

The ethnic *flâneuse*: The Right to the City and Embodied Streets in Julia Savarese's *The Weak and the Strong* (1952) and Marion Benasutti's *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966)

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Abstract. Drawing on Edward W. Soja's radical critique to the prevailing narrative of history in social theory, this paper investigates how two novels on Italian/American ethnic identity are distinctively spatialized. The analysis focuses on the characters' different experiences and perceptions of space, which attest to the interplay of identity and spatial production, paying attention to agency and spatial stories that are specifically localized. By using theory on the (re)production of space, this paper analyzes how urban representational and material patterns relate to social division, in terms of ethnicity and gender, and how the perpetuation of inequality is spatially enacted. Particularly, it examines the key gendered urban layout that is revealed in how women are often "in transit" (Gómez-Reus and Glifford 2013), "out of place" (McDowell 1997) or in fear (Valentine 1989; Pain 2001) in the "embodied spaces" of the streets (Tonkiss 2005). Through two texts of early Italian/American fiction, this paper addresses the spatial practices, as well as restrictions, of the embodied racialized and gendered subject. To this end, the figure of the ethnic *flâneuse* (Carrera-Suárez 2015) represents a suitable object of study on embodied spatiality which serves to subvert traditional intersectional constraints of spatial design and discourse.

Keywords: ethnic *flâneuse*, embodied spaces, streets, intersectionality, Italian/American.

[es] La *flâneuse* étnica: Derecho a la ciudad y corporeización de la calle en *The Weak and the Strong* (1952), de Julia Savarese y *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966), de Marion Benasutti

Resumen. A partir de la contribución fundamental efectuada por Edward W. Soja, concretamente su crítica al papel predominante de la historia en la teoría social, este artículo examina dos novelas de la tradición italiana/americana que muestran un gran énfasis en la importancia de la espacialidad. El análisis explora las diferentes experiencias y percepciones del espacio de los personajes, que revelan la interconexión entre identidad y espacio. Asimismo, se presta especial atención al modo en que la agentividad y las relaciones espaciales están específicamente localizadas. Utilizando la teoría urbana sobre la (re)producción del espacio, este artículo analiza los mecanismos de representación y prácticas materiales y su relación con la división social, en términos de etnia y género, incluyendo la perpetuación de la desigualdad por medio del espacio. En particular, examina cómo el diseño urbano está manifiestamente construido o mediado en función del género. Por ejemplo, esta diferencia principal se observa en cómo las mujeres, a menudo, aparecen "en tránsito" (Gómez-Reus y Glifford 2013), "fuera de lugar" (McDowell 1997), o con miedo (Valentine 1989; Pain 2001) en los "espacios corporeizados" de las calles (Tonkiss 2005). A través de dos autoras pioneras de la literatura italiana/americana, este artículo aborda las prácticas espaciales, así como las restricciones, del sujeto corporeizado de acuerdo

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a su etnia y género. Para ello, se utilizará la figura de la *flâneuse* étnica (Carrera-Suárez 2015), que representa un objeto de estudio adecuado para abordar la relación entre espacialidad e interseccionalidad, y que sirve también para subvertir las desigualdades tradicionales de la configuración espacial y del terreno discursivo.

Palabras clave: *flâneuse* étnica, espacios corporeizados, calles, interseccionalidad, ítalo/americano.

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‘Gabriel, would you tell me, have you seen many places? More than I have, I mean? Tell me about them. Tell me about some place I never saw, someplace so I can think about it today.’

‘Crazy! What places do I know? I never saw anything—even less than you. The way you talk about the places in your dreams, it always sounds as if you’d really see them. Was there something else last night? Would you tell me about it, Gino, please?’ She was begging as eagerly as he had done a moment before.

‘There was a place, I think, but I can’t remember it. I can’t remember anything about it, except that it was so beautiful, and I was so-’

‘Beautiful! And you want me to tell you?’

—Julia Savarese, *The Weak and the Strong*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the key role of space to explain or understand social difference, particularly in terms of class, ethnicity and gender by using studies on the so-called “counter-*flâneur/flâneuse*” (Carrera-Suárez 2015: 854). The analysis mostly draws on feminist theory and the insights of intersectional critique, although attention to space has also been an important concern in Italian/American scholarship and fiction. In 1981, Stephen Steinberg coined the term “ethnic myth” to describe race relations in the United States, and for the first time dislodged strong popular and academic opinion about success being dependent on inherent cultural or biological fitness. He provided rather a materialist critique, where it was a *structural* background, particularly spatial and occupational segregation, which influenced or accounted for a group’s upward mobility. According to historians Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, despite its rural origins, the Italian community in the U.S. was the most proletarianized of European immigration, with its unskilled population reaching a figure of 90 percent in the first decade of the twentieth century. Naturally, occupational segregation represents a key factor in the community’s lack of social advancement given that “this concentration in low-paying, insecure occupations was not solely a first-generation phenomenon. Upward mobility remained painfully slow within the Italian American community” (Cannistraro and Meyer 2003: 9). Moreover, because reduced to manual labour, they were the most disenfranchised in periods of acute

economic crisis and an ESd labour shortage. This socio-historical context constitutes the setting of Julia Savarese's and Marion Benasutti's novels, which take place in the cities of New York and Philadelphia respectively. This is the time when

many of the gains that had been made were lost in the Great Depression, because unemployment was most severe in exactly those areas of the economy with the highest concentrations of Italian Americans. In New York City in 1934, manual workers (who had comprised 35 percent of the workforce) represented 50 percent of all workers on relief [...] Similarly, in the early 1930s, the district where most Italians in Philadelphia lived had the highest unemployment rates in the city, and one-third of all heads of Philadelphia families who applied for relief were of Italian origin. It is likely that during the Great Depression, Italian Americans had the highest rates of unemployment of any European ethnic group. (9)

Savarese's *The Weak and the Strong* (1952) situates immigrant life in an unspecified area of New York City which, for some critics, challenges the "symbolic confluence" of what is considered the urban experience of Italian Americans (Simonini 2003: 229). Unlike other novels, it does not depict urban locals nor is even set in Little Italy, but in an ethnically mixed enclave, in Yorkville, Manhattan, not generally inhabited by Italians. Indeed, there is no place reference in the text, a fact that was also deemed original in a review by Marcus Lee Hansen, an influential historian who praised this selection of setting and the decision to represent a pan-ethnic working class community (229). Yet, Savarese's text is eminently urban and emblematic of the Italian/American experience in ways that transcend any factuality of events. The setting resembles Lower Manhattan, where Italians historically settled, living in the crowded, unsanitary conditions that are described in the novel through references to the "the notorious dumbbell tenement" (Hall 2002: 38). This was an airless and lightless tiny "box" and was the architectural piece constructed in the mid-nineteenth century to lodge the flows of immigrant workers in the context of burgeoning industrialization. The novel opens to the "[g]raceless dawning of the tenements, reluctant, inevitable," where not even sunlight is welcomed as it represents a "prying gaze" (Savarese 1952: 3) into an otherwise hidden safety of poverty not exposed. This is a contradictory world which does not want to repeat itself into another doomed day—although still hoping for rebirth; a microcosm and indication of both familial and cultural destiny, mostly expressed through a comparison with the main character's (Fortuna Dante) unwanted pregnancy:

and the tenements were opening, like a weary womb, spilling out an unwanted day. The dirty doors of little shops yawned and emitted a foul breath of decaying vegetables, souring milk and sleeping cats. Women in torn dresses [...] stumbled to the stores, hugging empty bottles under their arms. A garbage wagon lumbered up the street, dragging a filthy spill in its wake. But a little boy [Fortuna's youngest son Gino] lay wide-eyed in bed and thought only that it was April: that the grass in the parks would be green; and that somewhere there was an unknowable world teasingly unlike his own. (5)

