The Belly of Naples and Displaced Meanings, City-as-Body and City-as-Theatre in Commentaries on the Old Town Risanamento
Deconstructing the Stereotype of the Picturesque

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Introduction

This article will discuss the formation of several stereotypical images associated with the picturesque nature of Southern Italy, by analysing the city of Naples. It interrogates two issues: first, how ethnographic interests created a strong bond between features of the people and the environment of Naples itself; second, how the use of literary tropes, especially 'city-as body' and 'city-as-theatre', influenced the reception of Naples abroad. The city has been endlessly described in guidebooks and travel accounts as the most important destination of the Grand Tour in Southern Italy. For this reason, we will limit our analysis to Neapolitan journalist Matilde Serao's writings on the subject, and selected pieces of literature written by foreign travellers before and after the *Risanamento* renewal period.

Naples also plays an important role in postcolonial studies on Southern Italy, primarily as the subject of many biased representations of the *Mezzogiorno*. For example, Franco Cassano repositioned the role of the South, and the Mediterranean region in general, as a self-aware agent of change.[1] As Ruth Glynn also pointed out in her critical analysis of Neapolitan cultural

representations, the city has often been characterized as an uncivilized and barbaric place in need of corrections from civilized Northern Italy.[2] She also explains, in subsequent books and essays, about Walter Benjamin's concept of 'porosity' as alternative ways to embrace modernity. This link is also laid out in *Mediterranean Crossings* by Iain Chambers, who proposes that rather than resolve inequalities from a Western point of view, one should acknowledge the multiplicity of currents in cultural development – with the way we inhabit cities as one of them.[3] This is further explored by Fernand Braudel, Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre's 'differential space' and many other Mediterranean voices.[4] Yet, the *meridionale* stereotype also surfaces in Benedetto Croce's work, whose understanding of the South as a historical space – instead of a geographical one – sets the stage for the newer paradigms of Italian historians like Giuseppe Galasso.[5] Massimo Cacciari also advocates for a 'geo-philosophy' of the Mediterranean, interpreting Naples' porosity in oppositional terms to Northern Europe,[6] while Glynn focuses on not creating construed dualism.[7] 'Southern Thought', in this sense, should both exist and develop independently of external forces. In that regard, John Dickie, in his review of stereotypes of Mezzogiorno from 1860-1990, argues it is difficult to discern who is 'us' and 'them' within the discourse, making the definition of a 'we' problematic.[8] Returning to the modernization issue, a southern urban theory has emerged with the argument that modernism, in certain regions, has 'never been a hegemonic culture'.[9] Hence, we must adopt an *ad hoc* theoretical framework of the very definition of progress and how we value it.

Serao, Dickens, Benjamin and Sartre

As previously mentioned, early-modern travel culture produced a vast span of literature, which in turn contributed descriptions of local curiosities, peculiarities and so on eventually leading to typizations of both people and places in Naples.[10] Melissa Calaresu elaborates on a traveller's inability to escape the idea of a picturesque Naples, reinforcing a corresponding social determinism.[11] The urban setting then blends with images of street life, becoming an inseparable whole (Figs. 1-3).[12]

Fig. 1. Urban scene of the Neapolitan picturesque: street vendor.
Photo by © Martina Russo, 2020.

Fig. 2. Urban scene of the Neapolitan picturesque: hanging clothes on the street, Pallonetto.
Photo by © Martina Russo, 2020.

Fig. 3. Urban scene of the Neapolitan picturesque: religious statues and a wayside shrine in the public space, Montesanto station.
Photo by © Fabiana Dicuonzo, 2018.

This article examines selected urban images reported before and after the dramatic renovations of the late nineteenth-century *Risanamento* period, with a focus on 'city-as-body' and 'city-as-theatre' tropes. We will also consider *Il Ventre di Napoli* (The Belly of Naples) by Matilde Serao, a Greek-born writer who was based in Naples – and, most importantly, published her text both right before the *Risanamento* and after its transformations. In the following two sections, we will see how Serao tackled contradictions of a constructed environment teeming with life via frequent references to the human body in order to capture spatial and social qualities of the city centre. In the last two sections of the article, we have connected excerpts from foreign travellers – again before and after the *Risanamento* – to pleasures (or sickness) of flesh and theatricality. These 'displaced meanings' parallel many descriptions by writers that travelled to Naples: Charles Dickens and the pantomime, Jean-Paul Sartre's delirium of flesh and rotten food, and Benjamin and the city-as-theatre. We argue that these pieces show how it is still possible to write about urban places, even in harsh terms like Sartre, while still deconstructing the stereotype of picturesqueness. In short, effort should be made to contextualize differences and understand the quality of urban space alongside the society that produces it.

