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Reframing the Modern City: Gendered Networks in Stein's and Loy's Urban Landscapes

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'The vision will be entire, complete, and its infinity' (Apollinaire)

Compared to modernist visual art, Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) and Mina Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (1996) focus on the human within urban environments, revealing female social networks obscured by Cubist and Futurist artworks. By looking firstly at Stein's strict adherence to Cubist principles, this essay shows how the uncovered female networks serve as a window into the psychology of her characters. Loy, however, adapts Futurist principles. By considering how she diverges from a technological focus to one centring on human connection, yet retains elements of Futurist dynamism, this essay shall demonstrate the resilience of these bonds.

Cubism was a marked break from realism, attempting to show a truth separate from reality through breaking down objects into geometric shapes and reassembling them. They could thus present numerous perspectives of a single scene, capturing 'in one glance the past, the present, and the future' (Apollinaire 263). In doing so, Cubists moved away from the illusion of reality, ensuring a viewer was aware of their position as viewer, stressing the existence of the canvas. Stein follows these principles rigorously in *Three Lives*. Fragmented perspectives portray a homogeneous urban skeleton: the houses in 'The Good Anna' 'were funny little houses, two stories high, with red brick fronts', just as Rose Johnson's home in 'Melanctha' was 'a little red brick house' (Stein 3, 61-62). These recurring descriptions stress the flatness of Stein's writing, mirroring Cubism's focus on the existence of the canvas. Margaret Dunn argues Bridgepoint 'simply sets the tone of the novel and provides a unifying aura': each novella relates a different perspective of the town and the women are little connected apart from their location (55). Their pasts, presents and futures are encapsulated in the text; there is a staticity inherent in their lives being contained to Bridgepoint that not only disturbs a reader's expectation of linear temporarily but provides three experiences of the town to gain a more comprehensive urban representation, conforming to Cubist principles. A study of the characters and of the town is achieved akin to a Cubist scene where the 'vision

[is] entire, complete, and its infinity' (Apollinaire 263). Similarly, Delaunay's *Eiffel Tower* (Fig 1) is a unifying image. Built for the 1889 World's Fair celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, the Tower encompasses the French past, its present values and its future prospects. In Delaunay's painting, it dominates in colour, size and positioning; the buildings on the side act as windows, establishing the Tower as the focal point. The focus is thus on the architecture and its magnificence from varying perspectives. Comparison evidences how strictly Stein adheres to Cubist principles in her portrayals of urban environments as repetition and fragmentation provide a similar backdrop to *Three Lives'* setting as it does Delaunay's Eiffel Tower.

Yet, Delaunay's focus is the architecture, whereas Stein's urban environment is the framework allowing female networks to thrive. Dunn's use of 'simply' to describe Bridgepoint as the mere backdrop of the novel is thus perhaps unjustified, especially considering Stein's personal reasonings for Cubism; she saw it as revolutionary as 'each thing was as important as any other thing' in the composition of Cubist paintings (Hilder 72). The human within the urban is thus just as important as the urban itself and, indeed, the urban necessitates human presence. The connections arising from the urban skeleton underscore Stein's novel just as the Eiffel Tower overlooks Delaunay's painting. In 'The Good Anna', Stein immediately introduces the female networks produced by the urban environment: 'the tradesmen of Bridgepoint learned to dread the sound of "Miss Mathilda", for with that name the good Anna always conquered' (Stein 3). The relationship between Anna and her mistress underscores her ties to the rest of the town; she wields Miss Mathilda's name as a weapon and uses it to 'conquer' the domestic economic sphere. Likewise, at the end of her relationship with Jeff, the narrator merely notes that Melanctha, 'now that she was all through with Jeff Campbell, was free to be with Rose and the new men she met' (Stein 147). Yet, when Rose rejects her, the 'blow…almost killed her' (Stein 166). The contrast between

Melanctha's emotional responses is striking, highlighting the significance of female connections within the urban setting. The good German cook features as a kindly presence alongside the domineering Mrs Hayden for the gentle Lena. The cook never receives a name as she 'tried to do her duty like a mother to poor Lena', taking on a maternal role (Stein 199). The strength of female networks is facilitated by the urban environment, as the pair meet in a professional capacity, and indeed the cook is defined by her nationality and profession. The human connections are as important as the presentation of the urban itself as female relationships exercise the most influence over the protagonists.

Through these female networks, the psychological complexity of Stein's characters is revealed. Their temperament and human connections within urban settings are akin to the Cubist "geometric shapes" of society: Stein follows Cubism in her presentation of urban environments to reveal its human fabric. Indeed, Bert Bender argues ''The Good Anna' represents Stein's attempts to recognise that "the sexual impulse was the key to analysis"' (532). While his article ignores the influence of Cubism on Stein's motivations behind the novel, he highlights how criticism can overlook the psychology of characters in *Three Lives*. It is perhaps ironic to liken the women after this assertion, as psychological depth implies individualism, but none of Stein's three protagonists care much for marriage or men, transcending the prescribed roles for women at the period and heightening the importance of female networks. Stein's style of writing makes a reader privy to the internal thoughts and emotional conflict, providing depth to working-class women who typically would have been denied a voice. Anna is concerned with duty and Stein repeatedly asserts 'Mrs Lehntman was the only romance Anna ever knew'; Melanctha is occupied by her freedom and is more crushed when her relationship with Rose ends than with Jeff or Jem, as previously explored; Lena is strikingly passive in all that she does, as she 'did not care much to get married' (Stein 34, 180). Indeed, the stories end succinctly after each character's death: there is no more

psyche to explore, thus no more point in writing. As the side buildings in *Eiffel Tower* provide a window from which to view the many perspectives of Delaunay's Tower, Stein's Bridgepoint is a window into the human psyche and female networks within her urban skeleton.

