

Appropriation and Gendered Spaces

A Discussion on Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels

Sernaz Arslan

Within the framework of Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey's theoretical conceptualizations regarding space, this article aims to discuss appropriation of urban space from a gendered perspective as presented through the Neapolitan novels by Elena Ferrante. Ferrante's tetralogy not only portrays the personal transformation of the main characters Lenú and Lila, but also their practices of urban appropriation, their relationship with the neighbourhood they live in, and the transformation of Naples as a socially constructed space itself.

In recent years, Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels have received worldwide popular and critical attention. Tackling issues such as gender, motherhood,

marriage, female friendship, poverty and post-Second World War politics, Ferrante's work reaches across different cultures and societies. It also constitutes a rich and substantial framework for multidisciplinary academic discussions and analyses. Indeed, the four volumes provide a fertile ground to discuss the relationship between place and gender throughout the second half of twentieth-century Naples. Translated and published in English between 2012 and 2015, the series has been characterized as a female *bildungsroman* that begins in 1950s Naples. It follows the lives of two protagonists, Elena (Lenù) Greco and Raffaella (Lila) Cerullo, from childhood to old age, as they struggle to find their ways amid the violence and poverty driven post-Second World War Naples. While navigating the sharp social and economic divides of the city, the two characters try to figure out what they want to become by challenging the dominant gender roles and power relations embedded in the society. This article aims to discuss appropriation of urban space from a gendered perspective as presented through the novels. To do so, it begins with a brief contextualization of space and appropriation within the framework of feminist geography.

Situating Space, Gender and Appropriation

Over the last few decades, scholars from different disciplines have been trying to understand how environments, landscapes, architectural surroundings, places and spaces have influenced the nature and scope of political power, cultural production, social experience and construction of identities.¹ A significant number of scholars has contributed to the definition of place, space and the differences between these concepts. According to Dolores Hayden, place is one of the trickiest words in English. It indicates home-stead, location and position in social hierarchy.² Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Tim Cresswell, among others, have associated the concept of place with human experience, action, intention and attachment.³ Space, on the other hand, has been perceived as something more abstract, without any substantial meaning. Tuan described space as a location that has no social connections.⁴ Furthermore, in the early 1980s, humanities and social sci-

ences approached the concept of space from a different angle. Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre, scholars like David Harvey and Edward Soja argued that space was not a static, abstract location without any social connections, emotions and meaning. It was dynamic, constructed and contested. As asserted by Foucault, 'space is fundamental in any exercise of power'.⁵ Space is where issues of class, sexuality, gender and race are located, shaped and fought out.

Feminist scholars played a pioneering role in this spatial turn. In the early 1970s feminist geographers started to underline both the neglect of women and the existing stereotypes concerning gender in human geography. The urban space became not only a crucial scale through which gender is experienced and constituted, but also a conceptual framework within which the socioeconomic aspects of human life could be analysed.⁶ Over the years the agendas of feminist urban studies have been enriched with the perspective of socialist feminism, identity politics, empathy, and politics of recognition and redistribution. As Leslie Kern asserts: 'Feminist urban studies mean tackling a complex web of power relations.'⁷ Feminist urban studies asks a set of questions concerning the societal relations in the city/urban space; looking at them through the lens of gender, sexuality, race, class, accessibility; acknowledging and discussing various urban experiences while keeping intersectionality intact.⁸

By proposing questions about how spaces are experienced differently by various actors, feminist geographers began to challenge the existing assumptions about the place of women and men in societies, built environments and the relationships within which they live and work. Their focus on the presence and absence of different groups in urban spaces brought issues of participation and non-participation into the framework. However, their contribution has been more than bringing issues of gender and factors like age, class and ethnicity into the field of urban studies. While rethinking gender and its relationship to space, feminist geographers also revisited

the key concept of space. It is thus not possible to talk about a singular, concrete and stable definition of space. As argued by Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson, feminist geography enabled new and interconnected ways of thinking about space and gender.⁹

