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The City as Gendered Space: A Reading of Three Literary Texts in the Light of Feminist Geography

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In this paper, the question of how the city is gendered is examined through a discussion of the private/public division of urban space in three literary texts (by Meiling Jin, Doris Lessing and Buchi Emecheta), read in the light of the work undertaken by feminist geographers on the spatialisation of gender divisions and on embodiment. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a complex understanding of how gender division works in the city, and questions whether it remains – or has ever been – a pertinent way of reading the urban experience. Instead, the performative dimension of that experience is highlighted, suggesting that the gendered inscription of bodies within the city is a process that cannot be articulated in simple binary terms.

Since the emergence of second wave feminism over 30 years ago, several academic disciplines have undertaken research into the difference that gender makes in people's experiences of the city. Geography has, in particular, played a pivotal role in charting the relation between urban gender relations and their spatial articulations, thanks to the work of feminist geographers such as, in the British context, Gillian Rose, Linda McDowell and Doreen Massey.

Feminist geographers repeatedly focus on one question when they link gender and space: the division of the urban into the private and the public spheres (England 1991; McDowell 1983 and 1993; Monk 1992). They have also started to research the urban from the perspective of embodiment in a way that grounds gendered experiences of the city within actual bodies (McDowell 1999a). Taking my cue from these geographers, I propose to work from an interdisciplinary perspective in order to discuss three contemporary literary texts about female urban experiences. More specifically, feminist geographers' views on the pub-

lic/private divide and on embodiment will ground my analysis of the short story "Perfect Secretarial College" (1996) by Meiling Jin, the short story "Debbie and Julie" (1992) by Doris Lessing, and the novel *Gwendolen* (1989) by Buchi Emecheta.

The public/private division of urban space

Feminist geographers' interest in the public/private division was prompted largely by the lack of research done on the private sphere – and what were regarded as private issues – within geography. In the first phase of research, they focused on showing how the public/private dichotomy stood for spatial articulations of gender inequalities. They took the division for granted, understanding it as a given category with which to read the urban. What mattered to them was to show that the category was gendered, something that had not been done prior to their work. More recently, however, feminist geographers have started to question the pertinence of the division itself, thus complicating their analyses of the ways in which power and boundaries function in the city (Bondi 1998; McDowell 1999a).

Before discussing the unmooring of fixed representations of urban space that this shift represents, I would like first to elaborate on the public/private division. According to many writers, among them Hanna Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, the public/private division has existed as a form of social organisation at least since the age of classical antiquity (see also Allen 2000; Sennett 1986; Snaith 2000). The meaning of the division, however, has not remained identical throughout history. For example, the private sphere was understood in antiquity to signify a lack of power, in contrast with the public domain where citizens could debate political issues. In early industrial societies, the dynamic was reversed and the private sphere became an area of freedom, protected from economical pressures and state authority (McDowell 1999b). Feminist geographers, however, have taken issue with such historical narratives and have uncovered their gender blindness. For instance, they have argued that the characterisation of the private sphere as a space of individual freedom is problematic from the perspective of women who did not qualify, until the twentieth century, as political agents. They have also showed that the fact that the state legislates on issues like repro-

ductive rights, which one would usually associate with the private domain, indicates the interpenetration of the two spheres.

Feminist geographers have often focused on the shape that the public/private division has taken since the eighteenth century, because it still resonates in the contemporary spatial and social arrangements of western cities. They have particularly looked at the very spatial form in which the division has been materially inscribed in the landscape with the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of the suburbs that have traditionally been linked to the private sphere whereas the city centre has been associated with the public arena (McDowell 1983). This bourgeois division, as it is traditionally understood, works along a clear separation of gender roles that characterises men as producers and women as reproducers of labour and capital. Women's roles are therefore primarily defined as being those of mothers and wives, which can be best achieved, the argument goes, within the privacy of the home. In contrast, men's roles are defined in the schema as those of the breadwinner.

