

# GEOGRAPHIES OF FEAR IN THE DOMESTIC NOIR: PAULA HAWKINS'S *THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN*

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the revision of social constructions of spaces of safety and danger in urban environments as represented in Paula Hawkins's 2015 domestic noir novel *The Girl on the Train*. As such, it draws from affect and space theory in order to study the interaction of emotions and space —both public and private— in relation to its three first-person female narrative voices and their affective attachments. Special attention is paid to the representation of geographies of fear and security, so as to explore the construction and performance of hierarchical relations based on emotions —fundamentally love and fear— as well as the performance and spatial embodiment of these affects. This work argues that the construction of alternative emotional patterns, namely, alternative embodied displacements and emotional attachments to spaces and relationships, serves to unveil patterns of domination that would otherwise remain hidden in the realm of the home.

**Keywords:** domestic noir, emotions, geographies of fear, Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train*.

## Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es analizar la revisión de la construcción social de los espacios de seguridad y peligro en los ambientes urbanos según aparecen represen-

tados en la novela de 2015 de Paula Hawkins *The Girl on the Train*, enmarcada en el subgénero del *domestic noir*. Con este fin, este artículo utiliza las teorías sobre el afecto y el espacio —tanto público como privado— en relación con las tres voces en primera persona que narran la novela y sus vínculos afectivos. Presta especial atención a la representación de las geografías del miedo y la seguridad para explorar la construcción de la representación (*performance*) de las relaciones jerárquicas basadas en las emociones —fundamentalmente el amor y el miedo— así como la representación y la incorporación espacial de estos afectos. Analiza cómo la construcción de patrones emocionales alternativos, es decir, los desplazamientos incorporados alternativos y los vínculos emocionales que se establecen con los espacios y las relaciones permiten poner al descubierto patrones de dominación que, de otro modo, permanecerían ocultos en el ámbito del hogar.

**Palabras clave:** *domestic noir*, emociones, geografías del miedo, Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train*.

## 1. Crime Fiction, Gender and Space

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Crime fiction has long been considered an incontrovertibly popular genre, but in the twenty-first century it has entered the realm of high culture, due in part to the malleability of its boundaries, which, according to Gill Plain, make it “a uniquely adaptable formula, capable of carrying a complex social and political agenda while still attracting a mass audience” (2014: 5). Crime fiction has served to channel social criticism of various kinds, be it against ethnic bigotry, homophobia, or gender asymmetries. Indeed, given the fact that the vast majority of readers of crime fiction are women, it is not surprising that this, together with the progressive incorporation of more women writers into this tradition, has contributed to the regeneration of the genre by making use of conventions already familiar to the public to explore issues ranging from sexism, in general, to more specific forms of discrimination against women, such as employment discrimination or gender-based violence (see Álvarez López 2013). This genre provides particularly fertile ground for analysing one of the most decisive elements that determine women’s socializing patterns, that is, their practice, as well as their imagination of and engagement in the construction of gendered geographies. These geographies in the contemporary world are principally urban, a fact that again connects crime fiction with the social realities of the environment in which it is produced. The portrayal of these gendered urban spaces often focuses on the so-called geographies of fear, which are particularly relevant given the structural role that cities have played in the development of the genre, whose storylines, according to Eddie Muller, frequently “resemble the city itself” (in Smith 2011: 3).

Gender is an essential element in the social construction and experience of the city, and crime fiction has been especially prone to reproduce, and even amplify, the gender roles associated with these spaces, as well as the risks they represent. Paradoxically, other spaces constructed as “safe” for women, chiefly homes, have not been so commonly identified as spaces of danger or fear, in spite of the large numbers of victims of gender-based violence living within their walls. In this respect, one of the most significant subgenres of crime fiction is what has been termed the “domestic noir”, an emergent corpus that has become especially popular in the past five years, and is mostly written by women authors. Given the principal categorization of space in the city into private and public, as well as the importance of the geographies of fear in women’s lives, it is particularly interesting to analyse the focus provided in domestic noir novels such as Emma Chapman’s *How to Be a Good Wife* (2013), Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), A.S.A. Harrison’s *The Silent Wife* (2013), and Renee Knight’s *Disclaimer* (2015), to mention but a few. Julia Crouch, coiner of the term, describes the domestic noir as follows:

[it] takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. (2013)

