Departing from our personal experiences, our presentation tries to discuss and conceptualize the “in-between positionality” of the feminist activist-researcher, who attempts to analyse the reality in which she’s implicated in, in order to better explore the nomadic movement between the spheres of the university and the social and political struggles and to focus on their borderline. We would like especially to share some of our first experiences and reflections that have inspired some discussions between

Chara Tsantili
University of Paris Diderot-Paris 7
e-mail: chatsantili@gmail.com

Carolina Topini
University of Paris Diderot-Paris 7
e-mail: topinicarolina@gmail.com
us when we went down into the militant and political sphere as a field-work. So, today we are not going to discuss our research-results or some specific case-studies, but we aim just to open a debate on the role of the researcher starting from the contributions of some theoretical and epistemological feminist approaches.

As the central axe of our presentation is the feminist epistemological tool of positionality, we find it important to introduce ourselves, before developing our main points. We are two white students and young researchers without an academic status of researcher, — so we can say we are in an “in-between” status — we come from two countries of south Europe (Greece and Italy) where we took part in feminist and student movements. After a training in different disciplines, law and contemporary history, we decided to join a master on socio-anthropology and feminist transnational theory, having as one of our major concerns the methodological and political achievement of transdisciplinarity.

In the first part, we discuss shortly a genealogy of the feminist epistemological theories of positionality. In the second part, we are going to discuss the role of the researcher considering her “coming and going” between the academic sphere and the movements arena. In the last part, we are going to propose some specific points to open a debate on the role of the researcher in the era of crisis and precarity.

We consider the feminist epistemological tool of positionality as one of the main contributions of feminisms in the scientific discussions on objectivity of the science and the neutrality of the researcher. So, to begin with, what is positionality? The term describes the process during and via which each one of us and, in what interests us here, the researcher becomes conscious about his/her position within the imbricated power relations, but also the process during and via which she/he finds her place in the world, her point of departure, this point from which she watches the world. In fact, it is an invitation to think about the existence
or inexistence, the construction and the articulation of our multiple identities that mainly reveals the reality that we, people and researchers, experience dominant and dominated positions at the same time. Positionality refers at the same time to an empirical reality that (feminist) scholars should necessarily deal with, and to a theoretical concept. We would like to mention three waves of thought that have contributed in a significant way to conceptualize positionality. All of them emerged with force back in the golden era of late 1970’s-early 1980’s, that is to say that once we figure out the variety of their birth contexts, we might be conscious about their possible inter-influences:

1) The feminist tool of positionality, before being one of the most important methodological and epistemological contributions of feminist theory, needs to be contextualized as the most important political and theoretical contribution of the collective struggles led in the last century by Black Women, Third World Women and Women of Colour, geographically disseminated in both the Western countries and the Global South. Afro-American women’s movements of 1970s, trying to achieve the concrete goal of eliminating inequalities/discrimination and implementing social justice, challenged both the hegemonic, white, middle class feminist movements, and the antiracial movements controlled by men and biased by sexism. The evocative title of the famous volume edited in 1982 by Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell-Scott and Gloria T. Hul Black, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some Of Us Are Brave*, expressed forcefully this unspoken truth: Black women’s struggles, shaped by specific historical and material conditions, couldn’t be anymore encompassed or represented by these movements. They needed to create their own movements, and to affirm their own epistemology that they closely articulated in connection with their «lived experience».
ing that Black women as a group possessed a unique standpoint and a critical insight of society, Patricia Hill Collins’ book *Black Feminist Thought* revealed how knowledge is produced in reference to the social, racial and gendered position of every group and every subject [Hill Collins, 1990]. Epistemology and Intersectionality are thus intimately interconnected according to the black feminist thought, which provided a sociological definition of the standpoint theory. The concept of “Intersectionality”, coined by the jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the simultaneous effects of the different systems of oppression and exploitation related to sex, race and class, among which is not easy to establish a hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality, as both praxis and theory, is thus a critical tool that, even if it has emerged historically from specific and situated struggles, aspires and provokes everyone, especially dominant and privileged people, in the self-awareness of our location in the social relations of power.