There are many problems with the characterisation of urban space that underlie such traditional accounts of the public/private divide. For a start, it seems anachronistic with contemporary gender roles and the changes that have affected living in the city over the last 50 years. In addition, the division, as outlined above, works within a normative model that functions only within a heterosexual ideology of the family. The model also erases questions of race, class and agency that make the experience of the city much more heterogeneous than it allows for. Ultimately, it provides a simplified reading of urban space that is trans-historical and trans-cultural, that assumes that boundaries are fixed and that homogenises women's and men's experiences within each of the spheres. This being said, however, the relevance of those criticisms does not erase the fact that "the *ideal* of separate spheres has had, and continues to have, enormously powerful effects" (Bondi 162). I will come back to this in a moment.

Furthermore, although those criticisms aim at making more complex our understanding of the workings of urban space, they do not all necessarily challenge the private/public division as such. What they do instead is question the characterisation of gender and gender roles within each sphere and, from a feminist perspective, work at providing other models of gender relations within the binary structure itself. This view presupposes, therefore, that the content and the form of the public/private divide are independent from each other. Liz Bondi, a femi-

nist geographer, labels this liberal approach the disentangling of dichotomies because its "underlying conceptualisation assumes that the dichotomies public/private, male/female, and city/suburb can be disentangled, and, consequently, that distinctions between public and private or between city and suburb can be rendered gender neutral in their effects" (163).

Rejecting this reading of the city, Bondi argues that urban space can be theorised from a second, alternative and disruptive perspective that stresses the complex spatial articulations and construction of the urban, understood as a network of relations that engage gender, racial, sexual and class ideologies. This second perspective implies that an additive reading of social structures does not provide a full picture of the ways in which urban space functions. It suggests instead that the city's spatial organisation is gendered from its inception: gender, in short, is not something that is added on to it, but partakes in its very formation. For instance, the characterisation of the private sphere as a safe place is made possible by the definition of women as weak and in need of protection. It follows then that the construction of the private sphere as safe is contingent on qualities traditionally attributed to women, and vice versa. As a result, each time that the safety of the home is invoked, it simultaneously re-inscribes vulnerability as a characteristically female trait. Therefore, the meanings of private space and of womanhood are interdependently constituted and redeployed through and by the spatialisation of gender divisions. The same mechanism applies to the public sphere in relation to masculinity. In other words, spatial organisation and gender construction are interdependent, as part of power relations that engage other forms of domination as well, such as race, class and sexuality. Bondi calls "the dismantling of dichotomies" (164) this second way of looking at and ultimately challenging the public/private division. She characterises it in the following way: "these dichotomies are inextricably and inherently interwoven so that they stand or fall together" (160).

One strategy for dismantling the dichotomy between the public and the private that Bondi discusses is the realisation that these two spheres do not, in fact, depict an absolute arrangement of city space. As I have suggested, the division does not describe a reality, but is part of an ideology of power relations, the strength of which resides in the ideal it presumes to represent, even for the many who do not experience the city in this way (England 1991). This suggests that even if the experience

of many – if not most – women and men does not conform to the ideal, its normative appeal has not disappeared. Therefore, charting experiences of the city that depart from this prescriptive model might work towards improving our understanding of its structure and towards creating spaces for alternative representations that question dichotomous readings of urban space. From that perspective, categories might become more fluid, inciting a reassessment of what public and private stand for and of whether they should be retained as explanatory tools with which to read the city. In addition, such a position also questions traditional readings of gender difference because of the interrelatedness between the two sets of dichotomies.

This being said, it remains that at this particular historical juncture normative and dichotomous representations are still prevalent and have material consequences that affect women's urban experiences. For instance, the geography of fear, which Gill Valentine has extensively researched, indicates that, in relation to fear, women still distinguish between the public and the private and imagine the public sphere as a place of danger – especially linked to sexual violence. This perception prevails despite the fact that studies have shown that one of the most unsafe places for women is actually their home because their attacker is likely to be someone they know and who has access to the private sphere. As the geographer Rachel Pain argues, this stigmatisation of the public sphere as a site of sexual violence functions as a controlling mechanism that ensures the reproduction of the status quo by restricting women's movements within the public sphere, especially at night. It is therefore through such social processes that "women learn that there is a series of boundaries in the physical and social worlds which they must not cross if they wish to remain safe" (Pain 423). In other words, the fiction of the home as a place of security – when experiences to the contrary abound – remains a powerful construction that reminds women of their designated place within the city. As a result, this geography of fear reinstalls and reinforces the division between the public and the private at a time when women's investment within the sphere of paid labour might weaken it, if not directly challenge its pertinence. The stigmatisation as "unmanly" of men who stay at home – house-husbands – also works in this logic, showing that crossing spatial boundaries, in whatever direction, has a destabilising potential that needs to be contained in order for the prevalent ideology of gender divisions and inequalities to be reproduced.