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These novels reverse traditional representations of violence in domestic spaces, which, according to Laura Goldsack (1999), is a threat that tends to be considered only if caused by external forces affecting the stability of women’s microspaces. On the other hand, there are authors who contend, like Gill Plain, that crime fiction “is about confronting and taming the monstrous. It is a literature of containment, a narrative that ‘makes safe’” (2014: 3), to which it must be added that such safety is typically projected on the preservation of traditional domestic structures and, for women, on the precautions they must take to avoid urban geographies of fear. The “monstrous” becomes an integral part of the relationships developed in these spaces of power. It is made visible and penalized when the final act of violence occurs, yet not during the process of progressive accumulation of violent actions leading to the tragic ending, which always involves an embodied experience of the spaces where the action takes place. The aim of this article, then, is to analyse the revision of social constructions of spatial safety and danger in urban spaces, as represented in one of domestic noir’s best-sellers, Paula Hawkins’s 2015 *The Girl on the Train*. As such, it draws from affect and space theory in order to study the interaction of emotions and space —both public and private— in relation to the three female narrative voices in the novel and their affective attachments. Special attention is paid to the representation of geographies of fear and security, so as to explore the construction and performance of hierarchical relations based on

emotions —fundamentally love and fear— as well as the performance and spatial embodiment of these affects. This article argues that the construction of alternative emotional patterns, namely alternative embodied movements within and emotional attachments to spaces and relationships, become the only strategy for survival available for subjectivities living on the edge of gender normativity.

## 2. Movement and Embodied Cityscapes.

The social production of space (Lefebvre 1991), its everyday practice (de Certeau 1984), the spatial regulation of women in modern and postmodern cities (Bowly 1993, Wilson 1991), as well as the possibilities of transformation inherent in the existence of ‘third spaces’ in the fabric of urban social relations (Soja 1996), have been analysed recently from angles that prioritize the influence of affect in the performances of urban identities. The body and its emotions occupy a central position in these analyses, which have displaced the Cartesian body/mind hierarchy to focus instead on the joint production of social and individual meanings created through affective embodiments of space (see Mehta and Bondi 1999). Additionally, this hierarchy, which is based on gendered constructions, has been transcended in order to underline the relationality of emotions, as well as their mobility (Ahmed 2004). In contemporary societies, where cities congregate most of the world’s population and, therefore, constitute the nuclear spaces where social relations are produced, it is particularly important to consider the role played by bodies and their emotions in the perpetuation, alteration or disruption of social relations. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, the body has come to be perceived as a “sociocultural artefact”, and its spatial dimension is now determinant in understanding, above all, wider gender-based constructions. Thus, as Grosz contends, 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: the city is made and made over in the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, ‘citized,’ urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body. (2002: 297)

In this vein, authors like Brian Massumi have situated the body in its emotional facet at the centre of their analyses of human socialisation, highlighting the importance of movement and emotions in their approach:

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It *moves*. It *feels*. In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think of a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other? (2002: 1, emphasis in original)

Such connectedness is particularly important in the case of women citizens given the centrality occupied by the emotion of fear, associated with space, which not only restricts their movements in the city, but most importantly the scope of their socializing patterns. Cities are often represented as spaces of freedom, but, in terms of the public spaces they encompass, also as exposed to male violence (Bondi 2005). This causes a recurrent displacement of the actual object of fear —male aggression— to urban space (Tonkiss 2005: 95), which in turn prohibits women's access to some parts of the city. In this context, where the majority of the social relations that are created and recreated, performed and enacted in the contemporary world have an urban twist, recent works of fiction have reproduced such embodiments of urban spaces, often portraying them as inflected by their characters' emotions.

In the case of twenty-first century feminist crime fiction, these emotions often revolve around three elements, according to Adrienne E. Gavin: “ensemble characters, issues surrounding motherhood, and violence against women” (2010: 267). These three characteristics are central to Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*, where we find three complementary and interwoven narrative voices which guide the reader in the reconstruction of the events leading to the solving of the mystery concerning the disappearance and subsequent murder of a young white middle-class woman called Megan. These three voices correspond to three women who are indirectly interconnected by their relationships with the killer, Tom, in their roles of his lover (Megan), his wife and former mistress (Anna), and ex-wife (Rachel), the latter becoming the novel's unexpected and highly unreliable “detective”. Information is dispensed gradually from their three perspectives, so that the initial portrayal of Rachel as an alcoholic harassing her ex-husband and his new family is weakened little by little, and instead we begin to understand that her distorted vision of the events is marked by her extended exposure to Tom's violence. The blackouts she has are in part a psychological mechanism developed to protect her from the violence she was exposed to, but they also constitute an obstacle, for her and the reader alike, to finding coherence in the story. Jamaluddin Aziz contends that:

The noir genre [...] is always about the audience's reaction, as demonstrated by, among others, its complicated narrative that creates a sense of complicity in the audiences, especially because of its brooding mood and atmosphere, cynicism, and critical edge. (2012: 3)

As in most domestic noir novels, this critical standpoint is central to *The Girl on the Train*, thereby situating the genre, given the excellent reception these novels have, in an optimal position for the simultaneous subversion of gender hierarchies and the widespread dissemination of this critique. Yet, it must be highlighted that in the case of *The Girl on the Train*, the reader's complicity with Rachel is not immediate.

