BODIES ON DISPLAY: AFFECTIVE AND SPATIAL PRACTICE IN ZOË STRACHAN'S *NEGATIVE SPACE**

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Abstract

Drawing from space and affect theory, the aim of this article is to analyse the representation of the female body in Zoë Strachan's novel *Negative Space*. First of all, it studies the construction of its protagonist's "negative" body, as well as the strategies she develops in order to cope with the void of positive representation in which she feels immersed. Secondly, it focuses on her affective practices in public and private spaces. In order to do so, it concentrates on the alienation and dislocation caused by her embodiment of the city of Glasgow, to then examine her highly sexualised bodily practice of the domestic spaces that are central in the text, chiefly her family home and the flat she used to share with her now deceased brother Simon. Finally, it revises her translocation in the Orkney Islands, together with the alternative spatial and emotional attachments she creates in her journey towards an eventual bodily reintegration into the rhythms of socialisation.

Keywords: body, affect, spatial practice, Zoë Strachan, *Negative Space*.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación del cuerpo femenino en la novela de Zoë Strachan *Negative Space* desde la teoría espacial y afectiva. En primer lugar, estudia la construcción del cuerpo "negativo" de su protagonista, así como las estrategias que desarrolla para negociar el vacío de representación positiva en el que se siente inmersa. En segundo lugar, se centra en sus prácticas afectivas en espacios públicos y privados. Se examina la alienación y deslocalización causadas por su experiencia corpórea (*embodiment*) de la ciudad de Glasgow, así como sus prácticas corporales altamente sexualizadas en los espacios domésticos que son centrales en el texto: su hogar materno y el piso que compartía con Simon, su hermano recientemente fallecido. Finalmente, revisa la translocación de la protagonista en las Islas Orcadas, junto con los vínculos espaciales y emocionales alternativos que crea en su viaje hacia una recuperación corpórea y su integración en los ritmos de socialización.

Palabra clave: cuerpo, afecto, práctica espacial, Zoë Strachan, *Negative Space*.

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1. NEGATIVE SPACES IN SCOTTISH FICTION

"Negative space" is defined in Zoë Strachan's first novel as "the gaps in the composition, between arm and body, leg and leg, the empty areas" (173). As the title announces, this is indeed the central metaphor of a text that is structured on different layers of interpretation attributed to such void in relation to the body of its protagonist, Stella, a young Scottish woman who is trying to cope with the emotions provoked by the recent death of her brother Simon. *Negative Space* has been analysed from different perspectives, ranging from the association of Stella's split self with the Scottish nation and its culture to cosmopolitan readings of Scottishness at the dawn of the millennium.[1] Strachan herself has contributed to such contextualisation of her novel —also of her writing in general— within a markedly urban tradition integrated by some consolidated Scottish women writers, such as A.L. Kennedy, Jackie Kay, Denise Mina, Ali Smith, Louise Welsh, together with other outstanding younger voices like Laura Hird, who react against previous masculine models, primarily those of the canonical voices represented by Alasdair Gray, James Kelman or Irvine Welsh ("Is that a Scot or am Ah Wrang?" 54). In this vein, as Kirstin Innes remarks in relation to Janice Galloway's complaints about the standardisation and globalisation of contemporary Scottish voices in the aftermath of the *Trainspotting* phenomenon, it seemed necessary to react against "the promotion of a particular minority voice as representative of a whole nation's struggle for emancipatory self-expression [which occurred] at the expense of all other subordinate and disempowered groups" (301). Thus, arguably, these women have occupied and vindicated the negative space allowed for female writers in the nation at the turn of the twenty-first century. Many of them are based in Glasgow, and the city has been present some way or another in their writing. The quality of the work they have produced has been widely acknowledged, as explained by Alan Bisset: "never before have so many female Glaswegian novelists achieved such prominence" (60).

Added to that, and with a clear political agenda in mind, what makes Strachan's writing innovative within this tradition is her focus on queer identities, which subverts what she regards as "the tendency towards repressed queer characters and subtexts in pre-devolution's Scottish literature [which] was linked to class as well as homophobia" ("Is that a Scot or am Ah Wrang?" 53). Rather than rejecting com-

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[1] Fiona McCulloch, for instance, argues that "writing in an evolving cultural climate, Strachan's text crosses a bridge away from the gendered negative space perpetuated by traditional masculinity to discover new possible Scotlands (...) that will allow for the positive diversity of supranational citizenship. By looking forward to the infinite potential of her own future and finding her own narrative voice, Stella encapsulates the need for Scotland to accommodate the cosmopolitan citizens of its postdevolution era" (25).

pletely the merit of her male models, she incorporates them into her own writing, translating the strength of their masculine characters, “their yearning, their angst” (55), into equally powerful female voices, like Stella’s. Indeed, as Fiona McCulloch contends, “writing in an evolving cultural climate, Strachan’s text crosses a bridge away from the gendered negative space perpetuated by traditional masculinity to discover new possible Scotlands” (25).