Embodiment

The geography of fear and its undertones of sexual violence provide a link with the second aspect of the urban experience that I wish briefly to discuss: embodiment. Indeed, the fear of sexual violence directly links the experience of the city to the body and shows an instance of "embodied geographies," to use Linda McDowell's phrase (1999a: 34). This type of geography is often close to the second perspective advanced by Bondi (namely the dismantling of binaries) because it inscribes bodies within social practices that radically disrupt the nature/culture dichotomy as well as the mind/body hierarchy. In her book *Gender, Identity, Place: Understanding Feminist Geography*, McDowell outlines several areas of research within embodied geographies. She mentions in particular two topics that are of special interest to me here. They are bodies/cities and pregnant bodies.

The first topic derives directly from an article entitled "Bodies-Cities" written by the feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz. In this article, Grosz explores the interconnectedness between bodies and their environment and discusses in particular "the constitutive and mutually defining relation between bodies and cities" (43). This echoes the mutual constitution of gender and the public/private division that I discussed earlier. Such a characterisation of the relation between bodies and cities is not, Grosz argues, the traditional way in which it is usually constructed. Indeed, the two pervasive models present either a causal relation or else a representational one between bodies and cities. In the first case – the causal model – "the body and the city have merely a de facto or external, contingent rather than constitutive relation" (44): bodies construct cities – which are simply viewed as the effect of embodied subjectivities – according to their needs. In the second case – the representational model – there exists "a kind of parallelism or isomorphism between the body and the city" (45) that is apparent in the image of the body-politic, for instance, or the metaphor used to characterise streets as arteries. In contrast with these two models, Grosz proposes a perspective that "sees [bodies and cities], not as megalithic total entities, distinct identities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or microgroupings" (47).

In conceptualising the relation between bodies and cities as mutually constitutive, Grosz questions dichotomies and boundaries. She imagines an urban space that is ultimately performative and that needs to be negotiated and reinvented continuously. However, for all the focus on the body, her highly theoretical dismantling of binaries seems at times to produce rather disembodied results. This is especially the case in her conclusion when she charts the future of bodies: "the body's limbs and organs will become interchangeable parts with the computer and with the technologisation of production" (50). The collapse of boundaries between the organic and the artificial, if brought to its limit, suggests that virtual bodies might replace material ones.

The second area of research outlined by McDowell – pregnant bodies – addresses the problem of disembodiment. Here, Iris Marion Young's book *Throwing like a Girl* offers inspiration. The pregnant body, Young argues, radically destabilises bodily boundaries as "it reveals a paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves. . . . The pregnant subject is decentred, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences herself as herself, and not as herself" (quoted in McDowell 1999a: 58). As a result, a clear differentiation between one's body and another's becomes problematic. The body itself becomes the contested terrain on which questions of limits are inscribed. Young, in theorising pregnant bodies in this way, retains a strong sense of the materiality of the body, in contrast with Grosz.

This characterisation of the pregnant body as made strange to itself affects the ways in which pregnant women experience the urban space because what were once familiar places might not be intended for the changing body – this also applies to disabled bodies – and therefore need to be renegotiated. This type of negotiation redraws boundaries in new and provisional ways that disturb fixed spatial arrangements of, and relations between, female bodies and urban space.

Li Li's, Julie's and Gwendolen's experiences of the city

I would like to turn now to the three literary texts that I propose to discuss in light of these theoretical considerations. The texts are widely different in relation to the stories they tell: "Perfect Secretarial College" tells the story of Li Li, a young Taiwanese woman, who has come to London to study to become a secretary but finds herself pregnant in-

stead and bleeds to death in her attempt to abort; "Debbie and Julie" portrays the flight of a young English girl from the suburbs to London in order to have a child, and her return home to her parents once she has abandoned it; *Gwendolen* is about a girl's early childhood in Jamaica, her subsequent migration to London to join her parents who have settled there, and her pregnancy after having been raped by her father.

