with mobility impairments wage a daily battle by leaving their homes and moving around the city, fighting for their right to exist within its spaces. Those who travel the city with a stroller come against many obstacles. Some of those obstacles are impassable, especially for parents of older children with disabilities. Carrying the stroller down a flight of stairs from the fifth floor, entering an office lacking a wheelchair ramp, or crossing a street bulwarked by high curbs is oftentimes impossible. The situation is only made worse by the absence of infrastructure, such as infant changing tables in offices and shops. This furthers isolation and is a form of discrimination against certain social groups.

Gender oriented interpretations would compel us in this case to investigate who designs our cities, who signs off on the projects, and who decides on their implementation. It is often a person that did not bother to empirically examine what it means to carry a stroller, sometimes weighing around thirty-three pounds (with the child, commodities and items required for travel beyond the home). Considering the relation in the use of parental leave benefits in European countries, we will notice that the care of young children is mostly left in the hands of women.¹¹ Their expectations of comfort or safety might be overlooked, because their gender is not adequately represented in the halls of power. Another question: why do mostly women care for infant children? Is it a question of biology (breastfeeding, instinct) or rather our culture decidedly determining family roles. Furthermore: why is such a numerous group of citizens barred from freely using the public sphere? By way of deduction we will arrive at the priorities of city government, economic questions and commercialization of space. Becoming aware of the problem, we cast away the layers of doubt and examine in detail the phenomenon as a whole.

¹⁰ *Miasto oczami kobiet*, ed. Patrycja Dołowy and Justyna Biernacka (Warszawa: Fundacja MaMa, 2012).

¹¹ Although a rise in the use of paternal leave can be seen (in August 2014 about 20.9 thousand men were beneficiaries) the parental leave that is available in the second half of the child's first year of life is used by only 2% of entitled fathers (according to ZUS estimations published in September 2014).

If we consider the aforementioned problems, then Calvino's model city becomes full of impassable streets and endless stairs. It is a space of exclusion for parents with young children, the disabled or people with impaired motor functions (such as the elderly). High curbs and crooked pavements effectively prevent free movement within the city, but they also create new areas for interpretation. Anthropology clashes with somber economy and the design of urban space as previous research strategies seem helpless in the face of crooked pavements. Repeatedly it turns out that in the process of analyzing themes related to contemporary cities we encounter social categories other than gender.¹²

Let us take a closer look at two subsequent areas of interest for scholars surveying the city in light of gender.

Anthropological Her

It is hard to write about the female point of view in historical research without resorting to the term "herstory." Although it is rather unfamiliar in the Polish research tradition, and has no equivalent in the Polish language, it is used ever more often as a symbol of a gender oriented interpretational strategy. What is the result of looking through the eyes of female experience? Is it one of possible choices of research methods,¹³ or is it rather a way of complementing or expanding official history?¹⁴

Regardless of the interpretation, the concept of "anthropologising history" seems interesting. Sociologist Grażyna Kubica refers to it in her book on women from Bronisław Malinowski's social circle. Recalling Michael Roberts, she says that her aim is to "mark the presence of voices overlooked in the great narratives of the contemporary world order."¹⁵ The aforementioned initiatives for reclaiming and retaining the history of women are founded on the idea of enabling the voices of both genders, irrespective of the scale or field of their activity in the historical context. Anthropology provides a possibility of a comprehensive framing of the studied subject, without hierarchizing its

12 This is clear in Tovi Fenster's work (for example in the article *Gender and the City: The Different Formations of Belonging*) or in the book *Cities and Gender*, ed. Helen Jarvis et al. (New York: Routledge, 2009).

13 Monika Świerkosz „Gender Studies – w drodze czy na rozdrożu?” in *uniGender* 1(5) (2010), www.unigender.org

14 Grażyna Kubica, *Siostry Malinowskiego czyli kobiety nowoczesne na początku XX wieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).

15 *Ibid.*, 8.

meanings. History itself can then be considered as a groundwork for reflections on the present, employing various disciplines of knowledge, creating an interdisciplinary study of the human being: his past, his creations and his epoch. In the “adventure with history” conceived this way, it is much easier to find a “feminine strand of tradition,” described by philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina,¹⁶ as it will never again revert to being an overlooked theme in the official narrative, but will become legitimate; from now on subject to equal rules. It is through a hierarchy of importance of particular personas, themes, and events, that women have become invisible to history. In the context of events such as a political coup, the foundation of a girls’ school, military conflicts, the invention of a new weapon or medicine for a contagious disease, the history of everyday life was a lost cause. This holds true on both the national and local level, but is most clearly visible in the history of cities. Looking at the fate of Warsaw, the scale of war damage and its reconstruction, it is hard to focus on other important, even decisive, moments.