It can be argued that there are two main approaches towards space and gender. The first, based on Doreen Massey's analysis, conceptualizes space and gender as interrelated, mutually constitutive processes. Like Lefebvre, Massey also perceives space as a social construct. It is based on the dynamic interplay between values and the continuous production and reproduction of meanings. She states that defining space as a notion producing shared experiences leaves us unable to see how differences in gender, age and class, along with other forms of social differentiation, shape individuals' lives.¹⁰ Such a conceptualization of space fails to acknowledge how social relations shape the urban space. Not all individuals experience urban space in the same way, due to the societal power relations embedded in it. Therefore, space cannot be described as a notion creating shared experiences and providing similar opportunities and possibilities for all. There are numerous examples in the literature illustrating this argument based on the theory of space and gender as mutually constructed.¹¹

The second influential approach concerning space in feminist geography literature has its origins in Gillian Rose's controversial description of 'paradoxical space'. Rose examines the relationship between space and gender within the framework of contradictions that represents women's everyday experiences. According to her, paradoxical space 'is a space imagined in order to articulate a troubled relation to the hegemonic discourses of masculinism'.¹² In other words, through the paradoxical space it is possible to challenge and reverse the dominant practices and conceptualizations of gender. For Rose, the built environment surrounding us is a product of the male/masculine imagination. This creates an obstacle for women to claim rights and/or control over space. To overcome this obstacle, women should

insist on the possibility of resistance and change. Paradoxical space has the potential to replace the dominant, hegemonic, masculinist space and make a more equal, free space possible.¹³

These conceptualizations of space pave the way for a gendered discussion of appropriation. Like the term space, appropriation does not have a single definition as well. According to Lefebvre, appropriation refers to people's acts when they exert their right to the city and urban places as spaces of encounter.¹⁴ As they appropriate the city space, inhabitants should be able to use the city for themselves and give a novel shape to the urban environment. In that sense, appropriation is an act of reorientation.¹⁵ As Mark Purcell indicates, Lefebvre's conceptualization of appropriation is based on urban inhabitants owning the city.¹⁶ But he does not discuss ownership within the framework of property rights; according to him 'the city belongs to those who inhabit it'.¹⁷ The issue of ownership is also central to Perla Korosec-Serfaty's definition of appropriation. She defines appropriation as a way of 'possessing and managing space, irrespective of its legal ownership, for its everyday use or as a means of identification'.¹⁸ Some scholars explain appropriation as a process by which people are constantly reclaiming urban spaces,¹⁹ or as a mechanism that leads to the development of place attachment and place identity.²⁰ It is also discussed as an interactive process through which individuals transform their physical environment into a meaningful place while being transformed themselves in turn.²¹

Regardless of how the term is defined, the way women and men appropriate urban spaces is different. As demonstrated by Massey's theory of space, their experiences of urban spaces differ due to norms and expectations based on perceptions of gender. Female gender identity shapes how women move through the city, how and to what extent they participate in urban public life, what choices are available to them. In fact, in cities women seem to have choices that would not be available to them in small, rural towns, such as developing new networks, having opportunities for work

and education, going after non-traditional careers, avoiding marriage and motherhood, and participating in arts, culture, social and political events.²² However, gendered discourses constitute a constant reminder that women should limit their freedom to walk, work, have fun and exist in the urban space. Their appropriation practices remain rather planned for certain urban spaces, for certain timeframes. It is the paradoxical space that allows for spontaneous, participative, flexible and meaningful appropriation.

Ferrante's Neapolitan novels not only portray the personal transformation of the main characters Lenú and Lila, but also their practices of urban appropriation and their relationship with the neighbourhood they live in, along with the transformation of Naples as a socially constructed space itself.