The stories have several points in common: they are mainly set in London, and each has a young pregnant woman as its main character. They all represent experiences of the city as mediated by embodiment. I propose to look at the three principal characters' experiences of the urban in order to see how they negotiate boundaries between the public and the private, and whether they reproduce, disentangle or dismantle the gender dichotomy at play in this division.

In "Perfect Secretarial College," Li Li experiences the public sphere as a place where she is scrutinised because she differs from the norm – she is "oriental" (80) as people keep referring to her. For Li Li, in contrast, the people she sees in the streets have the characteristics of "ghost-people" (81), that is, white, distant, unfriendly and disembodied. Surrounded by those ghost-people, she suffers from a feeling of exclusion that translates into the erection of an invisible boundary between herself and the crowd: "The bright lights and the crowd made her feel queasy, as if she was looking through the glass of a goldfish bowl" (83). It is not clear who is the fish here, but the image conveys Li Li's sense of dread of, and alienation from, the pulsing life of the city. She is no *flâneuse* wishing to lose herself in the energy of London. This is in fact a stance that is not available to her because she is objectified as sexual prey by passers-by: "'What's a nice oriental girl doing here on her own? Why don't you come and . . .'" (80). A *flâneur* does not need to worry about such issues (Wolff 1985). He walks the city as if it belonged to him. But in Li Li's case, her gender, ethnicity and status as single define her, in the eyes of the men she meets, as a public woman in the public sphere.

It could seem that in contrast to the public sphere of sexual danger, Li Li experiences her room in a students' residence as safer, even though it is a dingy place that she has not really appropriated for herself except for a few pictures she has hung on the wall. But she does not feel safer there. She acts like a guest, not able to relax within the walls of her bedsit. The fact that her room is "crowded" (81), as she characterises it, underlines the impression that no space in the city actually belongs to

her. The room seems to be an extension of the public space in which she feels scrutinised as female and foreign. Even once she has "bolted the door" (80), she still cares about the impression she makes on others: "Must not get blood on the sheets" (84), she thinks, while bleeding to death in trying to terminate her pregnancy. As this thought suggests, she always feels under surveillance in London, whether in or out of her room.

At the level of the city, the distinction between public space and the private sphere of security does not apply to Li Li's experience. In fact, she reformulates the division and reworks the boundary on a different scale, between London and Taiwan. London as a whole has become a public place where danger lurks, whereas Taiwan is the place she associates with safety: "She sighed and wished she could go back home to normality, instead of this dingy room and these ghost people" (81). However, as the verb "wish" suggests, she cannot go back to that sphere she endows with security, because her crossing of boundaries has tainted her: her pregnant body is the sign of her transgression; she has become a public woman for whom the private realm of security is no longer accessible. At the same time, she feels that she cannot invest herself in the public sphere represented by London, because of her foreignness:

> Her life was full of if onlys: if only she was different; if only she wasn't so shy; if only she was beautiful and blond and smiling and perfect like the heroines in the storybooks back home. If she had blue eyes and blond hair or even green eyes and brown hair, the Blond Giant would marry her and take her to Rio. (83)

As described here, her body becomes for Li Li the site of a struggle, the material sign of her exclusion from both the public and private spheres. She decides therefore to act on her body in an attempt to make it conform to what she considers the norm. As a result, she dies in her room in trying to discipline her body into an acceptable form, as an impossible condition for returning home.

Her experience of the urban suggests that the bourgeois ideal of separation between public and private within the urban space might not apply to a female immigrant who does not master the codes of London life. The sense of danger she feels in the city can be interpreted as a controlling mechanism that supports exclusionary practices, and that signifies to Li Li that London is not her place, in the same way that the

public arena is traditionally seen as not being a woman's place. Li Li's reworking of the boundaries at the level of countries shows that although, within London, divisions between the public and the private have collapsed, they have not been dismantled elsewhere. They remain a normative and ideal way of understanding space for Li Li, now at the global rather than the local level. At the same time, the fact that she feels excluded from both spheres suggests that she occupies a space outside the dichotomy. This undermines dichotomous thinking, as the very possibility of an outside radically disrupts it. In order for it to remain as a normative way in which to think the city, Li Li needs to be erased from the space of enunciation, both literally and metaphorically.