2) Chicanas feminists, communities of struggle of women located on the Mexican-USA “*frontera*” that resisted the Anglo-American hegemony, adopted a specific epistemology that derived from this particular geographical and political location “on the borders”: they reclaimed their existence at the crossroads of different power relations, stressing the challenges they faced across the multiple lines of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexuality. In Gloria Anzaldúa’s powerful image of the “*border*”, as well as in her theory of “*Mestiza Consciousness*” that discussed her life growing up on the Mexican-Texas border, one can find an epistemological account of the social, cultural, and historical conditions that produced her thought (Anzaldúa, 1987). Chicanas feminists’ reflection is also particularly interesting if one aims to examine the way we make theory, as well as our responsibility as producers of knowledge.
Cherrie Moraga, emblematic figure of Chicana feminism, artist and lesbian theorist, co-author with Anzaldúa of the pioneer *This bridge called my back*, developed the concept of “Theory in the Flesh” to express Women of Color’ place in the world and their political project: “theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience’ (Moraga, 1981: 23). She conceptualized the “Flesh” as the site within which Women of Color experienced the material effects of living in their particular social location (Anzaldúa and Moraga, 1981: xviii). As Chicanas explicitly outlined, it exists a close relationship among social location, knowledge, experience and identity. Any feminist political theory precisely derives from a certain racial/social/cultural background and experience.

3) Another ‘source’ of the concept of positionality can be found on a Marxist/socialist/radical feminist perspective. Nancy Hartsock in 1983 introduced the Feminist Standpoint theory, to point out the epistemic privilege of a feminist political position — and not of the ontological one of woman — as she described in her text *The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism*. Her work has been developed by Sandra Harding who seeks to do the “good science”, a science that aims always to the objectivity or what she had finally called in a revisited version “strong objectivity”. Objectivity can be seen here as the terminal of a process that starts from the subjective experience of those who have been traditionally left out of the production of knowledge, the marginalized people (especially women), to end to a knowledge that, rather than blinding the power relations in order to pretend an objectivity, it takes them into consideration.
Following their traces, Donna Haraway, melting her Marxist roots with a certain postmodern approach, speaks in terms of feminist versions of objectivity (“feminist empiricism”) which is based on limited and situated knowledges, see for example her emblematic text *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* published in 1988. These are knowledges that are explicit about their positioning, sensitive on the structures of power that construct these multiple positions and committed to make visible the claims of the less powerful. It is worth mentioning here that we talk about different feminist standpoints (according to the imbrication of power relations), and that we can see standpoint theory as an epistemology of permanent partiality. We could probably identify the vision of these feminist authors into Benedikte Zitouni’s reading of Haraway’s *Situated knowledges*: ‘a desire to call for better taking into account of the world, a quest for better ways to see, a wish for constructing more reliable stories, in short “a call to real worlds”’ (Zitouni, 2012).

We decide to use this conceptualisation of “In-between” feminist positionality to point out the very fluid, changeable and permeable borders that exist between the spheres of the university and the social and political struggles, spheres traditionally perceived and treated as separate entities. Specifically, we reflect on the troubled interconnections, contradictions, continuities, barriers and impasses that exist between the two. In our discussion we make reference to two different levels: the first one related to epistemological/methodological issues that a feminist researcher has to face to, and the second one more related to her personal and political implication in feminist movements.

Concerning the first level, we are going to bring to light two kinds of specificities mutually articulated in the militant-feminist
approach. As we know, it is within the academia that certain strict criteria of validation of knowledge that demand an authentic objectivity are fixed. Firstly, feminist approaches, developing uncompromisingly new epistemological and methodological tools, have troubled the mainstream orthodox and positivist approaches, even the more radical, challenging what was traditionally considered theory in the dominant academic community. Secondly, what we are interested in here is the particularity of the feminist researcher who decides to analyse the political realities in which she’s implicated in. We can affirm that the militant social world is a difficult research field, especially in the case of proximity with the research field/object (in the so-called case of “auto-ethnography”) that may not always be an advantage or a benefit, but something that troubles. In this frame, we propose to discuss some of the concrete difficulties someone may meet:

1) The theoretical tools and knowledge we acquire into the academia can become a rigid theoretical and ideological posture when we, as activists, go down to the arena of movements, since very often a “gap” exists between theories as conceptual models and analytical observations. This gap derives from the fact that social movements and social processes are much more polymorphous, fluid and contradictory than any analytical theory can fix or catch.