Appropriation in Ferrante's Naples and the Neighbourhood

As mentioned already, Naples is the setting of Ferrante's story. Lenú and Lila grow up in a miserable neighbourhood, named *rione*, that is characterized by poverty, violence, the Camorra and dominant patriarchal gender norms. Even though Ferrante describes the neighbourhood in detail, she does not reveal its name. She does, however, name each street and square when the characters leave the neighbourhood they lived in and move into other parts of the city, as if she would like to attribute a certain degree of universality to the neighbourhood. Without disregarding the uniqueness of Naples and the *rione*, it can be argued that Ferrante presents it as an archetype for a space dominated by poverty, violence and patriarchal power relations.

Ferrante's representation of Naples, in particular the neighbourhood, constructs a space dominated by male imagery and codes of masculinity. Women's presence and participation in urban spaces are limited and controlled by the male members of their family. Being mainly confined to the private sphere of their homes, women are present in the courtyard in front of their buildings, which become an extension of their apartments. Grocery shopping appears to be the major spatial experience of women in

the neighbourhood, especially for married women and mothers. Such a representation of the *rione* is a manifestation of Massey's conceptualization of space. Ferrante's female characters' opportunities and possibilities of urban appropriation are dictated by the patriarchal power relations embedded in the Neapolitan society.

Starting from the first book of the series, *My Brilliant Friend* (2011), Lenú and Lila try to escape the limitations, both intellectual and spatial, imposed on them by their neighbourhood. In that sense, the neighbourhood presents a paradigm that resists change from one generation to the next. Their desire to escape this dominant paradigm is reflected in the girls' obsession with generating wealth, excelling in reading and writing, getting rid of their dialect and mastering Italian. The tunnel and how it's appropriated by Lenú and Lila also illustrate their desire to escape the limitations associated with the neighbourhood. The main road out of the neighbourhood leads to a dark, infamous tunnel with three entrances. Through that tunnel it is possible to reach wealthier parts of Naples and the sea. Lenú and Lila's first attempt to leave the neighbourhood is by walking through that tunnel to go and see the sea. But the two girls did not reach their goal that day: Lila got scared and they turned back. When they did manage to go through the tunnel and visit other parts of the city, namely Via Chiaia, they were astonished. 'It was like crossing a border,' narrates Lenú, 'I remember a dense crowd and a sort of humiliating difference. I looked not at the boys but at the girls, the women: they were absolutely different from us. They seemed to have breathed another air, to have eaten other food, to have dressed on some other planet, to have learned to walk on wisps of air.'²³ There were women having drinks and laughing in cafés, girls walking alone by themselves in pretty dresses, couples walking down the street hand in hand. Lenú, who is not allowed to leave the neighbourhood without being chaperoned by her male friends, is faced with a strong sense of non-belonging:



Source: Juniper Books.

They didn't see any of the five of us. We were not perceptible. Or not interesting. And in fact, if at times their gaze fell on us, they immediately turned in another direction, as if irritated. They looked only at each other. Of this we were all aware. No one mentioned it, but we understood that Rino and Pasquale, who were older, found on those streets only confirmation of things they already knew, and this put them in a bad mood, made them sullen, resentful at the certainty of being out of place, while we girls discovered it only at that moment and with ambiguous sentiments.²⁴

It can be argued that the feeling of being out of place experienced by the girls is different compared to how it is experienced by Rino and Pasquale. The boys have been out of the *rione* before. They have already faced urban spaces they could not afford to participate in. Accordingly, their sense of non-belonging is rather class-based. However, for the girls it's a completely new urban space, which they are not even able to appropriate without the company of a male figure. They were astonished and felt out of place when they saw the women and girls walking down the streets on their own, not hindered by the patriarchal gender norms.

