At the Labyrinth Gates

And you, have you already closed your eyes on your own image, behaved blindly, lost your way blindly, loved blindly, and sensed in the darkness the tactile detour of the streets, the tactile detour of ideas?\(^1\)

Monday, February 11, 1980—Sophie Calle boards a train from Paris to Venice in pursuit of Henri B. He is not a lover, a friend, or even an acquaintance. She meets him at an opening and learns only his name, and his imminent plans to travel to Venice. Yielding to an impulse that not even she can explain, Calle follows him. As she begins her journey, she writes, “I see myself at the labyrinth’s gate, ready to get lost in the city and in this story. Submissive.”\(^2\) She places herself at the mercy of the city. She hurls herself into its embrace, both the physical city and the narrative that will arise from her experience there—one that she meticulously documents.

In Venice, Calle dons a wig and a trenchcoat, practicing with her mirrored photo lens so she can take photos of subjects without pointing her camera directly at them. She calls hotels and tells them she has lost her friend, one ‘Henri B.’ Would they be so kind as to let her know if he was staying with them? She shows his photo to waiters, tourists, and taxi drivers. She wanders the streets of Venice in endless looping circles. Her heart jumps each time she thinks she sees him. It sinks when she discovers he is only a mirage.

She almost despair of finding Henri B. when she finally locates him at Casa de Stefani. She begins to follow him, photographing him in the streets. She photographs the sites he photographs. She religiously plots the path of Henri B and his companion each day, writing, “They take the following route: Calle del Traghetto, Campo San Barnaba, Ponte dei Pugni, Rio Terra Canal…”,\(^3\) and so on. She follows him for days. She hides behind corners, in alleyways, her gaze vigilant and steadfast as she documents his movements, and her own. When she goes home at night, she traces their path for the day on a map of Venice. As she inhabits the space he inhabits, she rewrites his path with hers.

In her project, *Suite vénitienne*,\(^4\) Sophie Calle seizes the right to gaze as well as the right to wander through the city. She disappears into the crowd, but she is always observing, and always recording what she sees. She writes: “For months I followed strangers on the street. For the pleasure of following them, not because they particularly interested me. I photographed them without their knowledge, took note of their movements. Then finally lost sight of them and forgot them.”\(^5\) Whether she knows it or not, Calle places herself within a long tradition of urban wanderers and artists who travel through the city on foot, at once part of the crowd and outside of it, absorbing the ever-shifting spectacle of the metropolis.

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\(^1\)Jean Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me” in *Suite vénitienne* (Bay Press, 1988), 81.


\(^3\)Ibid, 26.

\(^4\)[sic] Calle’s 1988 edition does not capitalize “vénitienne.”

\(^5\)Ibid, 1.
The weight of the flâneur’s gaze falls on passersby in every city. The figure of the idle urban observer, the flâneur, has meandered through the writings of Ernest Hemingway and Émile Zola, dawdled in the paintings of Edgar Degas and the films of Karl Grune. He lingers in the cafés of Paris, smoking a cigarette. He gets lost in the streets of London. Like a trick of light, he disappears in a sudden shift of the crowd in New York. He craves absorption into the crowd just as his penchant for observation filters everything through his particular perspective, making his experience inseparable from his self. He is a walker who has haunted the streets of the metropolis since its inception.

Calle’s walking through Venice asserts the existence of the feminine counterpart of the flâneur: the flâneuse. Her wandering defies the notion that “There is no female equivalent of the quintessential male figure, the flâneur: there is not and could not be a female flâneuse.” Women have always walked in the city; to say that the flâneuse does not exist is to overlook the work of Sophie Calle, Jean Rhys, Agnès Varda, George Sand, and many other women who have sauntered, meandered, dallied, and drifted through cities, recording their experiences.

While women also participate in flânerie, the flâneuse is distinct from the flâneur. The obstacles she encounters in the city are very real and impact the way she moves through the urban environment. Cities are “made up of invisible boundaries” that “determine how we circulate within the city.” The social conventions, the implicit or explicit exclusion from public and private places, and the objectifying gazes that prey on women dictate how a woman is expected to behave, and where she is permitted to go within the city.

The flâneuse walks in spite of the boundaries that attempt to restrict her movement—her walking is an act of transgression. Rather than drifting in a detached manner through the streets, the flâneuse challenges the organization of the city, and how people envisage their movement within it. Sophie Calle dons a disguise to resist recognition; even as she falls under the gaze, she turns her own predatory stare on Henri B., hunting him through Venice. As she does so, she immerses into the crowd and shows us “The flâneuse does exist, whenever we have deviated from the paths laid out for us, lighting out for our own territories.” Her photographs are proof that “Here, at that time, at that place, in that light, there was someone,” and the flâneuse was there, in the city, watching.