In Savarese's text, the family's struggle revolves explicitly around deprivation in Depression times, with other opening scenes of men in line at "the temple of em-

ployment offices,” in search of “the god, Work, [which] was dead” (11). As it will be shown, the impossibility for men to work will not only result in economic difficulty but also affect gender identity. In Benasutti’s *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966),² history remains more in the background, the only recognizable allusions or events being the Great War and Prohibition; the former is “felt but vaguely” by the children, the narrator-protagonist Rosemary explains (25). Rather than the headlines in *The North American* about war and world affairs, “what the people in the Back street were *really* interested in was something called Prohibition” (46; emphasis in original). The town’s saloon is closed down and, as in other periods of crisis, gender pressures exacerbate: “the women would not be able to climb the hill any more and come down again with a foaming pail of beer for their tired men. They would have to begin to manufacture, in their own kitchens, a thing called Near Beer” (47).

In both novels there exists the running thread of a male (industrial) workforce determining the families’ mobility and affecting their survival. *WS* situates the father character, Joseph, who is on relief, as the epicenter of the family and the narrative all along. In *Steady*, the family’s move to the U.S. follows the traditional migration patterns of the time, that is, after the male members of families (husbands or sons) secured jobs and reached the initial conditions they deemed proper to call for their relatives (Mangione and Morreale 1992; Gabaccia 2000). Due to the need to fill the high demand for job positions, the family makes use of chain migration relying on previous immigrants: first, as many newly disembarked, they settle in a recognized Italian neighborhood, “a little row house that Zia had found for them in Hancock Street in North Philadelphia” (Benasutti 1966: 19); and later, after receiving a friend’s letter, they move near job opportunities to the also temporary settlement of a mining town in Western Pennsylvania. More characteristically, as the novel progresses and its title underlines, it will be Papa’s lack of a steady job which will determine the family’s fate. Hence the ubiquitous and highlighted concern that “what Papa needed—and Mamma was right,³ as always—was ‘steady-job’—she always pronounced it as one word” (23).

The (failed) male line is represented as the only purveyor of family continuity in Benasutti’s and Savarese’s texts, but these question the myth of the so-called Italian paterfamilias which assumed that Italian/American family dynamics of the era were predicated on the belief in and need to sustain such a patriarchal role. The familial rendering is accompanied by a related depiction of embodied spatiality, presenting the specific constraints and differential access to the city that the characters undergo in terms of their intersecting gender, class and racial subject positions. The importance of realizing such intricacies in historical accounts is emphasized by the very chances of these early female writers, whose scant or incomplete literary careers are explained within the same larger national context of overt prejudice towards

² From here *Steady* and *WS* respectively.

³ Mamma’s name is Europa and Papa’s Giovanni. Notice that Mamma is also renamed Donna, as the narrator Rosemary, her daughter, explains, revealing both filial female admiration and a critique of patriarchy. Rosemary boasts of her heritage to Europa, as she is named in accordance to the “mythical Phoenician princess,” which the narrator sees as matched to her mother’s proud character. She is truly disappointed that Mamma is called Donna instead due to her father’s whim, a name which has a rather negative connotation when translated into Italian by association to female subordinate status or duties: “the word that in Italian means woman, wife, but for a long time we thought Donna was Mamma’s name as Papa shouted: ‘Donna! Where ‘ta hell’s my pants?’” (Benasutti 1966: 32).

ethnic and gender difference (Barolini 1985; Mannino 2000). Not only is it necessary to unearth submerged voices and experiences, but also to question and unveil the epistemic paradigms that have worked to construct and reinforce oppression or exclusion. In this vein, the concept of the ethnic *flâneuse* comes particularly useful to explore the seemingly contradictory behavior or position of the characters in the novels, namely that women are often forced to occupy outside spaces which are however hostile to their presence. In other words, the concept both illuminates social phenomena of past history and signals the limits for women's lives in the previous absence of this category.

2. The (Re)Production Of Space: Class, Ethnicity And Gender Inequality

Gender does not simply apply to a personal, human level and to bodies, but also to space, being particularly reflected in urban configurations. From a variety of disciplines, feminist theory has shown how gender relations are woven into the fabric of the city and the way in which space not only reflects, but crucially constructs or perpetuates the dominant *status quo*. Daphne Spain's work on "gendered spaces" (1993) constitutes an early illustration of how social control is guaranteed through spatial arrangement, particularly calling attention to the rule of patriarchy through space. She posits the idea that there is reciprocity between women's disenfranchised status and their spatial segregation, whereby their traditional absence from public spaces precludes them from access to basic institutions and forms of knowledge and power. Feminist geographers have explained the mutual constitution of gender and space that allow for a rigorous and critical understanding of the way in which power and social relations are (re)produced, unveiling such sexed and gendered geographies, as well as implementing alternatives. For instance, a feminist analysis of the right to the city, which is central to early and contemporary social thinkers on the use of space and on class inequality, calls attention to the central concern of how planning reinforces gender difference, such as through the classic social model "divided into residential and urban areas" (Pérez-Sanz 2013: 97), or that of the suburb and the city (Franck 1997).

The study of how space is not mere context to human relations but a key instrument in the consolidation of hierarchies is grounded ever since the key insights initially posed by Henri Lefebvre (1969) or Michael Foucault (1993). Yet, while the spatiality of social life has been recognized, feminist critique has refined the analysis of the way in which not only class but patriarchal relations are reflected in urban spaces. In addition, not only urban practice but the discipline itself reveals an androcentric bias, thus excluding both women and the spaces that are putatively associated with them. For instance, the "romantic imagery of cities as sites of rumination and pleasure" responds mostly to a male experience (Domosh and Seagar 2001: 67-69). By contrast, women's use and perception of (public) space tends to be more inward-looking and self-conscious, typically when at night or walking alone (Kirby 1996: 45-56; McDowell 1999: 224-249). These aspects have begun to be addressed in the field of urban studies only in the last three decades, showing "a gender bias in both the construction of theory and the avoidance of research that directly addresses women's lived experiences" (Miranne and Young 2000: 1). As a result, many of the assumptions and tools in urban theory have become redressed. A certain counterbal-

ance has been generated thanks to an “explosion” of attention to women in urban research, which cannot ignore that “women’s conception, experience, and use of space is different” (McDowell 1983: 59-60).

Feminism has reformulated the right to the city and questioned the validity of dichotomies that run contrary to historical experience of how women have transgressed these, both in terms of presence and reshaping of those spaces. Traditional binary thought tends to favor the public realm (and other male experiences of related opposites, e.g. production/reproduction, individual/collective) as a site of rights and a privileged object of study. This is best represented by what Mona Domosh and Joni Seagar identify as the ideology of the separate spheres (2001: 2) or Linda McDowell as “public and private gender regimes” (1996: 18). McDowell also remarks the intersectionality of oppression or how (false) dichotomies fundamentally work to (re) produce multiple power relations, including “different regimes [of class and race] composed of separate but interconnected structures” (18). The two Italian/American novels analyzed reflect and problematize the creation of gendered notions and spaces around the concepts of work and streetwise.