As traveler and historian of Warsaw Olgierd Budrewicz once stated:

Warsaw alone happened to be more often an object of military action than a normal city; sometimes there was more military personnel within its borders than there were civilians. The history of Warsaw is a monumental battle fresco.¹⁷

There is no place for non-war narratives if history is perceived this way. Therefore genre literature is deficient in examples of women who contributed to the city and had influenced it. This is reflected in conventional guided tours catering to tourists, which shape the image of the city. The sheer number of sites related to war or the uprising overwhelms and is the reason why the name of the city is often pronounced by foreigners *war-saw* (a city which has “seen war”).¹⁸

“The Unwomanly Face of War” was unmasked by Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich through the voices of heroic women who partook in the Second

16 Jolanta Brach-Czaina, „Wprowadzenie,” in *Od kobiety do mężczyzny i z powrotem. Rozważania o płci w kulturze*, ed. Jolanta Brach-Czaina (Białystok: Trans Humana, 1997), 8.

17 Olgierd Budrewicz, *Zdumiewająca Warszawa* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Interpress, 1968), 5.

18 This wordplay inspires artist to search for new meanings hidden within the name. One example is the work of Dominika Truszczyńska that showcases sites related to war, of special importance to the author and associated with her “private city map.” The overlapping of personal and historical narratives is very common in Warsaw due to the number of sites relating to combat.

World War. During her work on hundreds of interviews she also kept a journal in which, at the very beginning, she wrote:

But why? I asked myself more than once. Why, having stood up for and held their own place in a once absolutely male world, have women not stood up for their history? Their words and feelings? They did not believe themselves. A whole world is hidden from us.¹⁹

Utilizing oral history is one of the elements of herstory and it is a direct result of the belief that what can be a source is not only a recollection or interview, but also a comic book, personal keepsakes, private photo albums. Anything that can be collected, and that relates to women, in some sense creates a new narrative of their history.²⁰ As the authors of *Przewodniczka po Krakowie emancypantek*, write it is clear that:

The absence of women and their achievements in historical textbooks is equaled by our real and symbolic exclusion from the public sphere as contemporary women.²¹

How did Italo Calvino understand memory in his *Invisible Cities*? He placed it alongside the visual sphere. He wrote that the city consists of “relationship between the measurements of its space and the events of its past.”²² Therefore the street grid, with all its flaws that were addressed earlier, directly relates to the memory of events, which took place in a given space. Events experienced by both men and women. By overlooking one gender, we recreate a deficient picture of what Calvino calls “language of memory” – repeated signs that enable the city to exist. The urban fabric becomes a sponge that sucks up and swells with a multitude of meanings of events taking place within a particular space. According to this interpretation the more we fill the city with stories the more swollen and full it will become.

19 Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 2017), XVI.

20 Kornelia Kończal, „Pamięć w historiografii. Kilka uwag o tym, dlaczego historycy uprawiają memory studies i co z tego wynika,” in *Historia w kulturze współczesnej. Niekonwencjonalne podejście do przeszłości*, ed. Piotr Witek et al. (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Edytor.org, 2011), 61.

21 *Krakowski szlak kobiet. Przewodniczka po Krakowie Emancypantek*, ed. Ewa Furgal (Kraków: Fundacja Przestrzeń Kobiet, 2009), 8.

22 Calvino, *Invisible*, 10.

Let us take a closer look then at few initiatives that attempt to reconstitute memory and fill the urban space.

Warsaw Trails, Murals, and Braids

Joanna Piotrowska and Anna Czerwińska of the Fundacja Feminoteka have created a virtual museum on the organization's website (www.feminoteka.pl/muzeum). One can find there not only biographies of particular women, but also lesson plans for teachers. The aim of the project *Muzeum Historii Kobiet* is the retention of the memory of Polish women, who have contributed to the development of local as well as global history. Their field of work or the area they have innovated is only a secondary consideration. Therefore we find writers, social activists, politicians and philanthropists among their ranks. We also see heroes of everyday life such as cabaret dancers or sportswomen. All these women share fundamental character traits such as freethinking, courage and unconventionality. Two large special exhibitions have been held thus far: *Pokolenia Kobiet* and *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki*. There is a documental feature associated with the latter. It depicts everyday life of women during The Warsaw Uprising.²³ The relationship of the fate of individual women with the city's history is inseparable, and by making sense of their choices we come closer to grasping the day-to-day realities of the military operation of 1944. Complementing this endeavor is a guide and collection of essays titled *Warszawa kobiet* [*Warsaw of Women*] by the author of this article. It connects alternative tour trails (10 paths) with a biographical introduction of 25 female heroes of these walks.²⁴