The novels Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf and Eggshells by Caitríona Lally prove that women can, and have, engaged in experiences that align with those of the flâneur, and also present a mode of urban wandering and observation particular to that of the flâneuse. The analysis of these two novels does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the flâneuse in literature over the 20th and 21st centuries. Rather, Mrs. Dalloway engages with the Baudelairean conception of the flâneur while also illuminating the boundaries of the city that attempt to constrain Mrs. Dalloway as she walks. Eggshells explores what is gained from accepting the flâneuse as not just a derivative of the flâneur, but as a distinct concept. Through the novel’s conflation of the city and the text, Eggshells suggests that the form of movement particular to the flâneuse extends beyond a woman’s physical transversal of the city. The flâneuse’s walking challenges the boundaries of the city and forces the urban environment into a relationship of mutual interchange. As she forges her own path, the flâneuse unleashes the generative possibilities of transgressive movement through the metropolis, and also through a text.

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7 Elkin, Flâneuse: Women Walk the City, 286-287.
8 Transgress: from the Latin trans, or ‘across,’ and gradō, ‘to step’ (OED). As I describe the flâneuse’s movements as ‘transgressive,’ I also reference her literal act of ‘stepping across’ the barriers that threaten to direct her walking.
9 Ibid, 23.
10 Baudrillard, 79.
Movement 1: The Flâneur

The flâneur is a difficult figure to pin down. In his simplest definition, the flâneur is “one who wanders aimlessly...taking in the urban spectacle.” He is also “a figure of masculine privilege and leisure...[who] understands the city as few of its inhabitants do, for he has memorized it with his feet.” The flâneur is both a walker and an observer. He is so attuned to “the chords that vibrate through his city” that he “knows without knowing.” His experience in the city is as much sensual and spiritual as it is physical. Finally, the flâneur is the interpreter of the city. For the novelist Honoré de Balzac, the flâneur took two main forms: “that of the common flâneur, happy to aimlessly wander the streets, and the artist flâneur, who poured his experiences of the city into his work.” As the common flâneur wanders, absorbing the urban spectacle, the artist flâneur pens the city. He records his impressions. He codifies his experience.

Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Man of the Crowd” spurred the introduction of the flâneur into academic discourse, inspiring authors like Baudelaire in their theoretical work as well as their own urban writing. In Poe’s short story, a man gazes out of the window of a café, watching the passersby go about their daily business on the streets of London. He observes their dress and amuses himself by categorizing them based on class and occupation. As he was “thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob,” he sets eyes on a man who “at once arrested and absorbed [his] whole attention.” Utterly bewitched, the observer follows the stroller on his wandering path through the streets of London, not unlike how Calle follows her subject through Venice. There is no pattern to his movements that the observer can detect. Though the observer follows a man, he still walks without purpose insofar as he has no notion as to why this stranger would arrest his attention. The stranger is one particle of the urban landscape, a cog in the machine of the urban spectacle. The story presents the flâneur, broken into his two component parts: he is the watcher and the walker. The wanderer “is the man of the crowd” and by following him, the watcher becomes the wanderer himself. In the union of these two experiences, the flâneur is born.

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11Calle, 32.
12Elkin, Flâneuse: Women Walk the City, 3.
13Ibid.
14Ibid.
15Ibid, 10.
17Ibid, 7.
Inspired by Poe’s story, Charles Baudelaire wrote “The Painter of Modern Life,” one of the first essays to solidify the idea of the flâneur. In Walter Benjamin’s explorations of Baudelaire’s work, he finds the flâneur to be “a figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city, but also a sign of the alienation of the city and capitalism.”\(^{18}\) For Benjamin, the flâneur is inseparable from modernization and the emergence of the industrial metropolis. So, too, is he alienated in his investigations of the city: he drifts through its streets, but he does not partake in their mundane activities. He is separate, a removed observer.

Also essential to Benjamin’s thinking is the idea that flânerie is a particularly masculine experience, resulting in a masculine interpretation of the city. Baudelaire conurs, positioning the flâneur as an urban walker who is male, autonomous, and anonymous. Simultaneously, he construes the Woman as a delectable feature of the urban spectacle, but not one who may participate in its observation like the flâneur. He writes that the figure Woman “is sometimes a light, a glance, an invitation to happiness, sometimes just a word: but above all she is a general harmony...in her bearing and the way in which she moves and walks.”\(^{19}\) To Baudelaire, the Woman is an abstraction, “a word.” Her walking does not build a relationship between herself and the city like the male flâneur’s; instead, it contributes to her abstraction from a flesh and blood individual to a symbol, a “general harmony.” Baudelaire’s description revokes the Woman of her personhood and places her under his gaze. Unlike the flâneur, who drifts unnoticed, her walking performs and ‘invites’ the observer to look upon her.