3. Embodied Streets: Gender, Ethnicity and Space

No acknowledgement has generally been made of whatever public access or presence women had. For instance, in relation to the *flâneur* figure, who has so much influenced the literary imagination, as well as urban thought, it is typically a male protagonist while, as Isabel Carrera-Suárez affirms, there is a “discrepancy between the constructed literary figure and [women’s] urban practices” (855). Aside from being socially unjust, it is scientifically unfounded to accept the differential attention and prestige conferred to productive realms, as reproduction tasks are those on which all production, political and economic projects rely (Pérez-Sanz 2013: 101). As a consequence, even when pioneering male authors provided a key contribution for unveiling power relations, as well as including subjectivity and experience in cities, their ideas have not been by far exhausted. As a case in point, the *value* of women’s unpaid work to sustain the organization of the cities and capitalist economy was finally considered thanks to Manuel Castells. Yet his work has been implemented with respect to crucial realities that he left unanswered or treated in a too simplistic manner, such as the dynamics of female double burdens and professional replacement by a migrant female workforce when growing numbers of women participate as ‘productive’ workforce rather than devote their time to domestic labour exclusively (McDowell et al. 2006: 141-42).

Lefebvre’s paramount influence was equally recognized for his ideas on the right to the city by its ‘true’ citizens, displaced by economic hegemony, although he was subject to substantial critique by feminists such as Dolores Hayden for his lack of attention to women. In “What a Non-Sexist City Would Look Like?”, she calls attention to such denied right through the very principles established by urbanism, which (re)produce the traditional notion that “a woman’s place is in the home” (1980: 187). In reference to the “extensive Marxist literature on the importance of spatial design to the economic development of the capitalist city” (187), comprising the works by Lefebvre, as well as other widely-known referents such as David Harvey and Castells, Hayden emphasizes the differential consideration of the analogous production

of a gendered space. Although valuing the importance of their analysis, Hayden argues for the need of a feminist perspective in urban theory, as “[n]one of this work deals adequately with the situation of women as workers and homemakers, nor with the unique spatial inequalities they experience” (187).

Equally valuable is the idea of an urban embodied subject, such as Michel de Certeau’s specific model of the pedestrian that concentrated on resistance. Attracted by phenomenology, de Certeau opposes the reality of a lived city to the disembodied, homogenizing organization established by urbanism. His alternative vision of the urban is represented by its walkers, who are not completely powerless by virtue of their daily practices of trespassing, appropriating and transforming the (spatial and social) boundaries of design. Feminism, however, addresses an all-encompassing question about the different subject positions and bodies (in terms of class, race, ethnicity and gender) of city-dwellers and practitioners (Collie 2013). In other words, the urban design criticized by de Certeau is disembodied only in appearance, since it is mostly androcentric, as is his own alternative model of resistance. Luce Giard, the only woman in the collaborative project which composed *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pointed out that women were remarkably absent in his favoured model of the defense of the anonymous subject and ordinary practices (de Certeau 1990: xxix). A crucial way in which gender has been incorporated in urban life analysis interrogates the very existence of a female urban subject and the figure of the *flâneuse*, as she is conceived as incongruent in the city and represented as a streetwalker. Although this view is true to a certain extent, both reality and fictional representation insist on women’s presence in the city, and embodied citizens continue to have relevance despite urban and social progress. Yet, as Carrera-Suárez argues, the specificity (and intersectionality) of such localized positions, due to race as well as gender, challenges concepts and identification as we know them:

the figure of th[e] postcolonial, post-diasporic pedestrian necessarily occupies a different place in the real and fictive worlds, acting as counter-*flâneurs/flâneuses*, writing against the grain of their modernist counterparts, and therefore must be conceptualized —and named—differently, in keeping with the modified urban discourses and genres from which they emerge. (2015: 854)

This exposes the constraints faced by embodied citizens, while also the counter-narratives and experiences they bring to urban practice and theory, revealing the intertwined critical thread about the materiality of both bodies and cities. Borrowing from Elizabeth Grosz’ groundbreaking analysis of the mutual constitution of “Bodies-Cities,” Natalie Collie remarks how “the metropolis is also, in turn, produced by corporeality —not just designed by a dis-embodied consciousness—as the work of de Certeau and other urban theorists have also made clear” (2013: 6). As Grosz’ compounds “body spaces” or “body cities” express, the liberating potential of such a perspective lies in the belief that “there is nothing intrinsically alienating or unnatural about the city,” being dependent on the negotiation with the bodies it contains and shapes so that contingent relations are actualized by different cities and conditions (1992: 249-250). However, according to Carrera-Suárez, Grosz’ parallel model of resistance for disempowered subjects reproduced the same biased logics already discussed, as her text “paradoxically tend[s] to discuss an abstract, underdetermined body, in contrast with many fictional writings on cities, which

spell out the specific embodiedness of characters, or with postcolonial or race theorists, who foreground relational differences in their analyses” (2015: 856). Through the reflection of the category of the ethnic *flâneuse*, the two literary texts analyzed expose the spatial practices, as well as restrictions, of the embodied racialized and gendered subject.

4. The Myth of Male Dynasties: Unsettling Gendered Spaces

As explained earlier, Julia Savarese’s *WS* and Marion Benasutti’s *Steady* share the preoccupation with the male line as the center of the narrative and of family survival, which is deeply contested. In Savarese’s text, the family’s struggle faces being on relief in the context of the U.S. Depression, particularly the limits of the male role. Accounts about the Depression commonly attest to the social, cultural and psychological effects on men, prevailing among which is the (depicted) loss of their very masculinity as breadwinners. Conversely, little acknowledgement is made of the similar yet distinct consequences for women, who are directly addressed in their womanhood as nurturers of family. They must fulfill the ‘complementary’ role of administering the livelihood provided by husbands. Hence, while Joseph is left to wander the streets in desperation for work, forced to take the same dead-end routes day after day and fake the lost sense of a profession (Savarese 1952: 11), his wife Fortuna cannot evade her task of making the most of whatever scrap of food she is driven to find through interminable and distant journeys. The novel traces Fortuna’s geographies both throughout the city and in the house, a suffocating—although highly demanding—tiny tenement. She is therefore in charge of productive and emotional nurturing in the cramped shelter and out in the streets on behalf of children and husband, either searching for food or in active vigilance of their care and security. This otherwise unacknowledged dual role is emphasized by the fact that if “[m]en crowded into dirty little streets on which job boards stolidly stated the requirements of those who would eat that night” (11), at least they could later go home, to hope, memories and understanding, to be provided by their wives (12). According to Julia Lisella, “Depression may have put men out of work, but women are, for better or worse, never unemployed” (2007: 190). She also underlines how popular pictures during the New Deal depicted women as Madonnas, implying that there were no “tensions over gender identity in the period” (2003: 280). However, following Laura Hapke, there was great moral concern about women stealing jobs from men and the image of a female breadwinner circulated in certain sectors such as The Communist Party’s journal *Working Woman* (1997: xii).