A mural commissioned by The Warsaw Rising Museum, and completed in 2008 by the artistic collective "Święta Głowa Marii Antoniny," is also associated with the uprising. It depicts four women in battledress, covered in blood. One of them holds a small dog in her arms. The image conforms to a comic book convention. The caption reads: "We also fought." It draws attention to the role women played in military combat, as well as to the omission and devaluation of their involvement in the fighting – both as civilians and military personnel.²⁵

23 Documentary *Powstanie w bluzce w kwiatki*, Fundacja Feminoteka, Warszawa 2009.

24 Sylwia Chutnik, *Warsaw of Women*, trans. Katarzyna Nowakowska et al. (Warszawa: Polityka Spółdzielnia Pracy, 2011).

25 It is worth recalling for example the historical supplement to *Tygodnik Powszechny* 49 (2001), and the interview with Anna Jakubowska, runner and medic in the AK battalion "Zośka," who has said that: "War does not only belong to men. It is indeed different for women than for men, but who knows if it isn't harsher." There are numerous other re-

The project *Warkocze M*²⁶ of Fundacja Centra will serve as a third example of tracing women's history in Warsaw. It was carried out in the Muranów area, a space directly tied with the history of Polish Jews and the post-war reconstruction of the Polish capital in the socialist realism style. Women of various ages participated in the project, adding a cross-generational dimension to the endeavor, as well as creating a broad field for interpretation of individual experience arising from particular activities. One such activity was the charting of a personal map of Muranów by labeling places of special significance to the participants of the project. And so, in a game with the martyrological tradition of streets such as Nalewki or Anielewiczka, points such as "my first kiss" or "favorite grocery store" were marked. The provocative confusion of orders was intended not only to reorient the hierarchy and result in a convergence of private and public spheres, but also to introduce a decentralized way of thinking about the city. What is at stake here is not simply finding the "point of origin"²⁷ for the borough, but rather a reevaluation or – hopefully – relocation of the "point of interest" to the individual experience, one that is even intimate. This game of memory occurs at the level of details – bits of a larger history. This is in no way a revolt against history, but rather a form of completing it with individual stories.²⁸ They are the root of both the notion of "modern patriotism," as well as of the construction of "pop-history."²⁹

Another kind of game is found in this context in the subversive treatment of criticism that is often addressed not only at the notion of "herstory," but also at gender analysis. As an attempt at restructuring the negative definition of those methods, it also points to a certain deviation from traditional forms of historiography: both in relation to sources, and the form of historical discourse. It is the effect of, among other things, the "democratization of

lations and testimonials of women who participated in the 1944 uprising in the same issue.

26 The project resulted in, among other things, a publication in form of a comic book *Kobiece historie z Muranowa*, ed. Joanna Tomiak and Natalia Judzińska (Warszawa: UFA, 2012).

27 We are aware that the quest for the center is not always purposeful. See *Warszawa. W poszukiwaniu centrum. Miejski przewodnik*, ed. Anna Sańczuk et al. (Kraków: Znak, 2005).

28 A similar construction is found in a book by Beata Chomętowska, *Stacja Muranów* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2012).

29 The Warsaw Rising Museum utilizes it tirelessly, offering comic books, location-based games and board games, producing avant-garde plays and organizing plain air painting. A description of all these efforts can be found on the museum's website www.1944.pl. The notion "modern patriotism" is used in official communication of the Chancellery of the President and considered to be one of the top priorities of his presidency. It is also part of governmental policy.

discourse of the past” and “overcoming the monopoly exerted by academic history over the production and organization of historical knowledge.”³⁰ This poly-historical translation of memory is tied with a technological revolution (internet, access to recording equipment) and renouncement of the concept of authority founded on classical sources. This sets in motion many initiatives intent on unburdening “noble history” and reestablishing it as inspiring and, what is important, close to contemporary life.

Guides to Kraków. Tales of Łódź and Kalisz

One of the better known examples of the discovery of women’s local history is the series *Przewodniczki po Krakowie emancypantek* [*Guides to Krakow of Suffragettes*]. Scholars Ewa Furgał, Natalia Sarata and an accompanying team of women have edited and published, under the auspices of the Jewish Association Czulent, Women’s Space Foundaton and the Jewish Community Centre, the first Polish series of herstorical guides. Alongside biographies and photographs of individual women we can also explore the assembled guided tours. Workshops for city guides, a board game and a pocket calendar are a continuation of the series.