Feminist critics have also questioned the ability of women to participate in flânerie due to their inability to walk with the same carefree detachment that privileges the flâneur. In “The Fortunate Flâneuse,” Megan Brown and Lucy Sussex introduce the “dubious legitimacy” of the flâneuse when “the bodies of women are paraded before the ‘bloated spider’”\(^{20}\) of a capitalist, patriarchal male gaze. Rebecca Solnit expresses a similar doubt in her book Wanderlust: A History of Walking when she points out the inability of a woman to be unobserved within the city. She notes that “Women have routinely been punished and intimidated for attempting that most simple of freedoms, taking a walk,” and that it is thereby impossible for a woman to exercise her desire for flânerie—her “walking and indeed [her very being has] been construed as inevitably, continually sexual.”\(^{21}\) This sexualization leads to the attraction of gaze, but also of street harassment and threats of physical harm. As such, women are taught from a young age that hypervigilance in the city is a necessity for one’s bodily safety. While in these critics’ views, women retain their subjectivity and ability to gaze, there can be no detached drifting because she is always watched. The woman in the city must be always attached to her surroundings, always watching and always on guard.

If the flâneur is the quintessential urban observer, then perhaps the female walker is the quintessential ‘observed.’ Solnit notes the performative nature of feminine walking due to the constant observation of and sexualization of women on the street. In the city, “women walk not to see but to be seen, not for their own experience but for that of a male audience.”\(^{22}\) If a woman’s experience in the city is always considered in terms of the performer and those she performs for, then her walking is an “invitation” to be looked upon, rather than acted for the joy of her own “urban observation.”\(^{23}\) Under these conditions, she could never absorb, unnoticed, into the crowd.

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\(^{22}\)Solnit, 224

\(^{23}\)Baudelaire, 30; Deborah L. Parsons, Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity (Oxford
to the same extent as the flâneur. Her performance would be incomplete without the participation of a viewer who looks upon her and singles her out.

Baudelaire’s poem “To a [Female] Passerby” from Les Fleurs du Mal brings into question female agency on the streets of the metropolis when she can only be understood in terms of masculine framework, like that of the flâneur. Women are absent from Benjamin’s analysis of the flâneur and are reduced to a collection of parts under Baudelaire’s gaze. In “To a [Female] Passerby” Baudelaire writes that the passante is “Swift and graceful, with legs like a statue’s/ Twitching like a madman, I drank in/ Her eyes, a pallid sky where storms are born/ The sweetness that charms and the pleasure that kills.”

The poem blazons the female passerby, thought to be a streetwalker, under the gaze of the observer. She is an object of his desire, both a sweet pleasure and a “pleasure that kills.” He notes her shapely “legs like a statue’s” as she moves fast, so fast the observer is barely able to “[drink her] in” before she is gone. An apparition, she is a mysterious and transient force rather than a figure possessing her own personhood or grounded in the space of the city. Where, then, can a female walker’s agency lie? Can the concept of the flâneuse be a successful extension of the flâneur? Or must the flâneuse always operate within the terms of a masculine logic, one that dismantles the female body and alienates her from the place she traverses?

To deny the existence of the flâneuse is to risk prescribing the ways men perceive the city as the only ways women can experience the city. It is to deny the existence of a distinct feminine subjectivity that is not derivative of a masculine experience, but a mode of being that is separate and full of generative possibility. Baudelaire’s writings were foundational in describing the state of heightened passion generated by the tumult of the city and its various spectacles. But, even if he observes “as if alone,” he is not. There is always someone else there, though Baudelaire cannot access her interiority. But because Baudelaire’s perspective remains limited, it is not right to then assume that her perspective does not exist.

In “To a [Female] Passerby,” the flâneuse passes under the gaze of the observer, who does not recognize her as such. She moves fast—she is there, then she is gone. She shows up in the city and submerges back into its embrace. Being the object of the gaze does not mean she does not gaze back.

**Movement 2: Mrs. Richard Dalloway**

“*She had reached the Park gates. She stood for a moment, looking at the omnibuses in Piccadilly.*”

In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, the titular character ventures into the streets of London in search of flowers for the party she is hosting that evening. Clarissa Dalloway traverses the streets of London as a woman of status and means. She encounters issues that critics like Solnit mention, such as her recognizability and therefore inability to pass entirely unobserved. However, Mrs. Dalloway’s walking so aligns with Baudelaire’s description of the flâneur that no other word adequately describes her experience. She is a walker, she is an observer, she is an idler. She is absorbed into the crowd to the point where she becomes unsure of where she begins and where she ends. Mrs. Dalloway’s expedition into London proves that a woman walking on the street is able to participate in a type of flânerie that is almost indistinguishable from the flâneur.