These alternative Scotlands are explored in Strachan’s novel by means of a complex articulation of the body of her female protagonist in relation to the gendered power structures she must negotiate in a process of self-recovery. In her book *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo maintains that “[th]e most powerful revaluations of the female body have looked, not to nature or biology, but to the culturally inscribed and historically located body (or to historically developed *practices)* for imaginations of *alterity* rather than ‘the truth’ about the female body.” She goes on to explain that these “imaginations and embodiments” can only be constructed “through alliance with that which has been silenced, repressed, disdained?” (41). This is precisely what Strachan achieves in *Negative Space*, where by choosing to situate Stella in the active/passive coordinates of artistic representation —she works as a life model, as Strachan did occasionally in the past (Hind 2011)—, the focus on the female body and the gaze projected on it become central in the narrative. Such tensions, as Linda Nochlin contends, are embedded in “the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, [because they] occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions” (158). In a similar vein, Fran Tonkins argues that “gender and sexuality, after all, are not defined by the limits of the individual body: they involve social relations that extend across and are shaped by space” (94). As this article will argue, such structures inevitably have a wider social and spatial dimension determining Stella’s alternative embodiments of public, domestic, urban and rural spaces in the course of the novel. Drawing from space, body and affect theory, the aim of this article is, first of all, to study the construction of Stella’s “negative” body, as well as the strategies she develops in order to cope with the void of positive representation in which she feels immersed. Secondly, this work will focus on Stella’s affective practices in public and private spaces. In order to do so, it will concentrate on the alienation and dislocation caused by her embodiment of the city of Glasgow, to then examine her highly sexualised bodily experience of the domestic spaces that are central in the text, chiefly her family home and the flat she used to share with her brother Simon. Finally, it will focus on Stella’s translocation in Orkney in the second part of the novel, in terms of the alternative spatial and emotional attachments she develops in her journey towards an eventual bodily reintegration into the rhythms of socialisation.

2. NEGATING THE BODY

The metaphor of the absent body recurs throughout the text and is mainly projected on two characters, the siblings Stella and Simon Flett. His death has deprived him of a body —there is no corpse after the cremation— and of the possibilities of spiritual transcendence, according to his sister's beliefs, but most importantly, from the point of view of the narrative, it has left Stella without a physical reference with which she can identify. She defines herself in relation to the void left by her brother, occupying his negative space. Such perception forces her to undergo a complex spatial and corporeal process to reconstruct her identity, before eventually healing and taking over her life again. The strong connection between the two bodies, that in numerous flashbacks insinuates an incestual relationship, is reinforced by Stella's internalised responsibility that there is "no place for him to exist now, except maybe inside of me" (25). Her body has become the receptacle and the physical structure, the *space*, inhabited not only by her but also shared with Simon. Such circumstance even makes her assume the existence of a doppelgänger, a masculine form she can see "on the edge of [her] peripheral vision" (15). This haunting presence, which is a recurrent topic in Scottish literature dating back to Robert L. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, disturbs Stella's body and contributes to her emotional and physical deregulation.

This is particularly manifest in the chapter "Under Observation," where Strachan situates Stella under the supervision of the doctors after a suicide attempt, a circumstance that adds to her lack of control over her body. The first person narrative voice of the rest of the novel changes now to the second, with Simon as its interlocutor, but most importantly, it also incorporates the voice of the medical authority. This highly emotional imaginary dialogue with her brother, where she recalls his painful final hours, is interfered with by the rational detachment of the medical discourse, which explains scientifically what aneurysm consists in. Such heteroglossic portrayal of Stella's split psyche, together with other thematic concerns, such as the "investigation of the private world of unhappy individuals in a context of urban loneliness," has made Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon (16) find parallelisms between Strachan's novel and Janice Galloway's contemporary classic *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), which portrays the spiral of physical destruction caused by the strong emotional disorder of its protagonist, Joy Stone, who struggles to take over her life and the embodied spaces she negotiates on a daily basis in Glasgow, after the death of her lover.

As it happens to Galloway's character, Stella's body is problematic because it manifests the emotions she cannot control. It has become a medium for the expression of intense distress, which is personal, but which also has other external motivations. Indeed, as Susan Bordo contends, "the body of disordered women (...) offers themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter — a text that insists, actually demands, it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender" (169). In this vein, it must be remarked that Stella's corporeal coordinates place her in a very specific crossroads as a young, single woman, living in an alienating urban

environment with no clear family bonds. Her emotional landscapes are crucial to understand her arrhythmical interaction with harmful patterns of socialisation that are highly dependent on gender constructions and, therefore, regarded as threatening rather than as an opportunity to heal. Stella's decontrolled embodiments do in fact represent a rejection of heteronormative practices, of what Adrienne Rich calls "compulsory heterosexuality," which for the author is a political institution in itself (1980). Stella performs these practices unwillingly at first, until she eventually dismisses them.[2]