For example, iconic thoroughfares, such as the Rettifilo and Toledo Street, can be thought of as scars upon the urban history of Naples. The first is a symbol of *Risanamento* in the late-nineteenth century, while the second divides the core of the city into two parts: the densely populated *Quartieri Spagnoli* to the west and the post-renovative Rione Carità to the east. Travellers who describe these environments frequently employ words that are related to the body and the organs. For instance, 'bowels' is a frequently used term to convey ideas of perceived spatiality when referring to the network of narrow alleyways in the old city.

Furthermore, Naples is seen as a sort of organism inhabited by bacteria that rots if left neglected. Under the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomeno-

logical ontology, this body is already sick.[13] Among the streets of the city, having recognized a perfect correspondence between the built environment and the men who inhabit it, the urban fabric is soft and wobbly. This impression of shapelessness comes from urban spaces expanding and contracting, like an abdomen full of primitive substances, which in turn is composed by the genes of an archaic civilization (Figs. 3-4).

Matilde Serao and the Belly of Naples During the *Risanamento*

Journalist and novelist Matilde Serao, who was the founder (along with Edoardo Scarfoglio) of the Neapolitan daily newspaper *Il Mattino*, provided a personal and realistic description of Naples under the title *Il Ventre di Napoli* (The Belly of Naples). It was split into three different sections, each illustrating her conflicted feelings towards Neapolitan society. The first section of the book was written starting in 1884, when Serao was more critical and harsh towards the city. The last section was published in 1906, when Naples' degenerative immobility began to turn into an opportunity for possible redemption.

The climate at the end of the nineteenth century, to continue the metaphor, was literally feverish. A terrible cholera epidemic had put the issue of healthcare and traditional domestic spaces at the centre of public attention.[14] Consequently, urban renovations were being promoted by Mayor Nicola Amore: he deemed demolitions hygienically necessary to provide more natural light and ventilation throughout the city.[15] In fact, the reasons underlying relaxing the urban fabric were more complex, and involved the gentrification of façaded houses on the new and wide Rettifilo to maximize price. Furthermore, a wide and straight road piercing the belly of Naples allowed more efficient control of public places, especially to help combat popular uprisings.[16]

A few years earlier, between 1852 and 1870, prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann had enforced the well-known 'Paris Renovation Plan', estab-

lishing an expropriation mechanism that led to mass demolitions of congested slums in the city centre. Rents instantly soared and caused an unprecedented displacement of the working class to the eastern periphery of the city.[17] While popular pressure increased on those in power in the French capital, including threats of rent strikes, similar operations of expanding corridors and landscaped squares were also not well-received in Naples. In its huge city centre, the cost of new houses was out of reach, and 'walking behind the screen [the Rettifilo]', Serao observed, such interventions did not affect the already existing 'ancient, damp, narrow, gloomy and dirty alleys'.[18] The Rettifilo, today called Corso Umberto I, is a straight 1-km boulevard, connecting the square in front of Naples Central Station with Giovanni Bovio square, before reaching the famous *Quartieri Spagnoli* by a steep street (Via Cardinale Guglielmo Sanfelice). It is a grand symbol of Nicola Amore's renovations . . . but also a great illusion. Serao describes it as an embalmed body – or rather, as a precarious scenography – with a thin layer concealing a completely different reality behind it. Furthermore, she overlapped the quality of the construction with that of an innkeeper she had met in the city, whom she described as having a 'yellowish face, livid lips, and black teeth'.[19]

It is therefore not surprising that urban planners used the word *sventramenti* (disembowelment) when addressing the corridors and boulevards that cut through crowded old towns at the end of the nineteenth century.[20] When Serao attempted to 're-place [the belly of Naples] within the connective tissue of the city-as-body, [she] metonymically grounds her proposal to reconstruct "rifare" the city and its people',[21] contrasting the façadism undertaken by politicians back then. Hence, Naples' belly contains food and waste, but also the potential to become a womb for rebirth.[22]