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25Parsons, 4.
In Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” he defines the crux of the flâneur’s frame of mind, differentiating him from other urban walkers. Baudelaire says that

For the flâneur...it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement...To be away from home and yet feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.27

Baudelaire’s statement presents a series of paradoxes. The flâneur is nowhere at home, yet finds home in everything. He is somehow outside the world, “[seeing]” the world, occupying the position of an outside observer, while also being as internal to the world as possible, at its “centre.” Despite both observing and being central to this world, he is indiscernible—he merges with his surroundings.

Baudelaire’s definition suggests that flânerie is more than just a physical experience. In order to be a true flâneur, one must on some level transcend oneself and become more than just oneself. As he achieves a spiritual elevation and subsequent detachment, he becomes nothing, and through being nothing, is part of everything. Baudelaire describes the flâneur as “an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I.’”28 He is rooted simultaneously in his distinct self, the “I,” while also giving himself over to the joyful abstraction of flânerie—the “non-I.” The flâneur wanders because he loves it: he loves the city, and he loves who he becomes, or ceases to be, within the city. Virginia Woolf echoes Baudelaire’s sentiment in her essay “Street Haunting.” She says of herself and others that when a person takes to the streets, “We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers.”29 As a person leaves the comforts of the home to walk the streets, they become a part of the environment they inhabit. The physical walking of flânerie allows for a shedding of self and a rebirth within the crowd as the metropolis absorbs the walker into its tumult of activity.

Baudelaire’s discussion of the flâneur is crucial in understanding Mrs. Dalloway’s experience walking the streets. Like Baudelaire’s flâneur, Mrs. Dalloway walks through the city in a state of elation. The constant renewal of the streets energizes her, an experience Woolf conveys through long lists of urban activities that organically flow into the narrative at the same time as Mrs. Dalloway experiences them. She exclaims “For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh.”30 Mrs. Dalloway’s experience is nearly spiritual. She is unable to attribute her delight to any one, isolated element, hence her declaration “Heaven only knows” why she feels so enlivened within the city. As she walks, she gives herself over to the rush of activity that overwhelms her senses and lets it bear her away.

The list that follows Mrs. Dalloway’s exclamation illustrates the uproar of the metropolis that so interests urban writers. The list details the “the swing, tramp, and trudge; the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead”31 and replicates Mrs. Dalloway’s experience through the barrage of words and rhythms. The list visually expresses the experience through the varying phrase length. It also sonically expresses the upheaval through the alliteration of /b/ in “brass bands” and “barrel” and repeating /s/ sounds like in “sandwich,” “swinging,” and the “strange high singing of some” airplane. The long

27Baudelaire, 9.
28Ibid, 9-10.
30Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, 4.
31Ibid, 4.
list of sights and sensations thunders along the page as they thunder before Mrs. Dalloway, which Woolf expresses through the stream-of-consciousness narration. Woolf’s syntax and punctuation, in combination with the narrative style, leverage the limited medium of language to convey things that are seen, heard, and felt by Mrs. Dalloway to the reader.

Mrs. Dalloway’s exclamation also highlights how the rush of the city and Mrs. Dalloway’s experience of it are inseparable from one another. The verbs in the phrases “making it,” “building it,” “tumbling it” and “creating it” are generative. Suddenly, the walker who “loves [the city] so” is no longer a passive observer “[seeing]” the city, but is rather an active participant in the city’s activity. The ‘tumble’ and constant movement does not happen of its own accord; rather, a walker like Mrs. Dalloway, who immerses herself completely in the city, instigates the motion that permeates the city. The city’s motion and the walker work symbiotically: the movement of the city entrances the walker as the walker also creates the movement of the city.

Mrs. Dalloway’s absorption into the urban environment identifies her walking as flânerie and equates her experience to that of the flâneur. Her position is already ambiguous as she walks; like Baudelaire’s flâneur, she “sees” the city from the outside even as she “[builds] it round” herself, placing herself at its center. She reaches a state of absorption as she pauses for a moment in Piccadilly, reflecting:

She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on.
She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone...She knew nothing; no language, no history...and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that.