Paradoxically, what Marek Ostrowski introduced in an analysis of the point of view of legendary figures, Wars and Sawa, rings even more true in the case of publications from the *Przewodniczki* series. He points to the top-down (Wars) and bottom-up (Sawa) perspectives.³¹ In this case the bottom, or foundation, would consists of particular histories of individual women, their life stories merging with the history of Kraków. And the up, or the general level, would mean a linear placement in both the history of Poland and on a typical route of a guided tour.

The guided tours are becoming ever more customized, as the industry adapts to the higher expectations of foreigners. It is no longer enough for travel and tour agencies to simply place information about the “walks”: what counts is a creative approach to an interesting and original topic. In Warsaw, Łódź and Kraków, there are opportunities to experience the history of women associated with the city through walks that offer sightseeing of places of importance to their heroes. These are buildings, town squares, streets, also monuments and memorials. In all of the mentioned cities the tours are conducted on themed “routes,” they encompass individual boroughs, topics (e.g.

³⁰ *Historia w kulturze współczesnej. Niekonwencjonalne podejście do przeszłości*, ed. Piotr Witek et al. (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Edytor.org, 2011), 10.

³¹ Marek Ostrowski, *Tryptyk warszawski* (Warszawa: SCI-ART. Organizacja Badań Naukowych, 2009).

writers route, aristocratic route) and are addressed to particular groups (foreign tourists, city inhabitants, children, other guides or teachers).

A certain completion of these publication comes in form of yet another guidebook, this time published by Ha!art under the title *Kraków kobiet*. As the editors point out:

One can say that “Women’s Kraków” existed forever, inseparably intertwined with “Men’s Kraków,” in such an intricate manner, that despite its daily experienced difference it remained unnoticed.³²

The modern form of the book, as well as a respectable array of authors make popularization of this “intertwined history” very probable.

Another game of memory is *Łódzki szlak kobiet* [*Women’s Paths in Łódź*] that was initiated by the collective “Kobiety znad Łódki” and it is designed as a project for preserving the history of women in Łódź. At the outset, information relating to the history of women associated with the city are gathered, and then walks and meetings are planned. The framework of the project also encompasses photographic exhibitions, museum events and guided tours open to the public that mainly focus on factory trails.³³

Another worthy example of searching for women’s trails in the city that is coupled with cultural and social events is the project “Równe babki.” It was developed by the Stowarzyszenie Żywa in partnership with the Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku “Calisia” w Kaliszu and Klub Krytyki Politycznej w Kaliszu. This initiative is an attempt to create a contemporary history of Kalisz as seen through the eyes of its female inhabitants, the so-called heroes of everyday life. This endeavor bears resemblance to the Warsaw *Warkocze M* project, which focused on individual histories with the history of the city serving as a backdrop.

Multiplied Signs

In all of the described cases of activity at the intersections of history, tourism, anthropology and art, the focus is on complementing official discourse and overcoming preceding forms of construing the city. History is not just about learning the countries’ history, important dates and the succession of royal dynasties. The fate of ancestors of both genders is a constituting element of

32 *Kraków kobiet*, ed. Agata Dutkowska and Wojciech Szymański (Kraków: Ha!art, 2011), 8.

33 It is worth recalling the publication by Izabella Desperak, Grzegorz Matuszak, Marta Sikorska-Kowalska, *Emanypantki, włóknarki i ciche bohaterki* (Pabianice: Omega-Praxis, 2009).

personal identity, source of culture and social rules. Study of the past can be a starting point for highly intriguing enquiry and research conducted in a very personal key. One of such keys can be the rediscovery of women who lived, worked, and created in our country, city, or borough. It turns out there were many such women. Oftentimes brilliant and certainly inspiring and interesting. Our memory of them is unfortunately deficient, and they often make history as wives, mothers, and helpers. Examples of “herstorical” endeavors in Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, or Kalisz all have set before them the task of changing the attitudes towards the current hierarchy of memory and constitute a new way of looking at the question of forms of preserving the past.

Italo Calvino writes: “Memory is redundant; it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist.”³⁴ If we apply this assertion to initiatives intent on discovering the “city of women” and introducing it into the universal model, then we will perceive individual activities as new “signs,” necessary for broadening the picture. If the language of memory of space is intricate and redundant, then it requires material, from which it will create new narratives and through them complete the city’s image.

Translation: Rafał Pawluk

34 Calvino, *Invisible*, 17.