Such emphatic representation of the relation between body and mind is in line with contemporary feminist analyses, which have emphasised the need to avoid the Cartesian differentiation between body and mind to suggest integrative approaches. Susan Bordo denounces that this differentiation "has been one of the most historically powerful of the dualities that inform Western ideologies of gender" (11). On the other hand, authors like Susie Orbach argue that "our bodies are made both in a literal physical sense and in a feeling sense" (57), whereas Liz Bondi sustains that an analysis of the body will necessarily "require that we re-examine the interplay between mind and body and between the social and the biological" (183). There cannot be a dissociation between our emotions and our bodies, since they are what mediates between us and the world around us. Stella's incontrollable physical reactions are motivated by a precarious state of mind, and to her, the consumption of drugs —prescribed, legal and illegal alike— seems the only means to attenuate her pain. Such search for physical sedation in fact contributes to reinforcing the central space occupied by the body and its physicality in Stella's experience of grieving, whereas her emotions, the actual cause of her state of disorder, become more difficult to be grasped. For instance, in one of the passages describing an intensification of her pain, where she indistinctively uses the third and the first person to refer to herself, Stella explains, "she feels like she's been hurt physically except this is worse, this is intolerable" (123). Stella needs to see her body from "the outside," in a mirror, a recurrent urge throughout the novel, in an attempt to make sense of the situation, to resituate herself, through the observation of her reflected corporeality. It is only by seeing herself from the outside that she can identify her emotions: "she's distraught and it's running through her mind that this time she really has cracked. (...) She is broken." When she eventually calms down, physically exhausted and avoiding the mirror this time, she resumes using the first person to verbalise with more precision how she feels: "I'm fucking terrified, petrified with fear in fact" (24). Such change is in line with Drew Leder's analysis, where she explains that a strong focus on the

[2] In fact, Stella's reaction seems to correspond to Adrienne Rich's conceptualization of "lesbian existence," which, for her "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance" (Rich 649). Indeed, as Rich explains later in her study, "woman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality" (657).

body frequently reflects situations of crisis: “Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction; we then experience the body as the very *absence* of a desired or ordinary state, and as a force that stands opposed to the self” (4, emphasis in original). Thus, what is missing is a coordinated, regulated bodily condition that, in turn, responds to a balanced emotional state.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* Sara Ahmed explains that “emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us that all actions are reactions (...) what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others” (4). Such relational approach to emotions and bodies becomes particularly interesting to understand the significance of Stella’s loss. Growing up in a dysfunctional family, with an absent father and a mother who has married again a man with two young sisters who take over the space previously allotted to her and her brother, Simon becomes the only reference for Stella. They have established an allegiance that is simultaneously physical and emotional, which provides them with a strong sense of identity and belonging, especially in the case of Stella, as far as the reader can know, since her perspective dominates the narrative now that Simon is gone. As Ahmed explains, in our interaction with other people, “not only do I have an impression of others, but they also leave me with an impression; they impress me, and impress upon me” (6). In the case of Stella, Simon’s impression is felt so intensely that it re-emerges in any interpersonal and spatial interaction, and it is not until she leaves Glasgow for Orkney that she manages to find alternative affective practices, what Margaret Wetherell conceptualises as “the figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning-making and with other social and material figurations” (19), and which in Stella’s case are connected to a strong sensorial experience of the insular space.

Another important factor in the relationship between Simon and Stella is their symbolic relation with art and the different roles they play in the process of representing and expressing the other and the self. These are highly dependent on gender constructions and based on the active or passive attitudes attributed to their bodies, a scopophilic game they both have played for years.[3] Simon is a painter and thus controls the representation of the bodies he paints, most significantly Stella’s: “drawing things, just looking at things and thinking about them then putting them down on paper makes me feel in control” (185), he explains in one of Stella’s flashbacks. On the other hand, Stella is a life model who sometimes poses for her brother. These are the only occasions when she feels dignified, even if she is aware

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[3] In her influential 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey explains this asymmetrical representation on the grounds that the “male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (19).

of the different power positions involved in the process: "Being a muse, that's the a [sic] romantic way of saying it's someone else who's looking and creating" (183). Yet, when she tries to reverse the roles and become the painter, she is unsuccessful, producing a "hairy and bestial" childlike figure of Simon, a "lopsided faun" (191), which in the context of the passage describing the level of intimacy they reach while posing and drawing, hints again at an incestual relationship.

In this part of the book it is particularly important how Simon decides to change the relation with his sister's body and instead of sketching it on paper, he decides to paint on it, copying on her skin the patterns that appear in an art book representing the figure of Salome: "heavy bracelets and armbands circle my wrists and biceps, and necklaces wrap themselves around my throat," describes Stella. In spite of such an asphyxiating description, she remembers how she felt "warm and relaxed" (188), consciously ignoring the dangers of such imprint on her body, while perfectly aware of the ambivalent figure with whom she is being connected, the apparently powerful temptress who is, in fact, only a sexualised image projecting the masculine gaze: "she's a safe little fantasy woman painstakingly created on paper where she'll stay under control, unable to break free from the mould in which she's been cast. (...) an aesthetic ideal, decorative, no more important than the dais behind her or the floor she stands on" (186). Stella's narration of the events that happened that night is interrupted to avoid clarifying what occurred later in the bedroom, but Stella's body speaks for itself the morning after: "the ink is still there on my skin, but the patterns have smeared and run and smudged black across my body" (192). Such gaps are also connected to other intentional elusions in the novel, most notably, Stella's name, which is only revealed in its final pages once she has managed to heal.[4]