Keeping with the city-as-body trope, Serao reported that on the belly was a sort of laceration – cutting through flesh and exposing entrails teeming with life. From here, Serao warned that hidden viruses arose: beggars,

thieves and fixers that would emerge from well-hidden alleys, striking and disappearing without leaving a trace, protected by their perfect knowledge of a porous space that bewildered anybody who happened to pass that way.[23]

Serao, 20 Years Later: The Picturesque

The second section of the book, written in 1903-1905 (and published in a new edition together with the previous section), employed a more detached look at the urban renewal phase twenty years after the approval of the *Risanamento* plan laid out by engineers Gaetano Bruno and Adolfo Giambarba.[24] Serao was increasingly more relaxed towards her city, though still disillusioned, she admitted in the preface. Social criticism turned into consideration of change. She believed that physical degeneration corresponded to moral degeneration, and rehabilitation could only be achieved after courageous decisions at the top. Honour could push Neapolitan society to seek redemption by placing illustrious men in the most important public offices. Financial straits, thereafter, would only be bad-faith arguments if investments were wisely allocated for the right causes.[25] For instance, a project at the time for Rione Della Bellezza – also known as Santa Lucia Nuova, an oceanside area with a view of the bay and Mount Vesuvius – was at the centre of public debate at the time. Interestingly, the urban renovations that were pitched seem to echo some of our contemporary marketing strategies; in particular, a picturesque name that endeavours to recall the values of Neapolitan landscape and tradition for the renovated property. This speculative venture included thirteen large blocks, one public garden and a 'Pompeian promenade' (a Greco-Roman-style portico). Nothing was 'more ugly, bulky, and heavy', Serao maintains.[26] She sensed how superficial the reference to tradition was when the project was *de facto* driven solely by the maximization of rental prices. Furthermore, the cost of a coastal home was expected to double. Injustice would be aggravated, Serao wrote, by the fact that the renovation would prevent Neapolitans and tourists from a full experience of the seascape.

Lastly, Toledo Street, also known as 'la gran via',[27] was a corridor connecting Piazza del Plebiscito to Piazza Dante through the belly of the city. Today, one can clearly recognize two distinct halves: the densely populated and porous *Quartieri Spagnoli* to the west, and the post-renovative *Rione Carità* with a loose urban fabric to the east.

Naples has long been associated with the picturesque, and its 'redemption' had to go beyond the physical transformation. It had to break century-old clichés. Charles Dickens visited Naples in February 1845: ten years before representing the divide of British society with the imagined industrial city of Coketown in his novel *Hard Times,* and forty years before the approval of the law on the *Risanamento*.[28] He saw the prerenovation Naples, and his first impression of the city was that of a funeral – a dead body shrouded with a red and golden cloth and carried in procession in an open bier. Death and life are well represented, he observed (Fig. 4). Arriving in the city, he felt all the inadequacy of 'lovers and hunters of the picturesque',[29] those who often idealize the precarious and degraded condition that is usually associated with the happy life of Neapolitans, as if it were inevitable. In Dickens's view, pantomime was the conventional sign for hunger, again a manifestation of bodily emptiness.[30] While the English writer was more impressed by the rural landscape of Naples, Serao associated the picturesque city centre's 'belly' with the appropriation of public space by grocers. Shopkeepers or street vendors had arranged the city spaces in multiple ways, forming a spatial 'seizure', in order to express their public persona.[31] Looking at the streetscape, Serao asked herself: '[If] the shops are there but everything is for sale on the street; sidewalks have disappeared, who has ever seen them?'.[32]

'Touristization' of Neapolitan folklore had already commenced at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as Stendhal noted on one of his stays. He visited Naples and other major cities with an idealized vision, right before

Fig. 4. Fontanelle cemetery, a charnel house located in a cave under the Sanità neighbourhood where people developed a spontaneous cult of devotion to skulls. Photo by © Fabiana Dicuonzo, 2018.

