

# An Exploration of Female Mobility and Spatial Negotiation in Our Missing Hearts

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**Abstract:** The novel *Our Missing Hearts* by Chinese-American author Celeste Ng employs a dystopian narrative to depict the plight of individuals living under the discipline of power. This paper focuses on the spatial mobility of the protagonist, Margaret, to explore the mechanisms through which female mobility and spatial negotiation are manifested. Drawing on Doreen Massey's theory of gendered space, the paper analyzes how the female subject in the novel continuously negotiates her spatial positions through practices of mobility within power structures and social discipline. The study argues that Margaret's mobility is not a matter of free choice, but rather a strategic act within unequal spatial relations; this process facilitates the reconfiguration of motherhood and cultural agency, and redefines the meaning of "home", shifting from a fixed location to a relational and fluid spatial concept. This paper aims to explore the significance of female mobility as a form of resistance in dystopian narratives and to offer a new literary interpretive perspective for feminist spatial studies.

**Keywords:** *Our Missing Hearts*, female mobility, spatial negotiation, gendered space, dystopian narrative

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## I. Introduction

In contemporary dystopian narratives, space is no longer merely the backdrop against which events unfold, but has become a crucial site for the operation of power and the construction of identity. Celeste Ng's novel *Our Missing Hearts* takes the PACT Act as its central political mechanism and depicts a society that maintains a unified narrative through surveillance, censorship, and public mobilization. In this context, homes, streets, libraries, and even individuals' everyday activities are incorporated into the surveillance network of state power, resulting in the gradual blurring of the boundary between private and public space. Within such a political environment, the movements and tracks of the protagonist Margaret become particularly noteworthy. From being forced to leave home, to moving among different families to listen to and record their stories, and eventually to disseminating these suppressed voices throughout the city through handmade technological electronic devices, Margaret's mobility is not only a form of physical movement, but also constitutes a spatial practice that negotiates and contests existing power structures. Her actions demonstrate a transformation from passive escape to the active reconstruction of public space.

Existing research have primarily interpreted the novel from the perspectives of ethnic identity, memory politics, or maternal ethics; however, systematic discussions of female mobility and mechanisms of spatial negotiation remain relatively insufficient. Questions therefore arise as to how Margaret's mobility reshapes the meaning of space, how she reorganizes social relations through movement and narration within a highly centralized power structure, and whether her actions redefine the boundaries between home and the public sphere. Based on this, this paper will focus on female mobility and spatial negotiation, analyzing Margaret's spatial practices at different stages and exploring how she reshapes the political dimensions of space through

relationship-building and narrative dissemination within oppressive political structures. The paper will first review relevant spatial theoretical frameworks, then proceed to analyze the subject from three dimensions—forced mobility, negotiated mobility, and empowering mobility, and finally conclude by examining how female mobility challenges and reconfigures the order of closed spaces.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

In contemporary spatial theory, space is no longer understood as a neutral physical container, but rather as the result of the dynamically intertwined social relations. Doreen Massey argues that space should be viewed as “social relations stretched out,” meaning that space itself is constituted by multiple social relations and is constantly being reconfigured through the operation of power. This perspective emphasizes that space is not a static background, but a shifting arena in which “power geometry” is constantly produced and transformed. The position, mobility, and scope of action of different subjects within space are all constrained and shaped by power structures. Building on this idea, Doreen Massey further argues that place is not a closed, stable, or self-sufficient unit, but a particular convergence of social relations articulated at a specific moment. The identity of a place is therefore determined not by fixed boundaries, but by its connections with wider external networks. Consequently, place is open and fluid, and its meaning is generated through ongoing social interactions. This theory offers a crucial perspective for understanding the reconfiguration of “home” and “public space.”

In a similar vein, Martina Löw, drawing on the mechanisms of spatial production, argues that space is constituted through “placing” and “synthesizing.” Bodily practices, the arrangement of objects, and the perceptual integration carried out by individuals within space collectively shape its concrete forms. Space is thus both structural and practical; it encompasses macro power networks while also manifesting in micro actions. In feminist spatial studies, space is further revealed as a gendered social construct. Binary oppositions such as public-private and center-periphery often imply gendered power relations. Women’s mobility, spatial visibility, and freedom of action are frequently constrained by institutional and cultural norms. Therefore, female mobility should be understood not merely as physical movement, but also as a process of negotiating and reshaping established spatial orders.

Based on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, this paper conceptualizes space as a dynamic network of intertwined power relations, regards place as an open relational node, and understands female mobility as a practical process of negotiating and reorganizing spatial power structures. Through this framework, the protagonist’s spatial practices at different stages can be examined more systematically, revealing how her mobility transforms the meaning of space and reconstructs the public sphere within a repressive political environment.