In this same vein, it must be noted that the novel is constructed on the paradox that, in spite of her unreliability, Rachel's perspective is the only one capable of unmasking the killer. This is due to her exclusion from the domestic spaces of false security that Tom dominates by means of the emotions that attach the three women to him. Despite her physical exclusion from the space she shared with Tom, Rachel recreates her life with him obsessively, imagining alternative realities that she projects on the houses she sees as the train moves through the neighbourhood where her former home is located.<sup>1</sup> She is now alien to the emotional relations developed in these spaces because of her forced "migration", which has displaced her from the geographies of normative affect that used to provide her with an accepted social role and a dignified identity.<sup>2</sup> Rachel's urge to embody the homes she sees from the train represents the internalization of her need to belong to a heteronormative family structure now that she has lost her status as wife and been expelled from the domestic space that defined her as such. Ironically, it is precisely this outsider position that will allow Rachel to help the other two women in the novel: by eventually, and with Anna's collaboration, confronting and killing Tom, which saves Anna and her child from his increasing abuse, and ultimately avenges Megan's death.

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Homes, though, cannot be isolated from the embracing net of social relations surrounding them, and which, in turn, they contribute to sustaining (Grosz 2002; Tyner 2012). Linda McDowell argues that even if "the house and the home is one of the most strongly gendered spatial locations, it is important not to take the associations for granted, nor to see them as permanent and unchanging" (1999: 93). Such possibility for change lies fundamentally in the embodied practices carried out in the domains of the house and the home, which always have a strong affective dimension. Indeed, authors like Margaret Whetherell interpret this process of "*embodied meaning-making*" as "*human emotion*" (2012: 4, emphasis in original), which in the novel implies the capacity of escaping social and spatial constructions of affect—love and fear—in order to identify who is the actual perpetrator of the violence and who are his victims. In this sense, Elizabeth Grosz argues that:

The city orients and organizes family, sexual, and social relations insofar as the city divides cultural life into public and private domains, geographically dividing and defining the particular social positions and locations occupied by individuals and groups [...]. The city must be seen as the most immediate concrete locus for the production and circulation of power. (2002: 32)

Such power is intrinsically connected to the hierarchies created through the emotions that the novel explores.

Furthermore, the possibilities enabled by alternative embodiments of urban spaces

must be understood in their relational dimension. As Sara Ahmed argues, they need to be explained in terms of the relations of power they create by attributing meaning and value to the “others”. She 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 should show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others. (2004: 4)

Such emphasis on “orientations” helps delve into the mobile character of emotions, into their social dimension, caused by the dissociation of the unique correspondence between the subject and the object of the emotion: “emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (2004: 10). This, on the one hand, explains the social construction of patterns of emotion, while simultaneously allowing for their transformation in each individual act of spatial embodiment. Movement in Ahmed’s model of emotions is, then, essential, although, as she highlights, its relationship with attachment is crucial to understanding how the body is connected to other bodies:

What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence, movement does not cut the body off from the “where” of its inhabitation, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others. (2014: 11)

Attachment is particularly important in terms of the relationships of affect developed within homes, given the latter’s symbolic value as the basic unit which grants stability to whole communities, and ultimately, to the state. Attachment to a partner and the foundation of a home inevitably involve a spatial transposition of emotions, which are experienced by the subjects, but which also have a marked social component.

*The Girl on the Train* is articulated on precisely such an axis by means of the embodiment of urban and domestic spaces, as well as on the emotions experienced by its accidental “detective”, Rachel Watson. Her portrayal relies on the use of a leitmotif, the rhythm of the train on which she commutes every day from Ashbury, which she defines as a “tumour at the heart of Buckinghamshire” (2015: 17), to Euston, central London, in spite of having lost her job. It marks the normative pattern for the social relations that are interrogated in the course of the novel as a space of contact for people of diverse backgrounds, crossing the city —moving together— in the same direction at the same speed. As Tim Edensor contends, “urban space is increasingly organized to facilitate directional movement by both pedestrians and vehicles by reducing points of entry and exit, and minimizing idiosyncratic distractions” (2000: 127). These “realms of transit” identified by

Edensor simplify the performance of unconscious collective choreographies — which David Seamon conceptualized as “place ballets” (1979)— and serve to homogenise everyday movement, since “peer pressure to follow a co-ordinated choreography may oblige participants to conform to group norms” (Edensor 2000: 123). In this sense, *The Girl on the Train* provides a counterpoint to the order the train represents through its incorporating to its impersonal rhythm Rachel’s own interfering emotional rhythms. These are triggered by the spaces that are first observed and described from the train, and which later on are revealed to the reader as the embodied spaces in Rachel’s process of gradual destruction. Her emotions are the product of the conjunction of the complex set of social and individual elements, which, according to Phil Cohen, determine our movement in cities, steering