London, in "Debbie and Julie," is a place of both danger and emancipation. When Julie, four months pregnant, first arrives in the city, she finds herself alone in Waterloo Station at midnight. She is offered shelter by Debbie, but there is a sense of danger lurking near: other people are watching her. Debbie is a prostitute, and as such she crosses boundaries and occupies the city in a way that is new to Julie. The division between public and private is eroded for her, as both spheres become places of paid labour in which sexualised bodies are exposed.

Surrounded by these new codes, Julie compares her parents' home with Debbie's flat. Whereas the former is characterised by repression, both mental and physical, the latter stands for freedom and emancipation, especially at the level of bodily displays:

> In this house [her parent's house], her home, they did not see each other naked. Her mother hadn't come in for years when she was having a bath, and she always knocked on the bedroom door. In Debbie's flat people ran about naked or half dressed and Debbie might answer the door in her satin camiknickers, those great breasts of hers lolling about. Debbie often came in when Julie was in the bath to sit on the loo and chat. . . . (16)

Liminal spaces, such as the door's threshold in the above passage, are straddled, public and private mixed up. As a result, the city extends to the flat. It becomes a space of transgression in relation to the normativity typified by the suburbs. As with Elizabeth Grosz's "bodies/cities" there is a strong sense here that the city energises and flows in bodies and vice versa in a mutual movement by which they constitute one another.

There is here, as in Li Li's story, a sense that the public/private division is reworked in such a way that boundaries shift: inside and outside

fold into each other. But in contrast with Li Li's experience, that new space is positively characterised by Julie: she sees it as a place of possibility and freedom. This prospect might be open to her because her whiteness does not stigmatise her as different, as outside the racial norm.

Julie's investment in the public sphere challenges a reading of freedom in purely masculine terms, because she acts with a strong sense of herself as having a female body. Indeed, she chooses to give birth outside, in a garden shed within the city, rather than in Debbie's house. In doing so, she reclaims that space in her own terms. She disentangles binaries between the public and the private, as well as gender divisions, by claiming a kind of ownership of the city.

However, the traditional dichotomy between the suburbs and the city remains. Once back home she feels her body constrict in the mental narrowness of her parents' house. She feels "safe" (14), but this is not what she actually wants. By stating this, she questions the equation between the feminine and the need for protection on which much of the ideology of the public/private divide rests. Julie's refusal to be boxed within normative constructs of what her proper place should be shows a willingness to read the city in a way that questions women's traditional place within urban space, and consequently challenges the construction of the public as a male sphere. However, the narrative also suggests that the creation of this space of possibilities remains dependent on its articulation in opposition with the suburbs. As such it re-inscribes the division on a different scale.

Gwendolen, the main character of the eponymous novel, learns very young that she cannot equate the private sphere with safety and security. Indeed, in her grandmother's shack in Jamaica, Uncle Johnny, a family friend, sexually abuses her repeatedly. When she migrates to London at age 14, the same scenario recurs, this time with her father. Sexual violence therefore pervades the private sphere, which is also the domain of hard domestic work. But even though Gwendolyn relishes leaving the private sphere for the outside world, she cannot invest herself in it in the way that Julie does, for instance. Indeed, race, gender and class issues combine to make her weary of the indifference with which she and her mother are treated in the public sphere: "Gwendolen noticed that her mother did not speak to the other mothers and they did not talk to her. They did not even give her a look. They all behaved as if the family was not there" (46).

Having experienced sexual violence in the private sphere and silent rejection in the public one, Gwendolen cannot rely on an ideology that constructs the private as the safe arena of domesticity and the public as a space of freedom. She cannot attach meaning to a reading of the city articulated through these dichotomies. Instead, Gwendolen invests the urban with a different set of expectations. She reads the city as a network of relations between people, as well as between people and their environment, relations that create provisional spaces of safety and freedom, but that are not dependent on the fixed determinations of dichotomies.