In *Steady*, moving to the U.S. and later to Philadelphia is a man’s decision as the most entitled work-seeker who must provide for the family, but this conventional lens of gender relations is unsettled. Akin to Savarese’s text, any assumption of work as waged and productive, and hence male, is misleading, since Mamma works in a key, although more informal, economy: the boardinghouse. Once again as in Savarese, it is the frustrated workforce of men that is the source of all trouble, for themselves and the families. So the young narrator Rosemary expresses with “Poor Pupà!,” as “he was so easily led, never the leader,” “led astray” (Benasutti 1966: 20). Whether disaster comes by external forces or at their own fault, or both, women are brought to the task of alleviating deprived conditions. Buying into the “promise of

riches” being made out of entrepreneurship, Papa decides that Mamma should run the boardinghouse and he himself a bakery:

The boardinghouse had meant the hardest kind of drudgery for our mother. Like everything else that Papa ventured, the bakery was doomed to failure from the beginning. The beautiful ovens, so costly to build and to operate, that Papa had helped to put together of warm red bricks, were now cold, abandoned. Gone, too, the marvelous smell of newly baked bread. And it was typical of us that we did not realize, then or ever, that the essential difference between our parents was that Mamma would never, under any circumstances, have sold bread to buy hyacinth, while Papa would cheerfully have given it all away. (20)

Through this last phrase and general credit towards her mother, the narrator’s initial sympathetic comment of understanding towards “Poor *Pupà*” turns into a critique, especially after the pattern of movement of the whole family as a pendulum to his wishes seems unending, even in the evidence of failure: “Then came the letter from Uncle Dom in Philadelphia. ‘The war will soon be over. There will be a building boom. Come back. We will be rich!’ So we obligingly hit the trail again, back to Philadelphia, forever bent on seeking the ever-elusive fortune” (20). Irony recurs to criticize Papa’s unsound decisions, such as his reason for building the bakery, as “he had been a baker for a time in Philadelphia as well as a stonemason. But neither of them had been ‘smart operators’” (20). More poignantly, the narrator is aware of how the absence of male offspring is the root of the family’s situation of poverty, as well as of her father’s own misery. Mamma and Rosemary herself are shown to be able to sustain the family economically, quite in opposition to Papa’s expenditure and business failures. Yet, it is the male line that is deemed to contribute to what counts as work and, most importantly, recognized to guarantee the family’s continuity and value:

Papa would have been quite happy as a priest, but we liked to think that having five daughters brought him greater happiness, even though we were ready to concede that five sons might have made him happier still, in addition to solving our economic problems. Papa said, and often, that had our mother given him five sons he might have established a Dynasty, a Big Business, and then he would not have had to work at all. (101-102)

Father figures, being confined to a narrow although socially privileged role of economic provision in the household, are either just content with life as it is or ineffective to provide an integral well-being to the family in traditional gender standards. Men are distinctly unambitious and it is women who must ultimately care for survival: “Unlike Mamma, our father enjoyed life in the Back street, as he would have enjoyed living anywhere, natural hedonist that he was” (32-33). Robert Orsi (1985) offers an alternative view to the model of Italian *paterfamilias*, and there are numerous other Italian/American novels in which the family’s economic advancement is vested in the figure of the mother. Orsi poses that the *domus*, which denotes both the space of the household and the institution of the family, is the central element of the Italian/American identity and community. As such, women retain certain power as traditional occupants or symbols of that physical and emotional space, expected to show authority and influence in making decisions, at least concerning the family, in

that socially accepted realm of their own. In addition, it is acceptable that women ‘usurp’ their husbands’ power when these ‘fail’ in their traditional roles. This is the case with Joseph when he is unable to comply with his function as breadwinner sanctioning him as a valid man and father, which renders him as an outcast in the novel and propels Fortuna into the task of fulfilling such a role.

Fred Gardaphe, borrowing from Judith Halberstam’s model of female masculinity, explains the construction of a number of Italian/American female characters following this pattern, notably the Italian immigrant mother. Analyzing Mario Puzo’s debut novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964), he argues how the death of the husband, Anthony Angeluzzi, is only the last in a series of renditions “in his failure as a man” for Lucia Santa to assume control of the family (Gardaphe 2006: 25). She fills the role after the eldest son Larry, as is customary in Italian tradition, has also failed to do so first. Not surprisingly, the father had all along been seen as “the master, but a chief without foresight, criminal in his lack of ambition for his family, content to live the rest of his life in the slum tenements a few short blocks from the docks where he worked” (Puzo qtd. in Gardaphe 2006: 25). Even in death the father is rendered as unable to properly fulfil the expected duty, since he “carelessly let himself be killed in one of those accidents that were part of the building of the new continent” (25). As a result, Gardaphe adds, Lucia Santa, as well as her daughter Octavia, are “women [who] are enacting masculine roles quite naturally to fill voids left by the men in their lives, who ultimately present masculinities that have failed to perform” (26). Mary Jo Bona also references different texts which portray mentally or physically-ill father figures while, at the same time,

depict immensely strong immigrant mothers who help the family survive the early days in America. For the most part, the mothers in these novels remain more in the familiar province of home; the men, in contrast, are separated from the home world and often feel out of place in the work force. The writers often characterize their fictional males as divided selves, suffering eventual illness and even death. (1999: 207)

If Benasutti’s Giovanni/Papa is quieter about the issue and shows occasional gaiety (or ‘innocence’) in managing his despair, Savarese’s Joseph perfectly fits the portrayal. Before crumbling to death eventually, his own sense of misery is emphasized when he realizes he is alienated from his family. Unaware of his children’s life and particular hardships—such as the punishment to eleven-year-old Gabriel staying in the classroom copying nonsense when the nuns decide that those who have no dime will not go to the movies like the rest—Joseph concludes that “a man who does not know his family is a stranger to himself” (Savarese 1952: 38); and further laments his distance from the only promising referent, Giuseppe, “father of his father, teacher and dreamer” (39), while he is forced into the ‘work’ of begging (45).

These critical analyses on ethnicity would partly explain, therefore, the depiction of heroic women/mothers who have a powerful position within the family. Italian or Italian/American women’s uncontested power is unfolded but with conditions, as it is linked to women’s traditional sphere of control, as well as the relationship to public spaces in Italy and how that was reproduced or altered in the immigrant context. On the one hand, female power is regulated by the code of *bella figura*, which is gendered, as whatever influence women may have over family matters and

decisions must be masked before a male member when in public, turning into a behavior more characterized by humility (Nardini 1999). This is appropriately showed in *Steady* through the neighbor Leo, a womanizer who openly boasts “his theory” to “[k]eep the woman in her place” and proves it in his abusive treatment of his wife Alisabetta (Benasutti 1966: 43). He envies Papa’s family and tells him that “there is peace in your household. Your wife has not only great beauty [...] she knows also how to make the dollar for the work of two and how to hold a civil tongue in her head” (44). The comment is followed by Rosemary’s astonishment, who not only admires her mother, but also sees her as ruling the family: “Since Mamma had never spoken more than three words at one time to Mr. Leo, and those at rare intervals, he had no way of knowing, certainly not from Papa, who really ruled in our house” (44). Later on, Rosemary further distinguishes between private power *versus* public humility. She explicitly alludes to that cultural or ethnic code ruling her mother’s behavior in public, particularly in relation to “The People Next Door” (a German family): “But Mamma refused to acknowledge that it was her voice [shouting] they could hear rising clearly, as it had to, several octaves higher than ours. For Mamma wanted always, above all else, to *fare la bella figura*—to appear well in the eyes of others” (45).