Mrs. Dalloway’s experience consists of two states: she both moves “through” the space she is in and is “outside,” transforming the city into an optical experience as she “[looks] on.” This section of Mrs. Dalloway presents the same paradox present in Baudelaire’s description of the flâneur: she is inside the world, she is outside the world. She “[knows] nothing” and instead perceives the world through her “perpetual sense,” or Baudelaire’s “passionate,” rather than rational, “spectator.” “The cabs passing” are “absorbing” to such an extreme that like Baudelaire’s flâneur, the distinction between Mrs. Dalloway’s self and her surrounding environs begins to break down.

Mrs. Dalloway does not just observe the city—she is a participant to such an extreme that her identity is abstracted by entering the city. In her essay “Street Haunting,” Woolf describes the experience of entering the streets as breaking “the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves.” This leaves the walker without “a shape distinct from others” as they instead become a “central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye.” As an oyster filters water and releases it, transformed, back into the sea, Mrs. Dalloway filters the city through her body and her being. When she absorbs the sensate stimulation and energy of the city, she reaches the extremity of perception, and of reception.

As Mrs. Dalloway releases this energy back into the city through her movement, the barriers of self that usually contain the woman ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ become indefinite and break down. Even as she contemplates the inevitability of her death, she finds solace in her dissolution into the city because “somehow in the streets of London, in the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter

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32 Ibid, 4.
33 Ibid, 4.
34 Ibid, 4.
36 Baudelaire, 9.
38 Ibid, 5.
survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive...of people she had never met...but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. As Mrs. Dalloway becomes part and parcel of the crowd and the “people she has never met,” she transcends her own self. She muses her body “seemed nothing—nothing at all” and “she had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown” as she moved “with the rest of them, up Bond Street.” As Mrs. Dalloway abstracts into the city as an “invisible; unseen; unknown” presence, at once “herself” and “[living] in” all the people around her, she fulfills Baudelaire’s conception of the flâneur as “an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I.’” Her body is unimportant; it is a vessel that bears her along the sidewalk as the crowd is a vessel that bears her along the artery of the street. As she absorbs the energy of the city, she releases herself from the bounds of herself and infuses the rest of the city with her presence.

While Mrs. Dalloway has moments where she transcends her self like Baudelaire’s flâneur, her absorption into the city is incomplete, or at least interrupted. Though Mrs. Dalloway has “the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen” as she moves with the crowd up Bond Street, her ability to be “hidden” in the city does not derive from the same source as the flâneur’s. As she merges into the “astonishing and rather solemn progress” of the crowd, she is “not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway.” To be “not even Clarissa anymore” seems to suggest the state of the “non-I,” but “this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” returns Mrs. Dalloway directly back to the state of the “I.” This complicates Mrs. Dalloway’s identity, as in this moment, she is not the “I” of Clarissa, but the “I” defined by her marital status and social standing. It is through this privilege as the wife of a wealthy man, and her status as an older, married woman, that she passes unseen through the crowd.

Mrs. Dalloway does not attract the same kind of sexual attention that Solnit addresses in her critique of the flâneuse, but she is still unable to achieve complete anonymity. Though she sometimes revels in the sense of her own invisibility, she stands out. Passersby recognize her as she walks, and this recognition pulls her out of her flânerie. As she marvels at the beginnings of spring “beating” through London, the stream-of-consciousness narration replicates the tumult of the city as Mrs. Dalloway observes “old dowagers...shooting out in their motor cars” and the “shopkeepers...fidgeting in their windows.” Woolf separates each observation with a comma or semicolon instead of a period, generating a sense of breathless frenzy as the sentence gallops on for an entire paragraph. However, when her acquaintance, Hugh Whitbread, emerges from the crowd, he puts an end to Mrs. Dalloway’s absorption into her environment. As Hugh greets her, he draws Mrs. Dalloway into a conversation about his convalescent daughter. When he continues on his way, he leaves Mrs. Dalloway contemplating not the city, but herself in relation to Hugh, as “she always felt a little skimpy beside Hugh; schoolgirlish.” She then launches into a reverie of her time at Bourton with Peter. Hugh’s recognition of Mrs. Dalloway returns her thoughts to her own positionality, interrupting her walk as well as her enthrallment in the city around her.

Rebecca Solnit’s opposition to the idea of the flâneuse stems from her own inability to pass unobserved as she walks in the streets of San Francisco, just as Mrs. Dalloway is unable to pass unrecognized through London. She confesses that “having met so many predators, [she] learned to think like prey,” so that fear is now part of her “everyday awareness” as she walks. As such, it is impossible for Solnit to be completely detached like a flâneur, or absorbed into the city. For her
safety, she must always be aware of herself and her body, attuned to any dangers that might arise. Solnit’s womanhood necessitates a continued ‘attachment’ to her surroundings, her body, and her sense of self, lest she be caught off-guard. As Mrs. Dalloway shows, the type of attachment Solnit experiences does not just arise from the fear of bodily harm. It can also arise from the encroachment of an institutional or relational identity, like Mrs. Dalloway’s marriage to a government official, or from the reinforcement of one’s identity through recognition, as with the encounter with Hugh Whitbread.