Stella's body does indeed speak for itself in various ways that escape her control. Remarkably, such quality, as Pittin-Hedon states, guarantees Stella's progressive reconstruction, and thus "the negative space [implies] no longer the space of negation, but rather the space where the outline of the subject becomes more real, more focused, maybe even more alive" (20). While modelling naked, she is exposed to the gaze of the teachers and the students in the art school, where she must remain static, obedient to the poses she is asked to perform, when her body "becomes just like any other object which the students are intent on drawing" (166). The representation of her body is not merely physical, and once the students acquire the necessary skills, they also project an interpretation of Stella's personality on their drawings: "I'm used to pictures that don't look like me, people distorting me

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[4] In an interview with Keir Hind, Strachan explains: "With not revealing my character's name in *Negative Space* it seemed, I think it was to do with her identity being so hard to pin down and so difficult for her to isolate or name in any way. There's lots of things that she can't name to do with what she's feeling, or things that've happened (...). But I think that's kind of a fun thing about writing, sometimes things are missing at first because you haven't quite realised what they are, and then the things that are missing become much more present, which I suppose is what the title, *Negative Space* is actually about" ("Is that a Scot or am Ah Wrang?").

to suit themselves. Leaving gaps in their sketches for inconvenient parts they don't want to draw" (108).

Yet, interestingly enough, this fragmented, appropriated body will develop strategies of empowerment even before Stella is capable of recognising them as such, as evidenced in the chapter entitled "Blurring the Edges," where she is hired by a professional male painter who asks her to pose in his private studio. In spite of the power position he occupies, this section presents Stella in charge of the situation, precisely because her affective practices, due to which she no longer aims to partake in standard forms of socialisation, allow her to act more freely, reversing the gender roles that would have determined the interaction with this artist otherwise. When he shows her his previous works, she sees "they were all of women, some clothed, a few nude, most somewhat dishabille" (140), which is in accordance with the predominant presence of the female nude in the Western visual arts, where women are systematically reified as objects of the male gaze (Nochlin 1998). Gradually, as the session advances and the scene becomes more and more intimate, partly because of the effects of the wine they are drinking, Stella feels more relaxed, "hardly aware of his looking at [her]" (143), even sexually aroused to the point she ends up masturbating in front of him. When he tries to approach her, she pushes him "out of [her] space" (145), because "he had come along with a whole sexual agenda he wanted to impose" (147), as she explains later. Nonetheless, when she narrates the scene to her friend Mhair, she assumes this is another example of her "lack of control," unaware of the fact that she has managed to subvert the gendered dynamics of representation involved in the situation.

A different response appears when Stella confronts another form of artistic representation, which is photography. This is mostly associated with her female friend Alex, whose relationship often resembles a very positive egalitarian romantic affair. Stella poses for Alex several times, even naked, but the control over her image is offered to the model, since the photographer promises: "I'll let you know exactly what I'm doing with the prints, and give you the negatives when I'm finished, whatever you want" (203). She is very much aware of the manipulation involved in the art of photography and this ethical reflection situates Alex in a different position as an artist than the painters in the novel, including Simon. Thus, while she acknowledges the power of the artists' gaze over the object they are representing, what she calls the "lies" of the camera (107), Simon regards drawing as a means to have "control over something" (185), which again reifies the bodies displayed in front of him, especially his sister's.

Significantly enough, Alex's photographs allow her and Stella to move out of the oppressive atmospheres of the city, when she receives a fellowship to be part of a collective artistic project in Orkney. As it will be discussed further in section five, this all-female collective experience will allow Stella to regain control over the representation of her self and her body, which is connected to her use of the camera in the final act of reconciliation with her emotions, which takes place after performing a telluric-oriented ritual for Simon. It is particularly interesting that Stella's photograph of the moment cannot focus on her brother's absent body. This centrality is occupied instead by the space where the ceremony takes place, which is

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appropriated emotionally by Stella and translated into what will become an object, the photograph, that is not intended for the consume and the gaze of others' but for her own individual purposes. Stella's highly embodied experience of space empowers her here, once she has escaped the burden of representation over her body, over what Elizabeth Grosz conceptualises as a "sociocultural artifact" (297). However, before reaching this state, she must negotiate very problematic relations with space, both private and public, where gender hierarchies are essential to understand her crises.