[...] a course between the nonintuitive space of modern physics, the immediate sensory spaces which our bodies navigate, the private mental spaces of our dreams, memories, and fantasies and the public geographical space that locates our journey within certain shared coordinates of social and cultural meaning. (2000: 325)

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Additionally, Rachel’s behaviour can be classified according to the rhythmic parameters pinpointed by Henry Lefebvre in his seminal study *Rhythmanalysis*, where he differentiates: secret rhythms, which are both physiological and psychological; public or social rhythms; fictional rhythms, related to the realm of the imaginary; and finally dominating-dominated rhythms (2013: 27). In this vein, Rachel’s mental instability and obsessions, that is, her secret and fictional rhythms, interfere with normative social patterns, creating states of arrhythmia for the rest of the characters. Yet, as the plot unfolds, her rhythmic and affective transformations will alter preconceived notions of the legitimacy of dominating rhythms, which are social, but mostly grounded in the gendered microgeopolitics of the home.

The train provides Rachel with a routine, a meaningful movement in the eyes of others, and to herself, in her own chaotic life, but more importantly, as is gradually revealed to the reader, it allows her to gaze into the two twin domestic spaces she longs for: “Victorian semi, two storeys high, overlooking a narrow, well-tended garden which runs around twenty feet down towards some fencing, beyond which lie a few metres of no man’s land before you get to the railway track” (2015: 13-14). One of which is her former home, where she lived with her husband, now married to another woman, who has taken up her space, and also her role of submission to Tom. And the other space is inhabited by a young couple, Megan and her husband Scott, whom she has never met, but whose relationship she has constructed by projecting her fantasies of conjugal happiness onto the fragmentary scenes she can see from the train. Her observations make her an exceptional

witness, who is, nevertheless, extremely unreliable, given the combination of her heavy drinking habits and her idealization of heteronormative domesticity: “I see [the houses] as others do not; even their owners probably don’t see them from this perspective. Twice a day I am offered a view into their lives, just for a moment. There’s something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home” (2015: 12). Her watching takes place from the space of what for other people is the transition between home and work as represented by the train, but which, for her, is a routine movement which implies moving from nothingness into nothingness: from a tiny room in a shared house on the outskirts to the meaninglessness of arriving in London without a defined purpose or the will to be there. That is, she has not given up the possibility of regaining a dignified position within the net of power relations favoured by urban structures, and this urges her to keep on moving. Her observation is possible because, significantly, the train always slows down at a signal close to these houses, changing the rhythmical pattern of the journey. She must negotiate her presence in spaces of disempowerment and alienation, which contributes to her recurring obsession with watching other people’s lives and fantasising about a distorted reconstruction of her own past. Indeed, the movement facilitated by the train adopts a different turn in Rachel’s case, given the emotional transition and self-discovery she undergoes in the course of the story. As Massumi explains, “when a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation [...]. In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary” (2002: 4). Rachel’s “variation”, her progressive movement towards self-recovery and her realisation of the long-term abuse she has suffered, depends on her emotional appropriation of the spaces she contemplates from the train.

### **3. Fear and Spaces of Security in the City**

Rachel’s distant, passing observation is insufficient to solve the crime, not only because of the physical distance towards her desired objects, but most importantly because of her unrestrained urge to embody these “familiar” spaces, of returning to them: “the familiarity isn’t just in my head, it’s in my bones; it’s muscle memory” (2015: 72).

In fact, this affective spatiality is the principal means by which the mystery of Megan’s disappearance will be discovered, once Rachel can reconstruct the story by recovering her memories through an emotional exploration of the spaces of the crime(s): both Megan’s assassination and the psychological and physical abuse exerted by her ex-husband on the three narrators of the novel: Rachel, Anna, and Megan herself, the woman he has killed. Embodied spaces are central to the

development of the story, as is the social construction of these female bodies and their emotions. Gill Plain maintains that in crime fiction

[...] murder literally is “written on the body” and bodies are never neutral. They inevitably bear the inscriptions of their cultural production —socially determined markers of gender, race, sexuality and class that profoundly influence the ways in which they are read by witnesses, police, detectives and readers. (2014: 13)

This of course affects the victims of the murder, but also the rest of the characters, including those in charge of investigating the crime, even if that be accidentally, as in Rachel’s case. She is an unreliable narrator, not only because of her obsessions and because her intoxicated recollections are incomplete, but most importantly because her body is “misread” —both by the rest of the characters and by herself— and is prejudged. In order to compensate for this lack of confidence, her body retains a physical and emotional memory of what she has erased from her conscious memories, which emerges in the uncanny spatial experiences that will help her reconstruct the missing elements in the story.