## **III. Forced Mobility: The Coercive Reconfiguration of Power Geometry**

The implementation of the PACT Act marks a comprehensive restructuring of the social-spatial structure by state power. The text notes that the Act “funding for new initiatives to monitor China—and new watchdog groups to sniff out those whose loyalties might be divided” (Ng, 2022, p. 143). Its supporters claim that the policy “would strengthen and unify the nation”, yet “left unsaid was that unity required a common enemy” (Ng, 2022, p. 144). In this political context, literary works are reinterpreted as dangerous texts capable of “inciting rebellion” (Ng, 2022, p. 160). Publishers are forced to pull the related books off shelves, and meanwhile public squares are transformed into sites of book burning and political performance. The boundary

between private expression and public space gradually disappear, as homes, publishing institutions, and urban spaces are absorbed into the same network of power.

From the perspective of spatial theory, this phenomenon reflects the essence of space as a construct produced through social relations. As Massey points out, space is “not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations” (Massey, 1994, p. 2). When power reorganizes social relations through institutional and surveillance mechanisms, the structure of space itself is transformed accordingly. Through surveillance, censorship, and public mobilization, the PACT Act embeds individuals within a “geometry of power” (Massey, 1994, p. 3) centered on loyalty, thereby turning space into a direct site of power operation.

During the reconfiguration of this power geometry, Margaret is forced to leave her home. She “wouldn’t write, she wouldn’t call. Nothing that could be traced. She’d leave the phone behind” (Ng, 2022, p. 163). This decision is not only a response to immediate threats, but also signifies her deliberate severance from her existing network of social relations. Originally functioning as a “place” grounded in intimate relationships and everyday interactions, “home” gradually loses its protective significance under the intense surveillance imposed by the PACT Act, and instead becomes “a site of surveillance, displacement and punishment” (Russell, 2025, p. 463). When relational structures are reorganized by power, the meaning of place is consequently transformed as well.

Therefore, Margaret’s departure is a physical relocation, and also a rupture in spatial relations. By detaching herself from the monitored domestic space, she enters a state of suspension and displacement. Through processes of labeling, the state fixes Margaret as “a rebellious kung PAO” (Ng, 2022, p.160), attempting to exclude her from legitimate social space. However, forced mobility also reveals fissures within power structures: when space is overly concentrated and homogenized, marginal spaces are paradoxically created. It is precisely within these fissures that Margaret’s subsequent negotiated mobility becomes possible.

#### **IV. Negotiated Mobility: The Reweaving of Relational Networks**

After being forced to leave home, Margaret’s mobility is no longer a passive act of evading surveillance, but gradually transforms into an active spatial practice. “She searched out the families whose children had been taken...she met them on lunch breaks, on park benches, walked round and round the block with them...waiting for them to be ready” (Ng, 2022, p.183). These encounters take place in the marginal spaces of daily life, which belong neither entirely to the private sphere nor fully to the formal institutions of power.

Through listening and recording, Margaret gradually constructs a relational network that extends across different families. “She scribbled them down in a notepad...tucking the old ones into the pocket of her jeans, the side of her sock. Bearing them on her body” (Ng, 2022, p.184). These stories are no longer merely narrative content, but become portable forms of social connection. Margaret functions as a recorder and “a witness to what they’d lost” (Ng, 2022, p.170) at the same time. Her body becomes a mobile archive, connecting painful experiences scattered across different corners of the city.

During this process, the meaning of space starts to shift. As Doreen Massey stresses, “the identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple, but the particular mix of social relations” (Massey, 1994, p. 5). “Some of the families invited her to their homes, asking her to join them at the table, offering a spare bed if they had it” (Ng, 2022, p.187). At this point, the domestic sphere does not function as a symbol of kinship structures, but becomes a temporary node for shared trauma and memory. Home-place is not only a space of emotional belonging, but also “a site of resistance” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 19). The boundaries of place are thus redefined, and

its meaning is continuously produced through newly formed social relations. At the same time, this mobility also demonstrates the practical dimension of spatial production. Löw (2008) points out that space is constituted through the interaction of “spacing” and “synthesis.” Margaret’s embodied practices across different spaces—walking, listening, writing, and carrying—constitute concrete ways through which space is reorganized. As third space theory emphasizes, people continuously “maintain or change what they perceive as cultural borders” (Shimoni, 2006, p. 217). Margaret’s movement and concealment across different spaces reflect her constant negotiation of social boundaries and identity boundaries.