By the end of the novel, she has invested her longing for a relationship based on security in her baby daughter. She has named her Iamide, which, Gwendolen says, "means 'My mother is here'. It is symbolic. . . . [I]t means everything I ever wanted, warmth, security, comfort, is all here in a female form" (200). Safety is no longer defined as an intrinsic attribute of the private sphere that participates in a social practice of containment – as in Julie's experience of the suburbs, for instance. Instead, it has become the quality of an embodied space that collapses prior divisions and renegotiates the urban in a way similar to that discussed by Iris Marion Young in *Throwing like a Girl*. By embodying safety for Gwendolen, Iamide opens the possibility for a space to take shape out of desire rather than power relations. This space is in fact an act – of enunciating desire, for instance, as Gwendolen does in the passage above – and is therefore performative. It does not persist as an empty shell to be filled, but is rather constituted by the transgressive bodies (in relation to the social order) that it makes possible. As a result, Gwendolyn experiences the city as a space of possibilities that is actualised performatively through the encounters of gendered bodies. In some ways, her stand echoes Gillian Rose's description of space:

> Space then is not an anterior actant to be filled or spanned or constructed, and to claim it is runs the risk of making a contingent spatial articulation of relationality fundamental. Instead, space is practiced, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, its forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self-other relations. (1999: 248)

The characterisation of Iamide – and the qualities she embodies – as a female form, however, intimates that Gwendolen retains some kind of essentialising impetus in relation to gender differentiation, although she empowers the female term of the dichotomy. This suggests a different

strategy to the ones expounded by Liz Bondi for dismantling the private/public division of social space. In fact, Gwendolen displaces the debate because she refuses to read the city in dichotomous terms and yet retains the sense that embodiment is thoroughly gendered. In doing so, she questions the validity of those erasing gestures that would like to do away with the question of sexual difference. In taking this position, she echoes the feminist writer Sandra Harding:

> It is premature for women to be willing to give up what they never had. Should women – no matter what their race, class or culture – find it reasonable to give up the desire to know and understand the world from the standpoint of their experiences *for the first time*? As several feminist literary critics have suggested, perhaps only those who have access to the benefits of the Enlightenment can "give up" those benefits. (quoted in Joy 276)

Gwendolen, therefore, does radically question the pertinence of dichotomies in relation to the social organisation of urban space, while keeping open the question of sexual difference as a potentially empowering form of embodiment.

By experiencing the city in these terms, Gwendolen points to an understanding of the urban fabric as a multiple and fluid network that reconfigures the urban each time it is solicited rather than as a predetermined space in which gender inequalities are inscribed and constructed. She therefore offers one strategy for dismantling the dichotomies at work in traditional readings of the city that remain grounded in gendered bodies.

Conclusion

The interdisciplinary approach that I have used in this paper shows how geographical questions and literary representations can gain from being connected to each other, geography providing a theoretical framework while literary texts represent experience in ways that are, at times, contradictory, but which nonetheless provide sites in which new possibilities for thinking the urban can be articulated.

As we have seen, Li Li's experience of London collapses the distinction between the public and the private within the city, but drives her to redeploy that distinction at the global level, between Taiwan and Eng-

land. In Julie's case, boundaries are disentangled through her investment of the public arena with desire, but they remain a way of separating the suburbs from the city. Gwendolen dismantles spatial dichotomies by navigating the urban in terms of multiple relations rather than fixed spaces, while remaining conscious of the structuring importance of gender in her experience.

The three literary texts I have discussed here all represent the city as a gendered space in which divisions into differentiated spheres endure. This representation can be compared to the findings of feminist geographers. They show, however, that strategies that seek to destabilise or break down dichotomies are also at play within the city. These strategies, such as a Gwendolen's gendered, performative and embodied appropriation of urban space, tend to disrupt neat articulations of those dichotomies. Consequently, the three texts present complex versions of the urban experience that, taken together, show that the form taken by the city cannot be decided or read prior to its performative deployment through the embodied experiences of the women and men who, figuratively or literally, dwell in it.

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