the Golden Age of travel in the peninsula (1815-1830).[33] But he was still more interested in people's relation with the constructed environment, as Sartre was, rather than ruins and museums. When Stendhal stepped outside the door of Palazzo Degli Studi where he was based, he walked onto Toledo Street, *'un des grands buts de mon voyage, la rue plus peuplée et la plus gaie de l'univers'*,[34] full of English tourists as it was becoming one of the main destinations of the Grand Tour. Toledo is perhaps the deepest cut in the belly of Naples, a mark that shows all the *strata* of Neapolitan souls, 'hearth of hearts: via Toledo! The stream of humankind'.[35]

Jean-Paul Sartre's Naples: A Delirium of Flesh and Rotten Food

Additionally, falsehood and deception were at the centre of Sartre's report-age *Nourritures* (Nourishments),[36] written and published two years after his stay in post-renovation Naples in 1936. During his stay, he discovered 'love's vile relationship to Food. Not right away. Naples doesn't show itself at first. It's a town which is ashamed of itself',[37] leading to a sort of hallucinatory drift within the narrative voice. It is a simple ballad in which Naples' teeming streets trigger his mental and physical alteration:[38]

> *At the bottom of a hole in the wall, there was a shape in a bed. It was a young woman, a sick woman. She was suffering; she turned her head toward the street – her throat made a tender spot above the sheets. I stopped; I looked at her for a long time; I would have liked to run my hands over her skinny neck – I shook myself and strode rapidly away. But it was too late; I was trapped. I no longer saw a thing but flesh: wretched flowers of flesh waving in blue darkness; flesh to palpate, suck, and eat; wet flesh soaked with sweat, urine, milk.*[39]

The dialectic between the inhabitants and the places they lived in, in the eyes of the Parisian philosopher, took place primarily through food, as a mirror of Naples' external and ephemeral appearance. Food in grocery shops is bright and splendid, and pastry shops look 'like a jewelry store',[40]

showing cakes of cruel perfection, coloured and polished like jewels behind the windows. Then, around the corner of the *Caflisch* pastry shop in a narrow street, he sees a slice of watermelon on the ground – open and spotted with mud. It was 'buzzing with flies like rotting flesh and bleeding underneath the dying rays of the sun. A child on crutches came up to this rotten meat, took it in his hands, and began to eat it with gusto.'[41] This contradiction between the shiny surface of jewel-like cakes and rotten foods that can be found around the corner frequently parallels with Serao's aforementioned 'screen', but also with the fleeting beauty of the body. Both works concern themselves with the duplicity of Naples, and narrativize primitivism and widespread precariousness emerging from the 'masses of filthy, crumbling, miserable houses of all sizes, stained with all the stigmata of poverty and vice'.[42] Many commentators see within this fluid identity the mechanism of indeterminacy that constitutes a sort of feminine space – a mother-city according to Natalia Rita Giannini's dissertation[43] – in which emptiness, or nothingness, is not seen relative to the phallus of subjectivity. Rather, it is a womb that nourishes and bestows life-giving power on the subject. Fluidity is then the base of its grotesque aesthetic, being 'a city that asserts fragmentation and segmentation instead of completeness and linearity'[44] in a precarious relationship between mother and child.

Benjamin and the City-as-Theatre

That same fluidity transforms daily practices into acts of spatial appropriation, usually represented in the form of a pseudo-musical in which alleyways and public squares are flooded with singers and dancers. In analysing the musical corporeality of Naples, Giuliana Bruno notes that 'the musicality and street life of the city ultimately have been transformed into an internationally constructed folklore'.[45] John Turturro's documentary *Passione* (2010) offers a perfect explanation of this *topos*, with the city-as-theatre and masses of bodies living their melodramatic lives. It is a densely populated film, with artistic narcissism 'performed on traffic island and *terrazzi*, in bistros and at the bus stops, on beaches and in beds',[46] while

architectural elements of the public space are used as makeshift stages. The comparison of syncopated body movements with urban features such as stairs, intersections and balconies is made evident by Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis in Naples in 1924, three years before the initiation of his *Passagenwerk* project. He introduced the idea of porosity associated with the built environment:

> *. . . as porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its 'thus and not otherwise'.*[47]