3. URBAN EMBODIMENTS: GLASGOW

As Nancy Duncan contends, knowledge is embodied, engendered and embedded in the material context of place and space. As such, the body becomes a space of resistance, a politicised space itself (4). Space, as bodies, is constructed according to gender dichotomies and, therefore, it reproduces power asymmetries and social hierarchies. In our contemporary societies, cities congregate the largest numbers of the population worldwide and, therefore, constitute the most common space where the negotiation of such hierarchies takes place by means of conscious or unconscious subversive performances of gender identities. In this vein, Fran Tonkiss contends that "setting gender and sexuality in the city is partly a question of putting bodies in space. But it is also to ask how embodied subjects are located within more general social structures and relationships" (94). These structures, as remarked by Liz Bondi, "are generally viewed as the product of patriarchal gender relations (177) and have traditionally reproduced, as Duncan argues, the "gendered dualism of mind and body [which] has spatial corollaries in other dualisms such as the interiority/exteriority and public/private distinction" (2). Such differentiation appears clear in Strachan's novel, while at the same time it is subverted through Stella's complex embodied performances in the public and private spheres. For instance, the dividing lines between her body and Simon's are unclear at the beginning of the story, and she repeatedly wonders whether she has actually become her brother. Stella's intense feelings serve to interrogate such Manichean understanding of bodies and spaces, since they appear much closer to Sara Ahmed's model for the socialisation of emotions, where these "create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. (...) It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made; the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" (Ahmed 10). Similarly, as Wetherell remarks, affect must be equated with "*embodied meaning-making*" (4, emphasis is original), that is, it situates the subject in the constant process of constructing meaning through emotion.

In *Negative Space*, "meaning-making" is initially contextualised in Glasgow, an alienating space charged with emotions that have transformed Stella's embodiments radically. These emotions resituate her in the city and determine her interaction with the spaces she lives in, impeding her participation in what David Seamon defines in *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (1979) as "place ballets", namely, the choreographic movements performed collectively in our daily routines of work and

leisure, as well as the meanings attributed to them. In spite of her distress, Stella does not remain secluded in the private sphere; rather on the contrary, she explores the city in search of anaesthetic experiences for her unrestlessness. These experiences are alcoholic or drug-related, frequently leading to detached sexual encounters, which do take place in the realm of the private, as will be explained in the next section of this article. Stella becomes an atypical *flâneuse* whose estrangement has a corporeal dimension projected on the city, that in its turn becomes "shaped" by her emotions, as suggested in Ahmed's model:

> I walk home that night, along a road I've walked hundreds of times before, all the buildings familiar (...). It's been a regular route for what feels like such a long time, and now I'm not certain when I'll take it. (...) I know this place like the back of my hand (...). The air's moving as if it's raining but I can't feel any drops, and this quiet sense of sadness that enfolds me is not a new thing, it seems as much part of this road as everything else. (174)

Grief has taken over Stella's other emotions, which have become an obstacle for her socialisation in many respects, but it has also enabled her to transcend many other boundaries. For instance, it has prevented her from feeling fear in the open spaces of the city, which has granted her the freedom to access any area, as demonstrated in her night walks in the darkest streets of Glasgow (106). This is an act of gender subversion in itself, given the fact that women, as Tonkiss explains, "are trained to use the street" since they are young and start accessing public spaces, because taking into account the gendered geographies of fear in the city, "having a female body can be a spatial liability," and some urban spaces "are experienced as a kind of conflict zone" (104) by women.

Stella's affective practices become particularly intense in relation with one public space in the city, the hospital where Simon died. In the chapter entitled "Seeing Inside," the relational construction of the siblings' identity acquires a spatial dimension when Stella is helped by a "sympathetic CPN" to relive "events as accurately as possible" (55), that is, when she decides to embody the spaces of the hospital from the perspective that Simon had in his final hours. After complaining about recurrent headaches as the possible symptoms of some "congenital weakness" (56), in reference to Simon's aneurism, but also to her emotional state, the doctors decide to scan Stella's brain. She then has to cross the same corridors, "filling [her] nostrils with the scent of the hospital," leading to the neurology area where she gets her scan done. This experience contributes even further to blurring the differences between "the inside and the outside," that is, of her body and Simon's, of her emotions and the spaces and times when they occur. When she is inside the scanner, a strong corporeal sensation caused by the heat given off by the machine makes her associate the space with another one, Simon's coffin in the crematorium. She imagines her emotional suffering physically, as a "huge knot in [her] brain, a lump. (...) the malign thing which had grown inside [her]" (57). While revolving on such thoughts and undergoing these intense emotional processes, her body reacts unexpectedly: "Maybe it was the vibration, or just the mixture of nerves and boredom through sensory deprivation, but freakily I ended up feeling quite turned on" (58).

Once more, her body takes over, connecting with the immediate sensorial experience, which temporarily liberates her from her emotional burden. Indeed, Stella's sexuality is her ultimate means of expression of the self, both in the private spaces where her heterosexual encounters take place in Glasgow and, later on, in her lesbian encounter in Orkney. Stella's body becomes not only a space of resistance then, but also a politicised space in itself.

4. UNHOMELY BODIES

Glasgow is full of oppressive spaces for Stella, but it still offers her the possibility of negotiating the meanings attributed to her body. This is in contrast with Kilmarnock, the town where her mother lives with her new family, and which Stella and Simon left behind to settle in the city when there was no more space for them in their mother's house. In fact, the lack of a stable home and the existence of dysfunctional ones is one of the main reasons for Stella's disorientation. As Joshua Price contends, "homes are painstakingly constructed and then ideologically maintained as 'given'" (40), to which it must be added that in this construction emotions are embedded to reinforce the heteronormative structure they represent. In the novel, there are no positive affective family bonds left for Stella nor does she partake in the symbolic space of care that her mother's house could represent. In this vein, when she returns to Glasgow the Christmas after Simon's death, she tries to "excise" the time she has spent there from her "consciousness as meticulously as a doctor with a scalpel removing an unsightly cyst" (152). The corporeal comparison is relevant because Stella's embodiment of the private sphere reflects her spatial anxiety, chiefly associated with the flat she shared with Simon and his friend Ritchie briefly before his death, and which in the first part of the novel is presented as her home in Glasgow.