On the other hand, retaking Gardaphe’s analysis, this blurring of the figures of authority also seems to happen when women “must step into a family position of power traditionally reserved for men” (2006: 25). He examines this phenomenon as a complex effect of immigration on gender relations, in keeping with the very textual representation he considers where “[i]t was always the men who crumbled under the glories of the new land, never the women. There were many cases of Italian men who became insane and had to be committed, as if in leaving their homeland they had torn a vital root from their minds” (Puzo qtd. in Gardaphe 2006: 27). Gardaphe explains that such vital root is no other than patriarchal authority and close control, which are diminished if the equal duty to provide economically for his family keeps a man away from it, such as when working long shifts in factories or temporarily moving to mining camps across the country. In fact, other Italian/American literary, historical and feminist scholarship follows a very similar analytic line of women’s assumption of ‘real’ (i.e., not in the terms of the mentioned behavior of *bella figura*) positions of power within the family when men are absent due to work, stationary immigration, as well as the war (DeSalvo 1996).

Helen Barolini also confirms that the ‘elevation’ of the maternal is a theme predominant in writing. Yet, it mostly corresponds to “the image of [Richard] Gambino’s stoic matron ideal” which publishers seemed to favor and which resulted in the exclusion of other female characters by early women writers (Barolini 1985: 17). This proves, in effect, how the insurmountable power of women, even within families, may be questioned; at best, it is an expression of *bella figura* or else a power in negotiation with larger competing forces. Barolini’s alternative analysis of the “figure of ridicule” in maternal representation conveys a preoccupation with the diminishing power of the immigrant Italian mother (12). She notes how in this early context of nativist feelings against immigrants, the strong American value of individualist success contrasts with cultural and gender mandates towards family. As such, the new context turned the Italian mother into an “anachronism,” “a relic of remote village culture,” as she “became the focus of well-meaning social workers who wanted to ‘save her’ from what was viewed as undemocratic patriarchal system

without recognizing that in that very system she had found validation" (12). At this point, Barolini further recognizes that women's presumed power is highly ambivalent, "often manipulative and always relative," given that it is limited to the private world and is a "pedestal" too costly (12).

Benasutti's text, for instance, conveys this ambivalence; although some recognition is allowed for Mamma's decision-making capacity and influence, particularly through the eyes of the daughter Rosemary, her power is finally circumscribed to the binomial of Papa and work. The imperative for a male steady job is forcefully prevailing in that this primary concern dominates even by the end of the narrative and after Mamma has finally acquired her immigrant dream of having a house of her own. It is expressed through the symbolic force of the male line which recurs throughout the novel as a haunting *presence*. Mamma is particularly satisfied that her daughter Trina may be the one to eventually provide for the long-awaited son for Papa's dynasty, to be named precisely after him as she declares: "Josef? Like the Emperor? Papa would like that" (1966: 210).

A feminist reading of the novel also problematizes this rendering of power based on gendered notions by looking at public space and relations as interdependent with private dynamics of production and reproduction. This perspective considers the politics or, more properly, *economy* of private spaces and the kind and degree of spatial mobility therein. A number of statements with a focus on the micro-spaces of the house and the block attest to women's role as cultural (re)producers, such as that "[i]t was Gran'ma who steered my three little sisters into the path of righteousness at an early age" (76). If "despite the language barrier" (79), Mamma ventures into the streets for food, the same effort is perceived in the grandmother. In her case, female roles extend into a broader kin network than the purely familial unit, being the one "who established international relations in the Back street" (79). In a similar line, it is women again, distinctly through their kinship skills, who come up with "a collective 'steadyjob'" to get through the winter (202), by

soliciting trade on the Front street and up and down the street where the rich people lived. Some were already Mamma's clients but we planned and instituted a supplementary service. We would do 'alterations and simple sewing,' charging a minimum hourly rate. In addition, we offered a unique 'hand-laundrying' service. (201)

In other words, women do work, even Rosemary, who when she turns thirteen goes into "the house of the rich" to take care of Miss Amy Pierce's invalid mother, a task which, being paid, counts as a steady job in the novel (103). However, patriarchy generally aims to put women 'in place' even when contradictions, here economic ones, emerge. This is most clearly expressed through the emblematic visits to Zia, where the motif of fury and Mamma's own words underscore her spatial confinement:

It never occurred to us to wonder why Mamma, who disliked Zia and her ways so intensely, should want to visit her at all. [...] 'Why do you go there if it makes you so unhappy?' Papa would ask. 'For the change,' Mamma said angrily. 'That is why I go. These four walls close me in. I go for the change.' Then she would begin to scrub and clean and wash with furious energy. (167)

By articulating this elemental gendered (re)production of space, the novel manages to show the fallacy of what traditionally counts as waged work, which is not always male, public or individual, thus reinstating the value of both domestic and kinship work, that is, “women’s work” (di Leonardo 1987: 441). At the same time, as Savarese, the author depicts the distinctive occupation and uses of the city, which can be explained in light of spatial and feminist theory underlying the concepts of embodiment and intersectionality to read not only gendered and racial identities but also the disciplines of knowledge.

5. Intersectional Embodied Spatiality

Julia Savarese’s *WS* and Marion Benasutti’s *Steady* show the differential access to and experience of the city by virtue of embodied, objectified locations that many disadvantaged subjects cannot do away with. As Collie summarizes in “Walking in the City: Urban Space, Stories, and Gender”, the wrongly-assumed universal figure of the *flâneur*, who rejoices in the subject position of an observer, is not open to all of the city’s bodies:

Others, however, are less able to enjoy the privilege of being anonymous, of being one who sees, but is not seen. People’s gender, class and racial background, and to what degree their bodies conform to conventions of desire, or movement and anatomy, for example, affect their ability to extricate themselves from the spectacle of the city enough to be its observer. (2013: 4)

This is not a minor issue, as embodiment is not simply ruling the possibility of pleasure, but affects the crucial access to resources and personal safety. For instance, Collie comments on some women’s need to cross-dress when walking in public spaces, since, “[o]n particular streets, this can be a matter of life and death, or at the very least a strategy for avoiding strange stares or verbal abuse” (4). A useful nuance for spatial analysis adding to such definition is provided by Fran Tonkiss, who calls attention to sexed or gendered urban spaces rather than to the embodied subject unilaterally, that is, to the embodiment of difference in and through space. As she states in “Embodied Spaces: Gender, Sexuality and the City”:

the problem of gender or sexuality in the city is not merely a question of what kind of body is walking down the street, but of the social and physical environments which they inhabit and reproduce. The street, that is, can be seen as ‘sexed’ and ‘gendered,’ not just the person who uses it. (2005: 94)

In other words, in their function and use, spaces are predisposing a certain subject to occupy them, rightfully or in a transgressive manner. This problem is paramount in the texts analyzed, particularly Tonkiss’ illustration that one way in which spaces are gendered comes by ignoring the issue of safety affecting women or by overlooking other female spatial needs.