The novel is mostly articulated on the emotion of fear, which in the gendered configuration of cities is connected to violence exerted on women. In his study of aggression and embodied spaces, James A. Tyner reflects on the paradoxical circumstance that violence is “both ordinary and extraordinary”, namely, that it is made invisible while being an integral part of our lives, shaping “our perceptions and conceptions of particular places” (2012: 3). Other authors, like Jon Bannister and Nick Fyfe, have analysed fear from a similar perspective, emphasizing its effect on spatial socialisation. They argue in their analysis, “fear, just like crime, can be portrayed as having damaged the fabric of cities, to have adversely affected the quality of urban life” (2001: 808). This standpoint clarifies to an extent Rachel’s quest for meaning and her adoption of the detective role in *The Girl on the Train*. Her exploration of the geographies of fear makes her traverse spaces traditionally considered dangerous for women, most notably the dark underpass where she has a revelation which finally allows her to realize the mechanisms of the abuse she has been suffering, which had been invisible to her until that moment. Initially depicted as one of the most likely scenes of the crime, and the place where Rachel was attacked by a man, although she does not actually remember it, the night of Megan’s disappearance, the underpass eventually becomes the counterpoint to the supposed spaces of security represented by the two homes that Rachel idealizes. This dark passage reveals how the actual location of danger remains unidentified as it is hidden behind a veil of emotions; the social construction of domestic love prevents the identification of homes as potential sites of violence, and rather points to the public as a source of danger. Once more, Rachel’s embodiment of space is essential to her realization, which takes place by means of an embodied encounter with the urban *unheimlich*:

[...] instead of going home I've come to Witney, and instead of scurrying past the underpass, I walk slowly and deliberately right up to its mouth. I place my hands against the cold, rough brick at the entrance and close my eyes, running my fingers over it. Nothing comes. I open my eyes and look around. [...] The sun slides behind a cloud and I feel cold, immobilized on the threshold of the tunnel, unable to go any further. I turn to leave.

The woman I saw walking towards me a moment ago is just turning the corner [...]. She glances up at me as she passes and it's then that it comes to me. A woman... blue... the quantity of light. I remember: Anna. [...] Only I can't be remembering right, because that doesn't make sense. Tom came to look for me in the car. Anna wasn't in the car with him – she was at home. That's what the police told me. (2015: 228)

At this stage, Rachel has only been capable of remembering being witness to Tom's threatening company in the underpass, and the presence of a woman in a car, who, as she suspects, cannot have been Anna. In fact, as she finds out later, the woman in the car is missing Megan, and the immobility Rachel experiences at the mouth of the underpass in the excerpt above is a consequence of the fear provoked by Tom's attack on her. Thus, such conscious enactment of an affective practice—her intentional embodiment of the repressed memories from that night—serves to disentangle the web of emotional associations which up to that point had impeded her identification of the real menace. The text therefore questions conceptions of public spaces as dangerous for women and, instead, points to domestic environments as the real location of potential violence, where patriarchal hierarchies can more easily remain intact. Indeed, it concentrates on the effects that the production of the “home”, as the pillar of heteronormativity, has on the three narrators of the novel, all of them women and each connected both emotionally and spatially to the man that abuses them. Rather than obscure the violence produced in the realm of domestic affection, the novel delves into what Joshua M. Price regards as the internalization of guilt and failure in the production of normative homes, which often leads to the justification of the violence inflicted on victimized women: “building a successful peaceful home is tied for some to their sense of self, to their sense of accomplishment in this life. [...] If a woman desires the safety of home and accepts her role as producer of it, then being battered confronts her fiercely, blatantly, with failure” (2002: 40).

#### **4. Fetishized Emotions in the Domestic Realm**

Failure and success, for each of the three women narrators, are intrinsically dependent on the capacity to perform maternal roles. It is the basis of a hierarchy among them, as well as a feeling of rivalry that is always related to the domestic