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Elizabeth Grosz argues that "the body and its environment (...) produce each other as forms of the hyperreal, as modes of simulation which have overtaken and transformed whatever reality each may have had into the image of the other" (297). This is applied to urban environments in Grosz's study, but can also be extended to the private, where, as Price reminds us, the fact that "spaces are constructed intersubjectively" (41) becomes particularly evident, given the emotional attachments developed by the people who integrate these structures. In the novel, these embodied experiences are primarily associated with Simon's flat and his room, which Stella occupies after his death: "there was no Simon's room now, it was mine, my new room, completely different" (109). This intimate space is nevertheless still haunted by her brother and his belongings, which awaken contradictory feelings in Stella. On the one hand, she fears losing them, as they remain the only physical, tangible, evidence of his existence after the cremation, but on the other she "cannot bear leaving [them] untouched like some morbid shrine, as though he might walk back one day" (94). There is a direct connection between her physical body, as the receptacle of Simon's absent body, and his flat, now home for Stella. Emotions are projected on the space and reproduced by it, saturating her body to the extent that she cannot experience it in isolation. She leaves the flat to enter the realm of the public

in search of company, yet her exploration is not motivated by the desire to fulfil heteronormative expectations and establish a romantic relationship; rather on the contrary, her incursions into the city are unplanned, erratic, a form of evasion from the flat and its suggestions, which again ends up being a highly physical experience, when she encounters a friend of Simon's, McCall, whom she takes home with her.

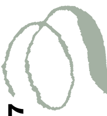
Stella's relationship with this young man, who is never given a first name in the novel, reverses gendered constructions of heterosexual romantic love and the power differences it reproduces. He is merely used to fill in the emptiness of the flat, that now seems "much fuller with two people in it, much more benign" (111). In line with her heavy ingestion of diverse drugs, sex represents a means "of distraction, gently manoeuvring Simon into the back of [her] mind" (51), another form of emotional anaesthesia mediated by her body. She does not have any feelings for McCall and, in fact, he is always reified in their occasional encounters. One of them, described in the chapter "Love Hurts," set in Simon's room, is especially important in this regard, also because it focalises on one of the "negative spaces" in the novel, the place where the incestual relationship that is never explicitly spoken about might have happened. The title immediately suggests a suffering subject that is troubled emotionally, as Stella is, by a love relationship. However, as the story advances, the interpretation of the title changes radically, when Stella and McCall's sadistic sexual intercourse is described. She takes control of the action transferring her emotional pain into his body: "It felt good. I moved more and more violently against him, clutching and pulling at the scant flesh of his chest. This was better, so much better than hurting myself. Why had I ever thought of hurting myself when the real joy was in hurting someone else?" (117). On the morning after, Stella is disgusted by this experience —"muttering filthy fucking filthy body in my bed" (118)— and so she starts cleaning the room and washing her body thoroughly, again showing a strong embodiment of the space. Yet, such physical decontamination will not be completed until she receives the morning-after pill, even if Stella confesses: "my womb felt far too inhospitable for anything to grow in" (128). Her body is conceived of as an unhomely space, incapable of hosting life, much less a new one, a new body, nor any positive emotions associated to it.

5. EMBODIED RHYTHMS

Leaving Glasgow for Orkney involves a radical change in Stella's relation with her body and her affective practices. This implies moving away from the masculine symbolic order that they city represents in its private and public spaces to a liberating environment that is perceived as feminine. Here, Stella and Alex are in the company of an all-female community of artists with whom they must share the little hotel where they will be staying, and which becomes an alternative and temporal home for Stella. The relation with the space is now natural rather than urban, and therefore her body starts to partake in new individual and collective rhythms accordingly. But above all, Orkney appears as a blank space, devoid of emotional attachments for Stella: "I try to imagine what Simon would have thought of it here,

if he'd have liked it or if it would have been too quiet for him. It's hard for me to admit to myself that I just don't know" (222). As Kirsty MacDonald explains, "the representation of the North of Scotland as redemptive is a convention again dating back to Romanticism" (146-7). However, Strachan's novel revisits the cliché introducing new perspectives, since this "redemption" requires discovering new affective practices which are related to Stella's self-realisation as a lesbian. Sexuality is again a crucial factor to understand her embodied spaces and affective practices, which become highly dependent on different yet interwoven rhythms.