The politics of space is discerned through the uneasy relation of women and the streets, which the characters occupy in a transitory manner because of the typical strangeness of the specifically female urban body, as is revealed by the map of

their everyday geographies in the novels. In *Steady*, Mamma's use and perception of the city is limited to her family's needs. She is in charge of going to "the teeming markets of South Philadelphia," where she "shopped carefully" and managed to "bargain" some cookies as "extra treat" (Benasutti 1966: 142). The text had already signaled that "[e]xcept for an occasional visit to Zia's, going to Poplar Street was Mamma's only excursion away from home," and given information about the many challenges and dangers of undertaking this route as "[t]hough apprehensive cause of the language barrier, Mamma had nevertheless learned how to get to Poplar Street and back again without getting lost, strayed, or stolen" (141). The narrator Rosemary adds how "[i]n her one good dress off she would go, regal, beautiful, unapproachable, the heels of her *pianelle* bobbing rhythmically up and down under her skirt" (142-143).⁴ This description is important, since the choice of *pianelle* serves to make clear her necessary comfort. Although Mamma's concern certainly matches her practicality, the insistence on her wearing proper footwear unveils the prevailing problematics and critique in the novel. Her practical sense is a distinctive character trait which is also contextualized. Mamma's stubbornness is often judicious when her husband's expenditure is rebuked given the economic situation of the family. Consequently, Mamma reasonably rejects a superficiality she cannot afford. In addition, her comments are revelatory of the different class and gender system of Italian and immigrant life due to material hardship, which she literally and symbolically embodies, and the American affluence for which her husband and Rosemary strive: "How could I walk about all the day in Poplar Street wearing shoes? My skirts," Mamma said firmly, 'will cover the shame of the *pianelle*, if that concerns you, *Professore*, although personally I see nothing shameful in wearing what gives one comfort'" (143).

In the description of the routes to Poplar Street where sometimes the husband participates, "dragged to carry packages," as well as the narrator, "mostly because Papa made the trip so fascinating" (143), another poignant distinction is raised to illustrate the uneven geographies performed by women and men. If Mamma's search for food is obstructed by acute awareness of distinct dangers, the father limits his concerns to giving a "history lesson" about a landmark site in the battle of Germantown during the American Revolution (144). Mamma's gender clearly conditions her ability to be a *flâneuse*, to simply enjoy the spectacle of the city, as noted by Collie. The narrator overtly remarks that "of course only Papa attended the Dime Museum" (145), and that "[w]hile Mamma's prime interest was her house, the family, and the always precarious state of our finances, Papa's, among other things, was an enormous interest in anything historical, particularly the history that lay around us" (43).

The "distinctly gendered nature of women's sense of risk" (Tonkiss 2005: 102) also affects the characters' experience of space. As several feminists have showed, there is a "geography of women's fear" (Valentine 1989) that, while based on factual high vulnerability, works well ideologically to prevent women from using public space (Pain 1993, 2001). Still, the feeling is equally real regarding the threat of male

⁴ The text itself provides a cultural note, or translation rather, which may be explained for two main reasons: the symbolic status this footwear has and the fact that early writers acted as cultural mediators (Bona 1999: 41; Gardaphe 1996: 52), which is reflected in their concessions and translations to the reader. The *Pianelle* are context- and people-oriented products or instruments, "the traditional footwear of the villagers, the strong leather sandals without backs that leave the feet room to move about and that can be dropped quickly so that tired feet may be bared to cool grasses and the *acqua dolce*" (Benasutti 1966: 11).

violence or “sex-related crimes,” to which women react by creating a mental map of urban space and accordingly undertaking a given course of action or movement (Tonkiss 2005: 102-103). For this reason, female fear tends to be often spatialized, “their perceptions of danger have a specific geography and this can determine women’s routine movements in urban space” (103). In *WS*, young Gino feels something of the world’s uneasiness, becoming very anxious when he cannot go home as the door is locked, having “nowhere to hide” (Savarese 1952: 15). However, his sister Gabriel’s fear of her street,⁵ especially when attacked by a man leaning on her house’s stoop, does not find solace at home either. This man not only grabs and scars her once, but also remains watchful at the stoop. As a consequence, from the violent incident onwards, Gabriel runs back home every time—“trembling inside” with fear and the feeling of something she “half expect[s]”—although to no avail: “She had thought that here she would be safe. She had run, panting, from the darkness, afraid, only to find that here, too, was [*sic*] woods and unsafety—the ripping sound of life’s tearing mask” (55).

Gabriel is repeatedly shown running in other areas characterized by decrepitude and darkness, as well as an impending sense of racial difference or menace reflective of her own personal experience. This is imbued with the sexual assault, but also with the effects of uneven urban and social distribution. Thus, as she goes “past the familiar houses and stores up to the nineties, then into the barren district,” she remarks on “[t]all, lazy Negroes, hanging around front stoops, watching as you walked past, or fat, overhanging mammies fixing their garters in empty store doorways” (181). This overt use of racialized language on the part of a child attests to the deep persistence of racial dynamics in the country. In explaining Italian or Irish racist attitudes towards African Americans, David Richards provides a comprehensive thesis of U.S. entrenched racism precisely because it “extended its power well beyond the American South and into the hearts and minds of Americans nationwide, including those of the waves of new immigrants to the United States, many of whom had been and were themselves targets of American racism” (1999: 3).

As Gabriel, Gino ventures into the city once, although into more privileged areas: The Battery, Fifth Avenue, or the lower part of Madison Avenue. He becomes frightened of the unknown places, people and activities, remembering his mother’s song “she went to the city / where there’s no pity, / To the City, where nobody cares” (204), but has dinner at the Fifth Avenue and manages to get back home safely. By contrast, for Gabriel there is a “last time” that puts an end to her wanderings (211). The one in which she is “ashamed of her clothes that didn’t fit, afraid of not really belonging there, afraid of the people” makes her conclude that “[s]he wouldn’t try it again. Now she knew where she belonged” (211). If, as Carla Simonini argues, “the degree of ease with which each member of the Dante family is able to pass to and fro [the New York cityscape] serves as a metaphor for their prospects for future success and integration in greater American society” (2010: 236), the fact that Gino is partially successful while Gabriel is more permanently harassed is not surprising. Indeed, it indicates the ecology of the male line also favored in this novel and how the mother Fortuna at times displaces her desire of agency onto her son Gino rather

⁵ Although not mentioned in the novel, given Fortuna’s view of life in relation to the future of her offspring, mind her use of a male nickname for her daughter, who one should expect to have the Italian name Gabriella. See note 3 for another example of the gendered load underlying naming practices.

than Gabriel. The stark contrast is analyzed by Simonini as deriving from an intersecting oppression based on gendered and racialized bodies:

As Gino grows older, he roams further and longer into the greater city [...] Gabriel, meanwhile, as she becomes a young woman, finds herself becoming increasingly constrained to the streets that surround her, her free-spirited and curious ways dampened by a heavy self-consciousness born of unwanted attention, from the boys who sexually harass her to the well-off folks who scorn her. (236)

Similarly, in *Steady*, when working as a bill collector, Rosemary is harassed in the “clean and quiet and orderly” area that her mother knows well and resents, as “only rich Jews could afford to live in such a place” (Benasutti 1966: 195). After Rosemary is led inside a man’s house, and the uneasy ensuing situation with him touching her hair and wanting her to play the piano, she finds herself “running down the beautiful new steps, down the long curving street, as though all the demons of hell were pursuing me” (198). The experience affects her profoundly as she laments that her mother had not told her about such danger. This could be a spatial strategy by avoiding to transmit on her daughter a fear that, following Tonkiss, works as “a mental and a practical geography that influences how women perceive and use space in the city” (2005: 103). The incident illustrates how “having a female body can be a spatial liability,” where the most common response is the tendency to victimize the victim, for instance, through typical advice given to women on how to conduct themselves in public. Caution out of fear may “foreclose certain [women] of the spatial freedoms and some of the independence that city life might offer” (105). Hence, Mamma could be (unconsciously) preventing Rosemary from becoming as chronically impeded as Gabriel, given that for this character emblematically only “[once] it had been possible to enjoy all the beauty there was to be seen” (Savarese 1952: 211). In addition, Gabriel’s own undermined power gradually extends to cultural identity, as a sense of “rotten dreams” is all she can admit when thinking of her community and neighborhood, whose history of social marginalization has been such that “they are even ashamed of their hopes” (253). Distinctly self-aware despite her young age, as Simonini also noted, Gabriel therefore articulates a mounting social critique of class and gender structures.