2) The displacement between the two spheres implies for the researcher a certain challenge that can be a fruitful opening and a risk at the same time; this one of taking distance, mainly from the militant environment where she/he is implicated. To give just some examples. Firstly, the theoretical and methodological tools acquired within the academia can enrich the agenda of a group but can also create a “knowledge gap” between the researcher-militant and other members of a group. Secondly, the
research on activism requires a task of interpretation and it’s not simply descriptive. As a consequence, this can include the adoption of a critical perspective which goes hand in hand with a process of taking distance from a familiar militant field. For example, the intersectional critical prism that a white middle-class researcher embraces through the reading of radical theories focused on power relations, can allow her to revisit both the social/political history and the activist context in which she’s implicated.

3) Another point we consider as crucial is the question of the institutionalisation of both knowledge and experience that originate from social movements. We ask if in this case, bringing research on our own movements within a neoliberal and capitalistic academic system of production of knowledge, can lead to an undue exploitation and appropriation of those movements, having the risk of de-politicization of the radicalism and complexity that belong to movements. In such a case, is it legitimate to speak about a “betrayal” by the part of the researcher, especially if we consider that sometimes movements/social minorities don’t want to be observed and enter into the theory since they perceive theory and the academia as a cage? At the same time, as suggested by the sociologist and materialist feminist Colette Guillaumin, observing “the anger of the oppressed” and promoting their epistemological entry in the theoretical field (not a sterile integration or domestication) produce a crucial subversion of perspectives, as it reveals the power relations always there but (un)willingly hided by the researchers in social studies (Guillaumin, 1981).

In the era of the expansion of radical and critical studies and in the European context of the economic and political crisis, it is crucial to revisit these troubled trajectories. We wonder if the young, pre-
carious activists-researchers, relaying on intersectional feminist knowledge and on their own experiences, have something new to bring to light concerning the ways we make theory in, within and for the struggles. Precarity has not just impacted the living and material conditions of the new generations but has also changed the boundaries that separate the two spheres of academic research and activism. Taking into account the Italian case, one can observe that precarity has recently become an important political laboratory for social movements, including feminist movements. The concept of precarity has emerged as a field of tensions that registers the exercise of power, as well as a powerful site of resistances and appropriations “from below”, in which activists cultivate alliances and build the possibilities for new practices and imaginative actions. Activism has thus turned precarity into an instrument of struggle through which they re-imagine and re-conceptualize their lives and subjectivities. Some young Italian feminist scholars have largely discussed the effects of such precarity on new generations, affirming the necessity to see female precarity via the intersection of some fundamental key topics like gender and sexuality, migration, diaspora, racism, social welfare and reproduction, in both their local and global intersections. In doing so, this “new wave” of feminism has destabilized the universalism assumed by the 1970s generation, more focused on the sexual difference concept, by pointing to a necessary generational change (Fantone, 2007; Di Cori, 2007).

The common feature that unify the different experiences told in the 2007 special issue of Feminist Review dedicated to Italian Feminisms, as Sconvegno in Milano and Punto di partenza in Firenze, is the attempt to think about precariousness not only in relation to a flexible job market but also in relation to other less flexible social structures affecting women’s lives, such as heterosexual marriage, maternity, social reproduction, care-work. The political urgency of the present is opening a fruitful dialogue across differences between native and migrant women, and crisis and precariousness.
can finally provide in this regard a good ground for a confrontation between different positionalities.

We consider crucial the process through which the feminist researcher takes consciousness of his/her position within the power relations — which is not once for all as we are always in process of being — and in-between academia and movements, in the perspective of taking into consideration and treating the whole of the ethical and political questions that emerge during the field-work. Writing this reflection and giving space to our ideas as young researchers and activists, has been for us a way to retrace and back over what we have learnt in our paths, but also a way to give voice to something new that doesn’t exist yet in our communities. What we need is to assume new cross-borders positions and produce new empowering and challenging theories in this ‘in-between’ — theories and positions sensitive to positionality, and committed to the articulation of the analytical categories of race, class, gender and ethnicity, in order to change the way we perceive the world. The high stake that we have is rethinking the part we take in the production of both knowledge and political practices that may perpetrate those exclusions, marginalisations and silences that the epistemologies of struggle we presented tried to unveil and challenge. After all, making theory as researchers-activists in the dominant academic community is not a neutral or an uncommitted process, but something connected to a political project of transformation, as reminded again by Anzaldua when she loudly said: ‘We need to de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy’ (Anzaldua, 1990 xxvi).

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