Therefore, negotiated mobility differs fundamentally from forced mobility. Rather than withdrawing from the power structure, it involves the reweaving of relationships within the existing spatial order. Margaret neither completely detaches herself from the social structure nor becomes fully absorbed into it; instead, she moves through the interstices of the city. Through narration and listening, she transforms private trauma into shared memory, turning the domestic sphere from an isolated node into an open relational space. This form of mobility lays the foundation for the subsequent reconstruction of a more public space.

## **V. Empowering Mobility: The Reproduction of Public Space and the Spatialization of Voice**

Building upon negotiated mobility, Margaret’s spatial practices further develop toward the reproduction of the public sphere. She stays in a brownstone apartment arranged by friends, “hiding like a hermit in the murky darkness” (Ng, 2022, p. 113) and “has somehow become this strange woman lurking in the shadows” (Ng, 2022, p. 115). Within the structure of bio-politics, “visibility is a ‘trap’” (Amery, 2025, p. 1249). Therefore, Margaret’s concealment does not signify a passive withdrawal; rather, it functions as an active evasion of the logic of surveillance. She temporarily withdraws from the visible network of power in order to gather strength for her next course of action. Subsequently, she starts to make bottle caps equipped with receivers and miniature speakers, tightly fitting transistors, batteries, and wires “into a cap the size of a coin” (Ng, 2022, p. 152). These miniature devices are gradually distributed throughout the city, “bottle cap by bottle cap” (Ng, 2022, p. 202). When she activates the signal, her voice resonates “across the city, block after block, bottle-cap speakers crackle to life” (Ng, 2022, p. 226). The stories collected by Margaret resonate simultaneously throughout the urban space, transforming dispersed familial experiences into shared public memory. This act demonstrates the possibility of space as an open network of social relations. Massey points out that “localities can in a sense be present in one another, both inside and outside at the same time” (Massey, 1994, p. 7). Margaret connects different blocks through technological devices, thereby reconstructing the relational structure within the city. The surveillance network originally shaped by state power is transformed into an alternative decentralized network of voices. In essence, this sonic network attempts to construct an alternative public space that could “permit all to participate as peers in social life” (Fraser, 2007, p. 27), through which sound becomes a medium for resisting power.

More importantly, sound acquires a spatial dimension in this context. She “begins to read the words these family have whispered, letting them speak through her mouth. One by one, child by child, she tells each story” (Ng, 2022, p. 227). When “a thousand people shouting through her mouth” (Ng, 2022, p. 243), private trauma is brought into the public space. Individual voices are no longer confined to the domestic sphere; instead, they formed a kind of simultaneity within urban space, in which different individuals in different locations shared the same narrative at the same moment. This empowering form of mobility not only transforms the

physical organization of space, but also reconfigures its emotional structure. Even though “the authorities finding and crushing speaker after speakers” (Ng, 2022, p. 242), her voice continues to resonate in the memories of listeners, “days later, weeks even... illuminating corners of themselves they hadn’t known” (Ng, 2022, p. 249). The reproduction of space therefore does not cease with the disappearance of the individual. On the contrary, listeners begin “absorbing that story, passing it on” (Ng, 2022, p. 249), thereby forming new nodes of mobility. As Löw notes, spaces are “always open and indefinite with respect to future formations” (Löw, 2006, p. 120). Margaret’s spatial resistance therefore opens possibilities for alternative forms of belonging and community.

Therefore, empowering mobility marks a shift in the politics of space. Margaret is no longer merely an individual mobility along the margins of power geometry; instead, she becomes a medium for reorganizing public space. Through technology, narrative, and practices of mobility, she transforms the city into a multi-node network of voices, enabling private trauma to enter the realm of public discourse. This process reveals the openness and generative nature of space: even within a highly centralized and repressive political environment, relational networks can still be rewoven, and place can still be redefined.

## VI. Summary

This article examines Margaret’s spatial practices and their political significance in *Our Missing Hearts* from the perspective of female mobility and spatial negotiation. Through the three stages of forced departure, negotiated wandering, and empowering dissemination, the novel presents space as a dynamic network of power relations. The reconfiguration of domestic and public spheres under the PACT Act renders private space no longer secure, but instead part of the surveillance system. Nevertheless, through mobility, Margaret reweaves social relations, transforms dispersed trauma into shared memory, and ultimately turns the city into a decentralized network of voices through technological means. Her actions demonstrate that female mobility is not a passive escape, but an active spatial practice. In this process, “home” is redefined as a site for the production of relationships and memory, rather than a fixed geographical location. Even when individuals are suppressed, the relational networks within space still retain the possibility of openness and continuity. The novel thus reveals that, under highly controlled political structures, space still possesses the potential to be reorganized and repoliticized.

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