In his 1992 study *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre situates rhythm at the core of his analysis of everyday life. He establishes a connection between natural and social rhythms in order to explain the different patterns that influence our embodied experience: "this human body is the site and place of interaction between the biological, the physiological (nature) and the social (often called the cultural), where each of these levels, each of these dimensions, has its own specificity, therefore its space-time: its rhythm" (89-90). Lefebvre's model concentrates on the body, as the primary "metronome" for measuring these intertwining rhythms, even when his analysis has a relational rather than individualistic focus: "the surroundings of bodies, be they in nature or a social setting, are also bundles, bouquets, garlands of rhythms, to which it is necessary to listen in order to grasp the natural or produced ensembles" (30). In *Negative Space* Stella's body is initially presented as alien to the social environment that surrounds it. It is not receptive to other people's individual rhythms either, especially to those of the men she is in contact with and who represent, as it has been discussed, a masculine order in which she is not ready to partake. Therefore, her corporeal reactions seem incoherent, out of place, while her body is perceived as pathologic, even arrhythmic, as Lefebvre would put it. A clear instance of such deregulation is her lack of control over her menstrual cycles, which makes her start bleeding unexpectedly in random situations.



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Everything starts to change, though, when she reaches Orkney, "a place that's nearer to the Arctic Circle than it is to London" (193), namely, a space of socialisation that is more natural than urban, less contaminated by the rhythms and the affective practices that Stella needs to leave behind. In the isolated community of female artists, her role is unspecific; she is merely Alex's friend, an anonymity which grants her the opportunity to reinvent herself. Interestingly, she decides to carry on with the role of model she had in Glasgow, but Stella's perception of the part she plays in the process of artistic creation has changed, which enables her to gain more agency progressively. First of all, she feels less exposed to the others' gaze, which is now only feminine; and secondly, she volunteers to do the job and there is no economic transaction involved. Similarly, the fact that the women have to live together in the same reduced space eventually creates a sense of community and artistic interchange, a rhythm of their own in which Stella feels involved. For instance, a significant section of the book describes Alex and Stella after being hennaed, that is, after having their bodies painted upon. The ludic and innocuous effect of this body transformation on the two women is in clear opposition to the psychological consequences of Simon's painting of Stella's body in Glasgow. While in the city, especially in the confined space of domesticity represented by her brother's room,

Stella's embodiments are systematically toxic, but in Orkney she learns to interpret her corporeal reactions more positively. This is why, after trying unsuccessfully to contact Ritchie in their Glasgow flat —interestingly the attempt comes after the description of waking up the night after being hennaed— she assumes: "I was glad I wasn't there. Even if it was a grey day here there seemed to be more to it" (216-217).

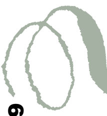
Such reflection is again motivated by her embodiment of the space. She starts to feel strong physical reactions to the natural stimuli she receives, which provoke in her positive sensations for the first time since Simon's death. Again, Lefebvre's study of rhythms becomes useful to analyse Stella's transformation. He identifies two main forces affecting our bodies collectively: the cyclical, which "originates in the cosmic, in nature" and the linear, which comes rather "from social practice, therefore from human activity." As Lefebvre contends, "time and space, the cyclical and the linear, exert a reciprocal action: they measure themselves against one another" (18). Stella's body is saturated while she lives in Glasgow, and cannot participate in the rhythms of heteropatriarchal socialisation. Similarly, it is imperceptive to the natural, cyclical rhythms affecting its individuality. By moving out of the city and into the island, Stella begins to recognise telluric rhythms, and feel their beneficial influence upon her body. In this vein, it is significant that Strachan's chapters in this second part of the novel allude directly to the elements, "Northern Lights," "Clay," "Under Water," which reinforces these associations.

What is interesting too is the fact that Stella's attachment to Orkney is, above all, grounded on an idealised, highly fictionalised, subjective reconstruction of life on the islands in times past. She imagines a more meaningful form of socialisation for the island's inhabitants, based on cyclical rather than linear patterns, which is closely associated with an idea of transcendence she had not considered before reaching the place: "these people all had belief systems in which death had its acknowledged, rightful place, without it being the absolute end of everything. A heaven, an afterlife, a return to the ancestors, whatever. Not just death, that's it, game over, the end" (233). The absent body, her obsession in the first part of the story, is no longer a source of anxiety once she accepts this paradigm, and therefore she can perform a final ritual for her dead brother in the chapter entitled "Memento Mori." In it, she accesses The Ring of Brodgar, a circle of Neolithic standing stones, where she initiates a ceremony consisting in carving her brother's name, as well as his birth and death dates on one of the standing stones. Added to this, she buries a pendant with the figure of St Christopher that Simon used to wear, and which she had tied to her necklace after his death. The interaction of natural, social and bodily rhythms is particularly relevant in this section. Indeed, as McCulloch contends, in order to understand Stella's ritual, it is essential to bear in mind the time of the year when it takes place, Easter, as well as the successive reinterpretations of historical systems of belief that are now embodied spatially by Stella: "Strachan revises Christian doctrine from a feminist perspective, as the spring's association with rebirth and growth are appropriated for Stella'self-development in a prehistoric pagan site" (34).