spaces they inhabit and the control that Tom exerts over them. The houses are located in a middle-class neighbourhood, in a “sleepy little street, tidy and affluent, with lots of young families; they’re all having their dinner around seven o’clock, or sitting on the sofa, mum and dad with the little ones squeezed between them, watching *X-factor*” (2015: 116). This image of perfect family happiness is juxtaposed with the traumatic experiences of the three women, whose fragmented narrations destabilize this social construct. Each of them represents a traditional female role that is directly associated with the social construction of their bodies: Rachel stands for the barren hag, Megan is the femme fatale that has been punished for her transgression, and Anna is the angel in the house. Yet their portrayal as such is never fully achieved and, instead, as the story unfolds, their differences are diluted, as are the reasons for the animosity between them, creating changes in the hierarchy which lead to the final act of cooperation between Anna and Rachel that saves them. This cooperation is reinforced by the structure of the novel, which is made up of fragments narrated in the first person voice. The women are the only narrators of their common story, and their three complementary points of view allow for the reconstruction of an alternative solution to a crime that otherwise would have never been discovered. Rachel and Anna are rivals, because the latter is seen as a “cuckoo” by the former, “laying eggs in [her] nest” (2015: 41). She is dispossessed of her space, of the home she had constructed and the house she had chosen, in part, due to the proximity of the train, “I liked being down there on the tracks, I liked watching the trains go by, I enjoyed the sound of them, not the scream of an inter-city express but the old-fashioned trundling of ancient rolling stock” (2015: 42). Similarly, Anna also has a complex relationship with the house: she has appropriated it, but is aware of Rachel’s imprint on the space, to the extent that she establishes a correlation between her predecessor and the house: “We need to get away from here. We need to get away from *her*” (2015: 143; emphasis in original). Yet, the reasons for her wanting to escape are not merely connected to the fact that Rachel keeps returning to the house, interfering with their everyday rhythms, but also to Anna’s awareness that she has started to incarnate Rachel herself, to reproduce some of her affective spatial relations within the home that she loathed when she observed them in Rachel.

Megan’s case, on the other hand, is different. She lives in another house with her husband Scott, therefore she does not partake in the other women’s spatial confrontation, even though in fact she is also alienated in her own home. As the femme fatale in the novel, she is the temptress who has (apparently) been redeemed by marriage and is adjusting to gender normativity. Her home represents a different form of reclusion, it is the space for the embodiment of her fears, past and present. Her relationship with domesticity is affected by the spatial association of the death of her daughter, which was due to her own and her then boyfriend’s negligence,

as well as by her subsequent feelings of shame, pain and terror when she was abandoned and left alone in the house: “At night I can still feel it. It’s the thing I dread, the thing that keeps me awake: the feeling of being alone in that house. I was so frightened —too frightened to go to sleep. I’d just walk around those dark rooms and I’d hear her crying, I’d smell her skin. I saw things” (2015: 210). She feels asphyxiated in her marriage and so she resorts to what she believes is her source of empowerment, the sexual attraction she provokes in men, but which in reality only ever serves to further denigrate her. As a result, she gets involved in an adulterous relationship with Tom, who manipulates her just as much as he manipulates the other two women, to the extent that he asks her to work as a babysitter for his and Anna’s child, that is, she is incorporated into the domestic space that Tom controls, albeit with an even lower status than his wife. Although she accepts it at first, the physical closeness of the baby becomes unbearable to her, and she soon quits the job, thus isolating herself further in the house she shares with Scott. After discovering that Megan is pregnant with his child, Tom rejects her, but she becomes obsessed with him, another invitation to the reader to acknowledge the similarities between the three women, under Tom’s affective manipulation.

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In fact, all the female characters who have had a relationship with Tom end up incarnating to a certain extent the devastated version of Rachel that appears at the beginning of the novel. Tom manipulates them, creating states of constant anxiety by threatening to deprive them of his love and the added associations that this emotion has for each of the women. Love —and rejection— becomes an instrument for the exertion of power in the hands of Tom, for whom, as Margaret Wetherell would put it, “power works through affect, and affect emerges in power” (2012: 16). From his initial subtle coercive control to the more evident forms of violence, including physical abuse, Tom goes through women until he finds a substitute for the one he has just destroyed, and then the cycle starts again. As Sara Ahmed has put it in her description of wider forms of “affective economies”, there is an erasure of the process of accumulation of the emotion, of the history that has led to the “affective value” attached to the object of the emotion, such that “‘feelings’ become ‘fetishes’, qualities that seem to reside in objects” (2004: 11). Tom’s relationships are constructed on the fetishisation of emotions experienced by the three women, but their different expectations will determine their different endings. Little by little, Anna starts to see her similarities with the object of her fear, Rachel, who represents a threat to her newly-acquired family life, but whom in fact she is misidentifying, by means of a transposition of the emotion of fear from the actual perpetrator —Tom— to her. Megan’s reaction differs, though, because she does not need Tom in the same way as the other women do. Rather than seeing him as the means to adjust to normative domesticity, she merely tries