In Savarese’s novel, immigrant family confinement is highlighted by means of the ‘seclusion’ in the room where living is so literally and socially asphyxiating that it forces Gino’s retreat into different forms of an imaginary escape. At first through dreams and later via the identification with a fly, these are temporary spaces created to be occupied in dialogue with, or as a consequence of, larger socio-spatial structures. These structures are equally destabilized through the practices emerging out of the very conditions, or contradictions, that dominant spatial rulings produce. In the dismal portrayal of the immigrant surroundings compelling the subject’s own transformation into a fly that escapes confinement, the same subject manages to exert his agency and (re)creation of spatial dynamics. Gino envisions himself as an eagle, through a clear intervention into what there exists, both the fly and the room, by

making believe that it was he who possessed the wings. He spread them slowly, synchronizing his movements with that of the fly, and vicariously circled the room. The small window at the foot of the bed opened onto the tarred air shaft,

somewhere at the top of which there was a roof. It was like a square of cardboard poked out of one side of a little black box. A small stream of light poured through the opening and Gino flew straight into this, darting back and forth, in and out of its flow, arching his wings as proudly as an eagle. (4)

Gino's spatial practices inform us of the structural limitations produced through other spatially-arranged social formations. Socio-economic regimes are not merely expressed through space but dependent on it, especially for immigrants within the context of heavy industrial and urban development in twentieth-century major U.S. cities such as New York. Urban planning has relied on a national ideal of separate functionality which requires that residential areas should be apart from working and service areas, as represented by the vision of most reformers. However, the combination of these areas, including overcrowding in neighborhoods and tenements, becomes more of a necessity, as it better meets working demands for both immigrants and the nation's growth. These demands represent socio-spatial conditions reducing the subject to a disadvantaged state that in itself produces the possibilities of its transformation or overturn. Yet, this is not a simple dialectics, since there are further socially constructed categories which are at play, in themselves generating or contributing to the same dynamics of disadvantage and the possibilities of contradiction.

In the episode that the epigraph signals (6), Gino resorts to his sister's stories and spatial practices as another form of spatial strategy which reveals another of his limitations as a sick or disabled child; not coincidentally then, we had seen him "try[ing] his wings on each of [the objects]" of his room (4), which was "better than dreaming," but still insufficient, as occupying the alternative position of the fly is transitory, only enabling until it flies "out into the world," where "Gino could fly no more" (5). This overlapping of bodily and socio-spatial scales, physical and imaginary realms, enriches our understanding of identity and subjectivity, since his scarce movement in the room mimics impeded normal development outside: "he lay, no longer winged, but tired and disappointed, a little boy who has first found out that he cannot fly. There were no wings to arch now, merely weary limbs, aching with the ravages of a just-past illness and a just-lost dream" (5). Gino has an idealistic vision of Gabriel's spatial practices, whereas her perceptions are strikingly different, a consequence of her own localized ethnic and gender identity. Lying "[b]eside him in the bed," he imagines her as "part of all the magic he did not know," mostly since she could attend Catholic School, while "instead he had lain in this familiar room for many months, knowing the cold chill of winter and the hot embrace of July; really, like a dark thumb pressed" (5). What Gino does not know, however, is Gabriel's suffering in school as an Italian who does not fit the expectations and appearance of either the dominant Anglo society or her fellow immigrants, Irish, German and Eastern European. Hence the irony that Gino remarks on Gabriel's eyes, a classic of racial identity, as a point of entrance into a world that, in her view, excludes her due to her ethnicity. He admires the "fair blue-green that reminded him once again of the feelings, happenings and enchantments that he was already too old ever to know" (5). Nonetheless, spatial mobility and her chance of seeing beautiful places are far from ideal because of other specificities linked to her body. Gabriel's trajectories are disrupted by harassment, as shown by her experiences in the "promiscuous city" (181), which is sexed, and her spatialized fear there, as well as around the stoop of the street where she lives.

Fortuna's perception of space is also specifically punctuated by her being pregnant, the unwanted state which seems to pervade her whole vision, in a personal and cultural sense as her child, she feels, is only the proof of a doomed lineage. She laments that this child is not the strong seed that will carry her willpower:

She had no great desire to awaken, to be thrust irrevocably into the twisting, squeezing palm of another day [...] To look beyond the clumsy broken bed, in which she and Joseph lay, into the stupid sameness of a new day, a day that would not be heralded by sun in this windowless, airless box of a room where night and day were merely a change in the blackness of its shadows. [...] Already she could feel her child, within her body, womb-bound, struggling against her, plaguing her with its captivity. (3)

The children's introduction, as well as their spatial practices and stories, follows Fortuna's overwhelming narrative placed at the novel's very beginning. Symptomatically, there is not equivalent rendition of Joseph, the remaining member of the Dante family. This is a deliberate choice; despite Joseph's governing role in the narrative, the author has the character, comparatively speaking, in the background when Fortuna only references him, turning him into a phantasmagoric figure. He is often absent throughout the novel while also haunting in his intermittent presence by virtue of his role as 'official' breadwinner during the Depression.

In *Steady*, Mamma's fury against her husband is only surpassed by the house they move to in Philadelphia, which is compared to a divine punishment. Being ugly and, worse, located in the "dirty, dusty street" which is called the Back street, the concern for *'na bella casa* (a beautiful house) takes center stage in the narrative (Benasutti 196: 24). In keeping with the analogous binary vision of the novel *WS*, here probably reflective of a child's understanding of the world,⁶ there is also a Front street, which makes the living in the Back street sharper or, indeed, accounts for its very existence as a back, underprivileged street. While one is remembered as a place where "[u]nless you had lived there, as we did, you could never believe that it had once existed," the other is "where the houses stood in neat squares of green grass, their front porches illuminated at night by lamps on little wooden posts at the foot of each set of steps" (27). Hence, the binary language (or discourse) also reflects the general way in which meaning is constructed through negation and difference (or its suppression), which is only too apt for the content of the novel, with the division by class clearly inscribed in and reinforced through space. The dusty street is very real, being unpaved, but mostly metaphorical of social divisions. As we move out of the Back street, we see children playing street games and running around, taking the dust of the Back street "under [their] bare feet" wherever they go, only stopped by the contained play in the fenced "Tennis Courts, beyond the Beer Saloon, where the rich children played" (30). These are places, Rosemary admits, which "in our minds were capitalized, in keeping with their importance" (31). There emerges in the narrator an early class consciousness which develops into a desire, turning into obsession, to "explore farther into this other-world place" (32). That hope initially translates into

⁶ Rosemary continually identifies Job with Papa and House with Mamma. It fits a child's innocent outlook, as is also unmistakably reflected in the prose, which could be a strategy by the author to reflect a world as dichotomist as that of *The Weak and the Strong*.

the typical longing for love as the path for social mobility, since “[a]t night when [Rosemary] hear[s] the music coming from the Tennis Court [she] dreamed of Alex Truelove” (52). This solution, however, does not but replicate the very same class and gender norms that account for her alienation. Accordingly, Alex is diseased, intended to be critically expressive of what assimilation entails (Bona 1999). The Tennis Court that excludes Rosemary from love and from other pleasures is the reigning signifier of the spatially-marked tripartite of class, ethnic and gender divisions:

I was here! Here where the music began that came so softly on the night wind; here where the slim tanned girls came and the tall young men who smacked the balls and called ‘love.’ This was where they danced to the music in the summer nights. *This* was the Tennis Court. (Benasutti 1966: 83; emphasis in original)

As a result of these manifold divisions, social interaction is proscribed and transgression is accordingly punished with the ethnic slur that she is just “one of those wops from Goat Hill” (84). Place defines identity and its meaning has competing senses or is constructed out of different power relations. This is reflected by the stylistic change from capital to small letters when Rosemary refers to her home ever since her awakening to class and ethnic difference. The same transformation applies to her vision of a ditch, which so far had different meanings for different social actors, being Mamma’s channel to relieve her frustration, Grandma’s site for planting vegetables, or “just another place to play in” for the children. The Back street turns now into small letters as if Rosemary had just realized the true meaning behind such naming practice, prompting identification with her mother’s alienation, in terms of ethnic discrimination:

All at once I was full of hate, of my mother and father, of the place I lived in, which had heretofore been as all other places only more fun and was now, by a single cruel word, made dirty, unclean. I thought of the loathsome ditch that Mamma hated so, and I hated it too. The street was a mean *back* street full of mud when it rained. (85; my emphasis)

In fact, the violence of the epithet hits her to the point of leading to further comparison with Negro experience. Rosemary expresses a Fanonian reflection of her feelings when seeing a colored person for the first time and being afraid until realizing that “he’s just like anybody else except that his skin is black! And so am I. I thought in despair. Wasn’t I just like anybody else even though I had been called that name?” (86).

Being crushed by the reality of the street, as “[d]irt covered everything” (86), additionally prompts an imaginary retreat into the idealized landscapes of Italy transmitted by her mother, as well as through the books provided by a neighbor. Nonetheless, the copies she gets actually provide Rosemary with alienating ethnic and gender models that not only increase her despair but ideologically function to keep her further ‘in place’: among *Bertha*, *the Sewing Machine Girl*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Rose Marion*, Rosemary rejects the “sinister downfall” of the heroine which she receives through Tess; she also symbolically refuses to trespass, being unable to read beyond page eighty because of “the seduction scene in the wood” (87). As comfort, she chooses *Rose Marion* who, contrary to the virtuous although weak girl giving in

to passion and so finding the fate of the gallows, is the blue-eyed princess, an appropriate model of modesty and purity. Yet, she is more attracted towards this book due to the tender relation between the character and the mother, whom Rosemary herself also seeks for solace “[t]o explain away the name they had called [her]” (88). Shortly after, the intergenerational rift unfolds since much as Rosemary is “frantic with love for her,” Mamma is unable to reciprocate. Not only because burdened by economic precarity and more pressing material needs, Mamma cannot provide for emotional nurturance due to a sexual restraint of bodily pleasure and expression. This is manifested in that “[i]t seemed to be an embarrassment for her to touch, or be touched” (94). Rosemary again talks of her escape into books, “in the dream world I had made all my own [where] there was no ugliness,” until shattered or awoken with the episode in the Tennis Court and, more definitely, with what is deemed the “curse”, menstruation. Rosemary awakes from innocence twice, to ethnic difference and to the realities of gender, this causing her such a panic and abrupt consciousness that it leads to extreme thoughts of becoming a nun. Therefore, it is the generational repetition of sexual oppression and repression that is the curse rather; Rosemary complains that her mother has not talked to her about the burdens of female sexuality, marriage and motherhood, “suppos[ing] that I, like Trina [her sister], knew and accepted, even as Mamma herself had accepted, that day so long ago in the room with the little painted birds flying all around and a strange man in the bed beside her” (95-96). Foregrounding intersectionality, the curse is significantly related to the episode of the ethnic slur, which had also made her think about the need to keep her culture hidden. Now, female sexuality is to be out of sight, drying the linen during “the night and never in the daytime” so that “we might retain our female dignity in the world” (96), Mamma says.

The texts analyzed then follow a feminist critique of the (urban) embodied subject which not only acknowledges the resistance of the dispossessed through spatial stories or practices as enacted by the impossibility of an abstract entity—which a Certeauan pedestrian model defends—but is also imbued with the specificity of a subject’s location (Collie 2013). In “Bodies in Motion: Attending to Experience, Emotion, the Senses, and Subjectivity in Studies of Transportation,” Jessica Lockrem explains the theoretical contributions to the spatiality and phenomenology of social phenomena while also registering the intersectional critique of embodied experience. Drawing on Elizabeth Wilson, who situates women, minorities, children and the poor at the “interstices” of city living rather than enjoying “full access to the streets,” Lockrem affirms that

[g]ender, class, race, and national identity (and the intersections thereof) affect how a person experiences, uses, and ascribes meaning to modes of transportation. One area in which this is particularly relevant is how gender affects how individuals inhabit, experience, or are excluded from public spaces, therefore affecting their experience and ability to walk in public space. (2016: 54)

In Savarese’s novel, the siblings Gino and Gabriel, as minorities (as well as poor and underage), may feel unsafe and vulnerable in the city. However, I have shown that there is a distinctly gendered representation of women’s fear, especially because of their female body being under threat, as encapsulated by Gabriel and also by Rosemary in Benasutti’s text. Lockrem pinpoints the key feminist critique to the *flâneur* figure, which in assuming a male (as well as white and middle-class) public subject,

and falsely naturalizing it as universal, exposes the contradictions particularly faced by immigrant women. If the social and literary imaginary conceives of women as absent from the streets, or otherwise takes them as streetwalkers, their *real* presence therein is often guaranteed by the structures of poverty and the patriarchal system in the novels discussed. This important representation of embodied spatiality is evidenced in the figures of the working mothers especially, revolving around the (pro) vision of female bodies in motion.

6. Conclusion

The manifestation of (intersectional) embodied spatiality is shown in how the experience of the characters is distinctively affected by their spatialized ethnic and gender identity. In the analysis of Julia Savarese's *The Weak and the Strong* (1952), I illustrate how the Dante dynasty is spatially confined as immigrants and gendered subjects within the context of the nativist, patriarchal and capitalist city of New York in the early twentieth century and through the Depression. In the other novel analyzed, Marion Benasutti's *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966), I demonstrate how Rosemary's family is marked through discursive practices of racial difference around the fictional Back street, part of an Italian neighborhood in Philadelphia around the same historical time of early Italian/American settlement. In addition, the study of that specific street allows for an exceptional analysis of further internal class and gender difference and thus emphasize critical attention to such micro-spaces. The texts encapsulate failed male lineages in a thematic sense that is more or less overtly expressed in the depiction of both families and their destinies. They feature a doomed plot which is only matched by the coarse realities of immigration and the Depression, as well as the boundaries represented by the intersecting limitations of embodying ethnic and gender difference. Yet, the analysis of these boundaries also show that they are not as insurmountable as it may seem in the general outline of the novels, inasmuch as categories of identity are never fixed. In fact, as embodied theory anticipates, it is the contradictions that are often at the heart of intersecting demands of identity that are also the motor of change and can eventually upturn, if temporarily, structures of power. The recognition of the figure of the ethnic *flâneuse* thus contributes to deconstruct oppressive and dominant urban configurations, and to carve out places which may be beautiful for all.

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