This personal ritual allows Stella to realise the transformation she has undergone, and in this regard it is significant that she decides to record "each step of the process" as she goes along (288); namely, she becomes the central agent in the

scene, controlling the gaze and the representation of the moment: "It took me a little while, as I gently etched away at the stone, to realise that in this instance I was both the individual performing the ritual and the person doing the seeing; giving this event its meaning, and making any truth it contained all my own" (289). Such perception of the ritual is in contrast with the other two ceremonies performed to honour the memory of her brother: the first one being the cremation in the official funeral organised by their mother, and the second one the gathering of Simon's friends on an isolated beach on the West coast of Scotland to burn his personal belongings. In both cases fire is employed to destroy physical traces of his existence, but in the final ritual performed by Stella the element involved is the earth, with its symbolic association to life and regeneration, as well as the standing stone, which guarantees the longevity of the message, at least for its primary interpreter, Stella.

Yet, such an act of reaffirmation is not exclusively motivated by her new relation to the space she inhabits, where she feels "less of a woman, more of a person" (257). On the contrary, it is also deeply connected to rediscovering her own personal rhythms, which occurs after meeting Iram, a young woman of Pakistani descent, with whom she has an intense sexual encounter. If heteronormative intercourse was experienced as an anaesthetic to her suffering body in Glasgow, now sexuality appears as a healing practice, to the extent that Stella assumes that she has not "felt so good in ages" (280). She is deeply surprised by the acknowledgement of the holistic entity of her self, which makes her wonder "how I ever avoided this identification of self with body, why I've felt so dislocated" (272). Iram is a "mirror image" (277) for Stella, and their relationship is portrayed as equal, with no power asymmetries involved, even if the former is initially more active than the latter. For the first time in the story, Stella's body ceases to be Simon's receptacle when she decides to expel him from her new affective practices, and so when Iram returns to London, where she lives, it is her that Stella misses and not her brother.



From the point of view of representation, it is also remarkable that, apart from the photographs that Stella has taken in The Ring of Brodgar, the only recorded item in the diary that she brought to Orkney, in an attempt to register her experience, is Iram's telephone number in London. The final part of the story situates Alex and Stella travelling by train from Scotland to the English metropolis, in an e-motional interstice between the two nations. It is in these indeterminate coordinates that Stella gathers the courage to call Iram on Alex's mobile, significantly mentioning her name for the first time in the novel, while identifying herself spatially as "Stella. From Orkney" (294). The other relevant object in this journey is the folder containing Simon's drawings of Stella, placed on the seat next to her "like another passenger" (292). Although the images are still humanised, directly associated with her brother's imprint on her, Stella has managed to find an alternative form of attachment that allows her to create a distance, a negative space between them and her body, whose control is now in her hands, and the fact that this realisation takes place in the mobile space represented by the train must be connected to Stella's emotions once again. In this vein, and in reference to the etymology of the word "emotion," Sara Ahmed reminds us that its original *emovere*, in Latin, meant "to move" or "move out." She explains that emotions "are not only about movement,

they are also about attachments (...). What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. (...) [A]ttachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others" (Ahmed 11). At this stage, Stella has finally taken over the representation of her body and is ready to explore new possibilities in London, where her affective practices are imagined as less harmful than they were in Glasgow. The physical movement from one place to the other does not merely imply a geographical or even cultural transition but, above all, a readjustment of her positioning to the objects of her emotions and the parallel restitution of her bodily rhythms.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Zoë Strachan's *Negative Space* represents an attempt at incorporating alternative subjectivities in the tradition of contemporary Glasgow fiction. The novel is deeply grounded on Scottish culture and exemplifies the conflicting modes of representation available for women in the nation, especially for those voices speaking from the margins. As the author has explained, "you cannot deny the factors that influence your work (...). As Scottish writers we are coming from a place —an intellectual and emotional place" ("Is that a Scot or am Ah Wrang?" 56). Yet, by deciding to situate the body of her protagonist as the central element in the story, as well as by exploring the alternative affective and spatial practices she develops, Strachan introduces transversal concerns affecting concomitant conceptualisations of femininity in other transnational contexts. The novel delves into the reification of the female body in art, in sexual and romantic relationships, but above all, it explores gender asymmetries in their spatial and affective dimensions. As it has been discussed, the body appears as a space of resistance, and the successive spatial embodiments of its protagonist constitute an act of subversive "meaning-making," where emotions and their physical manifestation represent either a rejection of gendered power structures, or an assertion of a new form of empowered subjectivity. It has been suggested that Stella's escape from the several "negative spaces" in the novel implies rejecting masculine modes of representation and heteronormativity, which can only be achieved by rejecting toxic affective practices in contaminated environments. In sum, Stella's healing is only made possible by constructing an alternative and highly personal female order, which for her is only possible after her affective experience in Orkney. This is determinant to recompose her body's eurhythmia, once she has integrated the different rhythms established in Lefebvre's analysis (27), which are *secret* (physiological and psychological), as demonstrated by her biological and emotional recuperation; *public*, as shown in her reintegration into the social; *fictional*, when she takes over the representation of her body; and finally *dominating-dominated* rhythms, which she has learnt to negotiate throughout the story to finally create a positive affective space of her own.

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