Solnit’s objections present a crucial problem of definition, as to whether the experience of women walking in the city diverges so much from the flâneur that adopting ‘flâneuse’ risks diluting the term beyond recognition. For Solnit, a woman’s inability to detach from her environment negates the possibility of a flâneuse. The terms used to describe women’s walking align with historical descriptions of ‘fallen women’ and their “strolling, roaming, wandering, straying” movements through the city. These words, with the exception of “straying,” all emerge frequently in descriptions of the flâneur’s movements. However, when applied to a woman’s walking, they imply that “women’s travel is inevitably sexual or that their sexuality is transgressive when it travels.”

The “strolling” or “wandering” flâneuse already connotes transgression: by the act of walking, she resists the sexual expectations placed on her. A woman’s participation in flânerie is never entirely free from the barriers Solnit outlines. However, they also do not prevent the flâneuse’s existence. Instead, it is exactly these obstacles to a flâneuse’s walking that unleash her transgressive potential. The flâneuse must always act in spite of the forces that may otherwise prevent her movement.

Unlike the flâneur, the existence of the flâneuse challenges the structures of the urban environment. Her existence is predicated on the idea of someone traveling where she should not and the object of observation turning her gaze on the observer. Lauren Elkin maintains that “it’s the center of cities where women have been empowered, by plunging into the heart of them, and walking where they’re not meant to.” By “walking where other people (men) walk without eliciting comment,” the flâneuse commits a “transgressive act. You don’t need to crunch around in Gore-Tex to be subversive, if you’re a woman. Just walk out your front door.”

Even though the flâneuse is an object of scrutiny, she maintains her subjectivity, her ability to absorb, to observe, and to idly walk through the city. Through this act of transgression, the flâneuse unleashes her generative potential.

The flâneuse offers more than an extended definition of the flâneur; instead, she proposes a new form of movement in which her wandering counteracts the prescriptive modes of walking, and of being, in the city. The flâneuse enacts her resistance through the steady erosion of physical and social structures that attempt to direct her movement. The concept of the flâneuse describes more than a woman’s potential movement through a city. To ‘flâneuse’ is an act of resistance that can be accomplished by any transgressive walker, not just women. One can be a flâneuse on a walk, and one can be a flâneuse moving through a narrative.

*Mrs. Dalloway* is a text about a flâneuse, Clarissa Dalloway, as she goes about her shopping in London. *Eggshells*, however, is a flâneuse text. Where *Mrs. Dalloway* presents the city, *Eggshells* represents the city. Vivian constantly reminds the reader that she struggles to narrativize the events of her life. Vivian’s wandering allows her to rewrite the city into a new world for herself; her flânerie is as textual as it is physical. Lally asks the reader to engage with a text that is not quite legible, just as Vivian interacts with an illegible city. Like Vivian, the reader makes sense of this new text by flâneusing: Vivian through the city, and the reader through the narrative.

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48 Ibid, 234.
49 Ibid, 234.
50 Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City*, 20
51 Ibid, 20.
Movement 3: Walking on Eggshells

Caitriona Lally’s *Eggshells* follows an eccentric woman named Vivian who believes she is a changeling and wanders the streets of Dublin in search of a portal, or a ‘thin place,’ that will send her back to the faerie realm. Vivian lives alone in her dead great aunt’s house and ventures out each day to places like the underground well at Trinity College and the National Botanic Gardens, places she identifies as potential ‘rips’ in the urban world that could provide passage to the fantastical world she seeks. Vivian’s idiosyncrasies are partially a result of the abuse she experienced as a child, a past she attempts to address through her quest for another world. The city is both the culprit and the solution: it is the constructed world that threatens to oppress Vivian and a place of endless regenerative potential. Vivian exemplifies the transgressive flâneuse as she refuses to abide by the rules of the metropolis and turns the mechanisms of the city against itself. It is through Vivian’s walking that she is able to accomplish this task. In the place of the city that would attempt to constrain her, Vivian instead creates a world that is legible only to herself, both in the way she traverses it and the language she uses to describe it.