Like Stein, Loy's poetry reveals female networks within urban environments, but she does so through adapting Futurist principles to her own ends. Futurism succeeded Cubism, displaying similar fragmented perspectives but with greater aggression and dynamism to reflect their rejection of the past and embracement of technology as the herald of the future. Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, specifically 'Three Moments in Paris' and 'Italian Pictures', conveys a similar energy within urban environments but focuses on the female consciousness within rather than masculine technology.

Futurism endeavoured 'to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy': to capture the zeal of modern life which is prevalent through Loy's depictions of Italy and Paris (Marinetti 251). 'July in Vallombrosa' highlights the pervasiveness of commerciality and consumerism through stressing the 'expensive upkeep' of Nature which 'Goes to support / The loves / Of head-waiters' (Loy 10). The bustling economy of the world infiltrates even the quietness of the commune but already a focus on human connections is evident - the mistresses of the waiters benefit from the perversion of nature. In 'The Costa San Giorgio', the speaker remarks 'We English make a tepid blot / On the messiness / Of the passionate Italian life-traffic' (Loy 10). The speaker has moved from observing in the previous poem to experiencing, involved in the chaos of everyday Florence life. Rather than foot-traffic, Loy identifies movement as 'life-traffic', stressing the centrality of the life and people of the city rather than its technology. The involvement of the speaker in the hubbub of the street activity results in a greater emphasis on 'BROKEN HEADS' and 'ICE CREAM' jumping 'OUT' at the reader (Loy 11). The reader absorbs the poem's noise, stressing the presence of violence

integral to Futurist art. While Loy does not go as far as to elevate ‘aggressive action’, the fundamental drive to explore the movement of the world is evident (Marinetti 251). This exists both in the foreground and backdrop of Loy’s poetry, as although ‘The Café du Néant’ is a site of decomposition, ‘Yet there are cabs outside the door’ (Loy 17).

Yet, in *The Street Enters the House* (Fig 2), Umberto Boccioni’s subject is separate from the sprawl of urbanism. She stands larger than life, merely observing the riot of colour around her. The women are estranged from the workmen occupying the street: they reside on balconies, distant from both each other and the dynamism of Milanese life as the city grows, fitting Futurist’s rejection of the past and look towards the future. Instead of fostering this focus on technology, Loy’s poetry looks towards human connection and consciousness within the urban sprawl as female networks quietly permeate both poems. The cocottes link eyes ‘surreptitiously / To know if the other has’ come to the same realisation about the commodity of sex (Loy 18). ‘Surreptitiously’ is telling: theirs is a soft, subtle bond in the face of patriarchal society. Their revelation and their binding state of being cannot be proclaimed for it disrupts the roar of the male urban environment. Aimee Pozorski identifies ‘Futurism’s focus on freedom from confining structures’ as crucial to the movement, reflected by Loy’s grammar (46). There is little punctuation and sporadic gaps in her syntax, denying and distorting syntactical rules. She frees literature from grammatical structures while drawing attention to connections that deny societal confines. Likewise, the women of ‘Costa Magic’ unite in an attempt to heal Cesira, further demonstrating female networks in an aggressive patriarchal urban environment that renders these connections inviolable. The narrator establishes ‘we’ are following the instructions of the ‘The wise woman’ (opposing the advice of the male doctor), progressing to identify this ‘we’ as ‘I and the neighbour’ and then ‘I and the neighbour and her aunt’ (Loy 13). The female network around Cesira is revealed slowly, its graduality implying the subversive nature of its existence in the face of men comfortably

'Mumbling at the window / Malediction / Incantation' (Loy 13). Although a murmur, his positioning 'at the window' is public - he is unafraid of his curses being overheard as his hostility is protected in a patriarchal urban setting.

These female networks are in striking disavowal to Marinetti's 'scorn for women' that marginalises female artists from the Futurist movement (251). Thus, contrasting Stein's rigorous conformity to Cubist principles, Loy adapts Futurist dynamism in her presentations of urban environments to highlight their pervasive female networks. The poignancy of these connections is enhanced due to the presentation of energy within the cities: it is an accomplishment to cultivate such intimacy in environments where aggression is rife. These connections are not seen in Futurist art, as demonstrated by Boccioni's *The City Rises* (Fig 3). The horses bulldoze the men and its colour is violent. The focus is the future that the horses herald rather than the humanity bringing it to fruition. Thus, Loy's poetry differs from visual art's representations of urban environments by drawing attention to the human within the urban and its success in surviving in the incoming harsh, technological modernity.

Urban environments in *Three Lives* and *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* are presented as facilitating the presence of female networks inside them. Stein conforms to Cubist principles to delve into the emotional complexity of her characters through their female relationships while Loy adapts Futurist dynamism to focus on human consciousness and demonstrate the impressive connections women can foster in the face of patriarchal aggression.

Figures

Fig. 1 Delaunay, Robert. *The Eiffel Tower*. 1911. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Fig 2. Umberto Boccioni, *The Street Enters the House*, 1911. Sprengel Museum, Hanover.

Fig. 3 Boccioni, Umberto. *The City Rises*, 1910. Museum of Modern Art, New York

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