The first two books of the series, *My Brilliant Friend* (2011) and *The Story of a New Name* (2012), can be regarded as Lenú and Lila's struggle to find a way to challenge their built environment, the space they live in. Being able to go through the tunnel, to move beyond the limits of the neighbourhood, indicates the possibility of different forms of appropriation in Neapolitan urban space that is composed by diverse social layers. In that sense, Piazza dei Martiri is depicted as a gateway to this diversity. The square is in the affluent Chiaia district, where Lenú and Lila felt like being in an alien world, crossing an invisible border. The square symbolizes a change with respect to the protagonists' relationship with the space. According to Lefebvre, urban appropriation should not be dispersed to the periphery of a city. It should also cover the right to use of the centre. Their presence, involvement, actions and decision in the Piazza dei Martiri can be considered as

the beginning of the transformation they engage in. In the Piazza, Lenú and Lila challenged not only the spatial boundaries that were imposed on them, but also the patriarchal power relations embedded in the society. It is in the Piazza that Lenú decides to go to Pisa for higher education; Lila continues to have an extramarital affair and later decides to leave both the neighbourhood and her husband.

Recalling Rose's theory of space, the *rione* is a metaphor for paradoxical space. Rose presents paradoxical space as a space where power, knowledge and identity are renegotiated and redefined.²⁵ She focuses on how women experience confinement in a space in their everyday lives. For her the key point is that women are located in both public and private space, in the centre and the margin. They are both insiders and outsiders. In her work, Rose discusses the paradoxes of occupying these spaces and underlines how challenging they can be: 'The simultaneous occupation of centre and margin can critique the authority of masculinism . . . help[ing] some feminists to think about both recognizing differences between women and continuing to struggle for change as women.'²⁶ As women start to exert more agency and to challenge existing masculinist discourses and hegemonic identities, space becomes paradoxical space, which is dynamic, fluid, heterogenous and subjective.

In the third and fourth book of the series, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2013) and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2014), Lenú and Lila return to the neighbourhood equipped with different resources, like education, employment and wealth. Lila, who was still married but living with another man in the neighbourhood 'had a very new job, she earned a lot of money, she acted in absolute freedom and according to schemes that were indecipherable'.²⁷ Lenú, on the other hand, acknowledged that she had a sort of double identity:

The result was that on Via Tasso and throughout Italy I felt like a woman with a small reputation, whereas in Naples, especially in the neighbourhood, I lost my refinement, no one knew anything about my second book, if injustices enraged me, I moved into dialect and the coarsest insults.²⁸

'And in fact, I felt like an external observer, with inadequate information',²⁹ narrates Lenú in the aftermath of her return to the neighbourhood where she was struggling to assert herself.

Once representing getting away from the neighbourhood, the tunnel this time depicts their return. 'From Via Tasso the old neighbourhood was a dim, distant rockpile, indistinguishable urban debris at the foot of Vesuvius,' narrates Lenú, 'I wanted it to stay that way: I was another person now, I would make sure that it did not recapture me.'³⁰ Thinking about appropriation is also thinking about change and transformation. While the heroines make their own choices and challenge the existing gendered power relations and structures, they also transform the neighbourhood as a space. Upon her return, Lenú was 'immediately seized by a yearning to regain possession of the neighborhood'.³¹ Both she and Lila start to make a spatial claim in the Lefebvrian sense and exert strong agency in terms of their appropriation. While Lenú challenges the gendered power relations embedded in the neighbourhood by publishing a journal article about the Solara Brothers, who were members of the Camorra, Lila does it by means of her newly established business. Lila's significant claim concerning the neighbourhood is reflected in the following quotation:

It was no different on the streets of the neighbourhood. Going shopping with her never ceased to amaze me: she had become an authority. She was constantly stopped, people drew her aside with a respectful familiarity, they whispered something to her, and she listened, without reacting. Did they treat her like that because of the success she had had

*with her new business? Because she gave off the sense of someone who could do anything?*³²

Ferrante's *riione* becomes a paradoxical space; a space of resistance and transformation that enables a more equal, spontaneous appropriation.