Vivian pays meticulous attention to her path through Dublin but also views the city at a cognitive distance, one that transforms the physical city into a text. As she records her walking and interprets the texts she creates, she inhabits a perspective similar to what Michel de Certeau describes in “The Practice of Everyday Life.” When describing the experience of standing on top of a skyscraper and looking down on a city, de Certeau says that “elevation transfigures [the observer] into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes.” De Certeau argues that the people who inhabit a city most completely do so by walking its streets; it is through this act that the city and the subject enter into a relationship and affect one another. De Certeau’s language of ‘possession’ places the walker in the power of the city—it is the city that acts on the subject. But from a distance, this dynamic shifts. De Certeau describes this as a physical distance, but Vivian’s distance lies in her cognitive removal from the logic of the city to which everyone else seems able to adhere. Sometimes when Vivian walks the city, “the streets come at [her] from odd angles: everything seems at a slant, there is no symmetry, no order, no system.” To reorient herself, she must reestablish symmetry and invent a system through which she can make sense of the world. She does this by transforming

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53 One way of reading Vivian is as neurodivergent. I want to acknowledge this possibility, though whether or not Vivian’s perspective derives from neurodivergence does not impact my analysis.
55 Lally, 203.
the city into a text that can be observed, as well as rewritten.

Vivian interprets her day-to-day interactions as she walks through the city as textual encounters. When thinking about how to make small talk on a bus, she muses “I could say ‘Traffic was a NIGHTMARE.’ People always speak in capital letters when they talk about traffic….”56 Instead of perceiving the variations in volume or other verbal emphasis sonically, Vivian comprehends these interactions through a textual format. The capital letters of “NIGHTMARE” concretize Vivian’s project of transcription, so that it extends beyond her own cognition to affect the reader’s encounter with the novel.

By describing the way people speak in terms of visual linguistic symbols like capital letters, she makes the language of others concrete, and therefore knowable to her. On one of her journeys, she repeats the word ‘kiosk’ to herself so many times that it “stops making sense as a word so [she writes] it down on a piece of paper and [puts] it in [her] pocket to make it real.”57 Through writing it down and generating a text, Vivian makes the word ‘kiosk’ tangible, and therefore legible. Vivian lays claim to the word by delineating where its form begins and ends and making it comprehensible to herself.

Through these processes of transcription, Vivian can better understand the mechanisms of the city at play around her. When encountering a person behaving erratically on the street, she describes him walking “like he’s being chased by words, swallowed up by sentences. Other people in the bus are giving little secret glances over their shoulders at him.”58 Vivian attributes this man’s fear and the social unacceptable of his behavior in terms of the tyrannical language of other people, as the “words” and “sentences” chase and threaten him. Vivian understands this experience. She notes when speaking to one person that “I would like to drop pronouns and verbs as readily as this man, he seems so comfortable with his language.”59 Vivian is not comfortable with the language of others. Instead of placing herself at the mercy of words she does not understand, every linguistic encounter in the novel becomes a potential site of negotiation for Vivian. The meanings of words are not static for Vivian, a condition that leads to her feelings of confusion and displacement, but also that offers generative possibilities. Vivian’s creation of texts as she walks in search of a portal to another world is one method through which she rewrites the city.

Vivian’s construction of new texts that reflect her way of perceiving the world entwines with her flânerie, as well as her selfhood. Parsons argues that “the urban writer is not only a figure within a city,” but also “the producer of a city, one that is related to but distinct from the city of asphalt, brick, and stone, one that results from the interconnection of body, mind, and space, one that reveals the interplay of self/city identity.”60 As Vivian records her experience, she engages with the “interplay of self/city identity” that Parsons identifies. Her interaction with the urban environment helps her look for her place within the world.

Vivian does not just rewrite the city by recording words that already exist; instead, she invents new words and identifies new patterns in language through her transgressive readings. Her reading is transgressive because she does not adhere to linguistic conventions. As she walks, she is “looking for new names of things, a list of new words in a particular order that could form a pattern and give me a clue as to how to find my way back.”61 In a natural history museum, she writes down names of “interesting sounding birds” like “Chats, Warblers, Wrynecks, Choughs, Buntings, Pipits”62 and other animals, then studies the letters in her notebook in search of a code. The names of these

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56Ibid, 25.
57Ibid, 199.
58Ibid, 56.
59Ibid, 14.
60Parsons, 1.
61Lally, 58.
62Ibid.
birds do not have any significance to Vivian beyond their merit as a series of letters strung in a pleasing order, either to her eye or to her ear. By decoupling the sign of the word from what it signifies, Vivian抽象s the language to pure sound and imagery. She studies their shapes on a page in order to find meaning, but that meaning lies in their physical nature as opposed to their dictionary definitions. Thus, Vivian ‘misuses’ language by revoking its ability to gesture to a concept commonly accepted as the thing a word signifies.