to obtain attention and a feeling of control over him, through her sex appeal. When he rejects her, she feels dismissed and stands up to him: “*I’m not going away. I’m going to make you pay for this. For the rest of your bloody life you’re going to be paying for this*” (2015: 299; emphasis in original). Unlike Anna and Rachel, who have wrongly internalized their responsibility in Tom’s outbursts, Megan dares to face up to him, to question his emotional authority over her. Incapable of coping with such resistance, Tom loses his nerve and attacks her, blaming her for creating the situation: “*Now look. Now look what you made me do*” (2015: 299, emphasis in original).<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of space analysis, it is extremely interesting that his attack should take place in a park, an area that is immediately identified as part of the urban geographies of fear for women citizens, where, as Ahmed contends, feelings of vulnerability “shape women’s bodies as well as how those bodies inhabit space”, securing “femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitation in the private” (2004: 70). Indeed, this might seem to reinforce the gendered spatialization of women’s fear in public spaces, yet the fact that the perpetrator is not a stranger but Megan’s lover, reverts such associations and makes the reader focus instead on the dangers of the private. As Price argues, “spaces are generated intersubjectively”, particularly when attending to the roles played in the private sphere, and to the spatial practice carried out in these highly affective spaces, and so, “how one understands the space one is in [...] depends a lot on who you are, what you do, *on whom you are focused*” (2002: 41; emphasis added). The three women in the novel focus primarily on Tom and his emotions, which fluctuate and cause them constant anxiety and fear, which destabilizes them emotionally. The effect of this long-term pattern of prolonged anxiety and intermittent relief are especially patent in Rachel, whose emotions are so altered that she even confuses fear and guilt, incapable of discerning who the victimizer is and how he has manipulated her affects in order to make her feel responsible for his attacks on her. Paradoxically, her anxiety (not knowing what to fear) is in fact what will gradually empower her, and encourage her to keep investigating into the fabric of urban emotions until she puts the pieces of the puzzle together correctly.

As Ahmed explains, the difference between fear and anxiety lies in the emotional dimension of affect, in its relationality. Fear becomes a strong bodily experience occurring in the present, but it also has a projection into the future, since it “involves an anticipation of hurt or injury” (2004: 65). On the other hand, anxiety is characterised by a relentless and fast movement from one object of the emotion to the next, and so more and more objects become the source of anxiety, the subject of the emotion accumulating foci incessantly. In this vein, Ahmed concludes that “anxiety becomes *an approach to objects* rather than, as with fear, *being*

*produced by an object's approach*" (2004: 66, emphasis in original). Therefore, it may be argued that there is an implicit change in agency regarding who or what "approaches". In the case of Rachel, *who* moves, as well as the characteristics of the movement are central to the development of the story. Rachel's various objects of anxiety always end up converging on the domestic spaces she approaches through the mediation of the train, either simply watching or being transported to the station, which grants her physical access to the neighbourhood. The object of fear is unidentifiable, she literally cannot see it —him— approaching because of the lacunae left by her alcoholism. She moves erratically, arrhythmically —to use Lefebvre's terminology— throughout the city, interfering with rhythms of domesticity in what seem to be actions of harassment. However, it is precisely her alienation, her position as an "arrhythmic" subject which allows her to reveal the patterns of gender-based abuse occurring in the lives of the women. In addition, her eccentricity grants her access to parts of the city restricted to women. Her intoxication becomes, in effect, the means to transcend social norms and gender spatiality. She lets her emotions circulate, to move according to alternative, discontinuous rhythms, and this proves to be the only available strategy to uncover the patterns of domination that would otherwise remain hidden in the realm of the home.

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The novel reverses to some extent the convention that extra-marital affairs have consequences for women but not for men. Megan is killed, punished for her transgression, but so is Tom, the murderer, even if for different reasons. Instead of resorting to jealousy as the motive for Rachel and Anna's joint action against him, Hawkins situates her female characters, the two wives, together in the house under Tom's control. This is the space where the final act of empowerment takes place, when he attacks Rachel and she kills him in self-defence, with Anna's help. Once again, emotions, movement and attachment become essential and appear associated with the house and the two women's bodies, but more importantly with the train, which passes at the very instant of Tom's death, as explained in the highly sensorial description of the scene provided by Rachel: tracks vibrating behind her back, the train sounding "like a scream" (2015: 311). Her appropriation and embodiment of the space is accompanied by a revelation of the change she has undergone. She has been able not only to defend herself from Tom, but also to reach an understanding of the now halted process of emotional destruction leading to her present situation. At this point, from the backyard she watches the passengers on the train, reversing her gaze and her situation as it was presented at the opening of the story: "travellers warm and safe on their way home" (2015: 311). She has reshaped the affective value given to domesticity and focuses on the train as the real space of safety before reaching home. It is the movement, the public space, that guarantees more security than the private.