On this kind of large-scale stage, the more that events are spurred on by chaos, the more separations between public and private will become blurred. Theatrical components are a direct expression of Neapolitans' passion for improvisation, which temporarily reconfigures streets, staircases, roofs, entryways and more as improvised scenes on the stage of everyday life. Private life is 'fragmented, porous and discontinuous. What distinguishes Naples from other large cities is something it has in common with the African *kraal*; each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life.'[48] The aforementioned 'nourishing emptiness' is here crystallized into 'porosity', which expresses the fraction of voids over the total volume. If the metaphor is applicable in architecture, porosity then represents the ability of the urban fabric to be permeated by public space and activate urbanity.[49] Streets penetrate domestic spaces, and vice versa. Porosity is evident on the iconic Palazzo Dello Spagnolo (Fig. 5), in the Sanità neighbourhood, as permeable as volcanic slag from Vesuvius. Additionally, complex systems of staircases overlap the inner façades of the courtyards, creating diaphanous thresholds on multiple levels in Palazzo Trabucco, Palazzo Venezia, Palazzo Sanfelice (Fig. 6) and Palazzo di Majo. Benjamin's text, though with a different set of tropes and metaphors, also

Fig. 5. Courtyard of Palazzo Dello Spagnolo.

Fig. 6. Courtyard of Palazzo Sanfelice.
Photos by © Fabiana Dicuonzo, 2018.

pointed towards the dark and shapeless form of the old town, where modernity has not penetrated.[50] Furthermore, Glynn notes that Benjamin's celebration of such spatial practices challenged those established categories, such as the private and the public distinction, posing itself as an ideal counterpart to Northern Europe.[51]

Conclusions

Serao's texts provided a passionate account of a pulsating Naples, then-struggling with its density. Organic growth leads to a porous constructed environment, in which public spaces are at times connected, or conversely trapped like air pockets. As porosity in geology is a product of its own formation, Naples likewise grew (and grows) with overlapping layers and vistas – creating an iridescent vision that is difficult to summarize with mere physical description. The Naples that Serao recounted is still a malleable rock, then-sedimenting with sudden, painful and even catastrophic events, as if a wounded body. In the following 150 years, the belly of Naples would mineralize, while still living with the cliché of the picturesque. Over time, the pores solidify, and today what we see is the rough surface of a rock with all of the dramatic vital pulsations of its past still visible.

We have seen previous writings provide ground for an identification of the body of people with that of the city. On the other end, environmental determinism and oversimplification (such as tourists in search of curiosities) contributes to establishing stereotypical images, which, in turn, may push the tourism industry to respond to that demand and offer a staged picturesqueness of the city. Writing about cities like Naples poses many difficulties in discerning similarities and differences with other European cities. Rhetoric can overlap authenticity, and generalization devalues the richness of details. Following the analysis in this text, we propose to embrace fragmentation, and thereby renounce the idea of a comprehensive synthesis of the city.

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7 Glynn, 'Porosity and Its Discontents', op. cit. (note 2).

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18 Author's translation of 'camminando dietro il paravento' and 'vicoli antichi, umidi, alti, tetri e sporchi', in: Matilde Serao, *Il Ventre Di Napoli: Venti Anni Fa* (Naples, 1906), 101-102.
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20 Leonardo Benevolo, *The Origins of Modern Town Planning*, translated by Judith Landry (London, 1967).
21 Darby Tench, 'Gutting the Belly of Naples: Metaphor, Metonymy and the Auscultatory Imperative in Serao's City of "Pietà"', *Annali d'Italianistica* 7 (1989), 288-289.
22 Ibid.
23 Serao, *Il Ventre Di Napoli*, op. cit. (note 18).
24 Manzo, 'Il "Risanamento" di Napoli', op. cit. (note 15).
25 Serao, *Il Ventre Di Napoli*, op. cit. (note 18).
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27 Ibid., 156.
28 Maria Gabriella Caponi-Doherty, 'Charles Dickens and the Italian Risorgimento', *Dickens Quarterly* 13/3 (1996), 151-163.
29 Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (London, 1846), 240.
30 Ibid.
31 Serao, *Il Ventre Di Napoli*, op. cit. (note 18), 67.
32 Author's translation of 'vi sono le botteghe ma tutto si vende nella via; i marciapiedi sono scomparsi, chi li ha mai visti?', in: ibid., 69.
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35 Author's translation of 'cuore dei cuori: Via Toledo! Il torrente dell'umanità', in: Serao, *Il Ventre Di Napoli*, op. cit. (note 18), 159.
36 Fragment of a story published for the first time as 'Nourritures', in: *Verve*,

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