As stated by Sara Santos Cruz, appropriation is about writing personal stories in urban places and creating narratives throughout the city.³³ The Neapolitan novels tell the story of two women who struggle to find new ways to write their own stories and prove that it is possible to create a new neighbourhood. The novels depict different stages in their lives and different attempts to appropriate the urban spaces in which they find themselves: 'Lila the shoemaker, Lila who imitated Kennedy's wife, Lila the artist and designer, Lila the worker, Lila the programmer, Lila always in the same place and always out of place',³⁴ and Lenú, who travelled places to become herself and managed to do it by confronting boundaries imposed on her. Through the urban experiences of her female characters Ferrante shows how urban space and gender are intertwined and mutually influential, both for her female and male characters. Moreover, as mentioned above, space is where issues of class, sexuality, gender and race are located, shaped and fought out.

- 1 Kathryn Beebe, Angela Davis and Kathryn Gleadle, 'Introduction: Space, Place and Gendered Identities: Feminist History and the Spatial Turn', *Women's History Review* 21/4 (2012), 523-532.
- 2 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Boston, 1997), 15.
- 3 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minnesota, 1977); Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London, 1976); Tim Creswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, 2004).

- 4 Tuan, *Space and Place*, op. cit. (note 3), 6.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1984), 252.
- 6 Linda McDowell, 'Towards an Understanding of the Gender Division of Urban Space', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 1/1 (1983), 59-72.
- 7 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World* (London, 2020), 47.
- 8 The term intersectionality was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s. It was mainly developed to indicate that race and gender are not mutually exclusive and cannot be analysed separately. Intersectionality has always been an important part of feminist geography. The intersections between gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, class, religion, ability and nationality are part of feminist geographers' research. Gill Valentine, Audrey Kobayashi, Linda Peake, Leslie McCall and Ann Hancock, among others, have contributed to the development of intersectionality in feminist geography literature. Doreen Massey's arguments regarding space imply that places and space do not only entail a variety of intersectional relations, but they also create and shape these intersectional relations.
- 9 Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson, 'Situating Gender', in: Lise Nelson and Joni Seager (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Geography* (New Jersey, 2005), 15-31.
- 10 Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review* 196 (1992), 65.
- 11 For some examples, please see: Koskela Hille, "'Gendered Exclusions": Women's Fear of Violence and Changing Relations to Space', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 81/2 (1999), 111-124; Gill Valentine, 'The Geography of Women's Fear', *Area* 21/4 (1989), 385-390; Gerda R. Wekerle, 'Women's Rights to the City: Gendered Spaces of a Pluralistic Citizenship', in: Engin F. Isin (ed.), *Democracy, Citizenship, and the Global City* (London, 2000), 203-217.
- 12 Gillian Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minnesota, 1993), 159.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 155.
- 14 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Cambridge, 1996), 174.
- 15 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minnesota, 2003), 1.
- 16 Mark Purcell, 'Possible Worlds: Henri Lefebvre and the Right to the City', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 36/1 (2014), 141-154.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 18 Perla Korosec-Serfaty, 'The Home from Attic to Cellar', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 4/4 (1985), 303-321.
- 19 Frank O. Ostermann and Sabine Timpf, 'Use and Appropriation of Space in Urban Public Parks: GIS Methods in Social Geography', *Geographica Helvetica* 64/1 (2009), 30-36.

- 20 Harold M. Proshansky, 'The Appropriation and Misappropriation of Space', in: *Appropriation of Space: Proceedings of the Strasbourg Conference* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1976), 31-45.
- 21 Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall, 'The Politics of Space Appropriation', in: Irwin Altman and Arza Churchman (eds.), *Women and the Environment* (Boston, 1994), 167-199.
- 22 Kern, *Feminist City*, op. cit. (note 7), 159.
- 23 Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* (London, 2012), 192.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 193.
- 25 Rose, *Feminism & Geography*, op. cit. (note 12), 140.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 152-153.
- 27 Elena Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (London, 2014), 358.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 370.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 369.
- 30 Elena Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child* (London, 2020), 116.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 33 Sara Santos Cruz, 'Appropriation as Transformative, Manipulative and Affective', keynote speech at online mini conference 'Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration of/in City Narratives' by COST Action 18126 Working Group 2, 17 November 2020.
- 34 Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child*, op. cit. (note 30), 477.