## 5. Conclusion

What is at stake in the novel is not the individual physical and psychological experience of abuse, but the existence of a whole set of structures that both allow for its persistence and make gender-based violence invisible to the eyes of the public. These structures are social and based on the repetition of patterns of affect, which again connects them with the corporeal. As Margaret Wetherell states, such practices are “very densely knotted in with connected social practices where the degree of knotting reinforces the affect and can make it resistant and durable, sometimes unbearably so” (2012: 14). Consequently, gender-based violence is not a private issue but an extended pattern of domination, constructed on the hierarchical affections that are projected on domestic spaces. Following Anna Mehta and Liz Bondi’s claim that “emotions can be viewed as cultural products that are reproduced in the form of embodied experience and that can be interrogated for their role in social relations” (1999: 70), it can be argued, then, that by choosing to focus on the emotional dimension of structures of domestic abuse, *The Girl on the Train* manages to focalize on the root of the problem, which is both interpersonal and social. It concentrates on the “affective orientation” of these power relations in order to interrogate women’s spatial and bodily performances in relation to the emotion of fear.

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Sparks et al. contend that “people’s responses to crime [...] inform not only their *sense of place* (where place refers to the immediate settings and conditions of their daily life) but also their *sense of its place* in a larger societal set of stories, conflicts, troubles and insecurities” (2001: 889, emphasis in original). In this regard, it is highly significant that the final portrayal of the houses in the novel shows them empty, for sale. In the eyes of the rest of the population they are labelled with violence, and this prevents their purchase: “I’m not the only one who looks now. I don’t suppose I ever was. I suppose that everyone does it —looks out at the houses they pass— only we all see them differently. All *saw* them differently. Now, everyone is seeing the same thing” (2015: 311, emphasis in original). Even if it is suggested that they will eventually be bought and embodied by new inhabitants, at this stage, all the passengers on the train perceive these spaces in a similar way, aware of the violent acts performed within their walls and horrified by the cruelty revealed. Thus, the passengers approach these houses emotionally from the train, which becomes a crucial agent in providing the city with what Elizabeth Grosz identifies as “the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies” (2002: 298), forcing them to revisit these spaces, as Rachel did in the past. It seems that there is unanimous consensus to condemn Tom’s actions, but in spite of this, there is no guarantee that such awareness will persist, that the *sense of the crime’s place* within larger structures of violence will continue to be

perceived in the future, given the private spatiality of these patterns of physical and psychological domination. By focusing on the corporeal experience of the novel's female characters, Hawkins highlights the existence of macro structures that regulate spatial practice, but more importantly the micro-geographies of the body, which inevitably have an emotional, relational and gendered dimension. In the framework of the narrative, these women's spatial embodiments become public only because Megan's disappearance has attracted the attention of the media. It is the specific details of the crime that are interesting to the public, rather than general, larger-scale, mechanisms of control. The repetitive movement of the train generates *e-motions* that are necessary for Rachel to discover, through her spatial embodiments, the imbrication of the three women's experiences, although its constant rhythm also suggests a progressive transformation, even the eventual erasure, of the actual implications of the crime, which will be produced by the repetitive spatial performances of its passengers in their everyday collective routines.

## Notes

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1. By choosing to situate the train as a central element in the story, *The Girl on the Train* appears indebted to Agatha Christie's 1957 classic *4.50 from Paddington*. In Hawkins's novel, though, the confrontation of space and emotions that is triggered by experiencing movement on this means of transport become intrinsic to the psychological development of its protagonist, as well as crucial to disentangling the web of social constructs protecting the killer.

2. Authors like Molly Warrington analyse the forced displacement of women and children because of gender-based violence as a form of hidden internal migration: "In England, over 50 000 people are forced to leave their homes to move to a place they may not even have heard of. Often the outcome of a sudden decision, they abandon material possessions and social networks and flee to a place of safety. Given its small scale, it is perhaps unsurprising that this type of migration has failed to attract much attention, but there are other reasons

for the apparent lack of interest. The people fleeing are women and children, and the circumstances involve the still taboo subject of domestic violence which, by its very nature, takes place within the confines of private space, and is therefore generally seen as outside the concerns of wider society" (2001: 365).

3. In this sense, Jamaluddin Aziz provides an explanation of the reasons why femme fatales, like Megan, are punished in crime fiction: "while the male protagonist's inescapable fatality is often the reflection of his own greed and dubious morality, the annihilation of the femme fatale is rooted in her failure to absorb these ideological contradictions (as opposed to the good woman's willingness to assume patriarchal gender roles), which is rather expected as femmes fatales constitute the embodiment of a male fantasy, serving unconscious male anxieties; hence creating a noir sense of ambivalence" (2012: 2).

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