Vivian’s creation of new language is an act of resistance—she rejects meanings she deems incorrect and refuses to use words as she is expected to. When her sister tells her she should shower “once in a while,” Vivian thinks “I thought I showered twice in a while, but my ‘whiles’ must be longer than hers.”\(^63\) The conventions of language that everyone else seems to grasp and live by elude Vivian; in fact, she much prefers her own. When her sister describes the remodeling she is doing on her house, she throws “words at [Vivian], whole lists of words, words…that mean nothing, words from advertisements and brochures and people who sell things for a living….”\(^64\) For Vivian, language is tyrannical: it asks her to accept a set of meanings assigned to words that she does not agree with. Instead of conforming, Vivian invents her own. When she sees “a red-and-white striped awning” hanging over a window, she decides that “awning is such an ugly gape of a word, I’ll call it a ‘pluice.’”\(^65\) Nobody would have any idea what Vivian meant if she referred to an awning as a “pluice,” but it does not matter. As Vivian generates language to describe the city that only she can understand, she defies the normative way of walking in, and perceiving, the city.

Vivian’s transgressive reading is entangled with her walking in Dublin and articulates new space within the city that she would otherwise be unable to access. More than once, she encounters street signs that have been completely defaced by blue paint, obscuring the white letters by making them the same color as the background of the sign. She notes, “The street sign from The Lotts\(^66\) has been completely blu-ed out. I step onto The Lotts and close my eyes but nothing happens, even though I’m off-map, on a street that doesn’t exist, as close to another world as I can be.”\(^67\) In this moment, Vivian’s transgressive reading takes the form of reading into the absence of a word. She acknowledges the place she steps into as The Lotts; she understands what the sign would have meant, had it retained the words “The Lotts.” But the sign has been removed—it can no longer ‘speak’ the place into being. Instead of inhabiting The Lotts, she is “off-map” in a place that is unnamed, and therefore does not exist.

Through her walking off-map in search of ‘thin places,’ Vivian treats the city as a liminal space. The city is a physical place that provides the means—a portal—through which she can get somewhere else, namely the faerie world. Like Elkin’s flâneuse, “she is saturated with betweeness;” she is traveling, but has not arrived. The flâneuse walks “where [she’s] not meant to,” or how she’s not meant to.\(^68\) When Vivian walks “on a street that doesn’t exist,”\(^69\) she is not just

\(^{63}\)Ibid, 83.
\(^{64}\)Ibid, 81.
\(^{65}\)Ibid, 203.
\(^{66}\)In this section in Eggshells, Vivian writes down the name of another street sign that has been blue-ed out to read ‘PLAN,’ because “‘like Dreadnaught’, it seems like a word to live by” (Lally 187). Earlier in the novel, she collects the word ‘Dreadnaught,’ which may reference the Dreadnought hoax of 1910, in which Virginia Woolf and other members of the Bloomsbury group impersonated the emperor of Abyssinia and his escort to gain entry onto the H.M.S. Dreadnought. The hoax embarrassed the British navy, who gave the impersonators a red carpet welcome, and has since reentered critical conversation due to the group’s use of blackface (Young). Furthermore, Woolf’s idea that “the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves” is “broken”(Woolf, “Street Haunting, 5) by entering the city suggests a reference to Woolf in the novel’s title Eggshells. While this connection is not central to my analysis, it is still worth noting that Lally nods to Woolf as she constructs her own novel about a flâneuse almost a century later.
\(^{67}\)Ibid, 187.
\(^{68}\)Elkin, 22, 20.
\(^{69}\)Lally, 187.
walking on a street without a name; she is walking on a street that has fallen out of the city and is no longer part of its fabric. She walks on the nameless streets because “It’s the space between kingdoms where transformation occurs, that thin place [she is] trying to find.” By replacing the conventional meanings of the street signs with her own readings, Vivian herself creates this potential ‘thin places’ she seeks, where the rules of the city no longer apply. As she reads against the city and reinterprets its mechanisms, she brings the “space between kingdoms” into being.

Vivian’s flânerie turns the devices of the city that intend to direct and constrain the walker in upon themselves, so that the city becomes a means to an end, as opposed to an end in and of itself. While this “in-betweenness” is descriptive of the flâneur and the flâneuse, who both wander without destination, the method through which Vivian transcends the confines of the city is transgressive by nature. It is this element of resistance to mechanisms that attempt to direct her that makes her walking a particularly flâneuse experience. Because so many obstacles exist in the path of a woman’s flânerie, she wanders in spite of the forces that attempt to constrain her movement. Vivian’s walking defies the physical constraints of the city, as well as the idea that “the perspective on the city has always been that of ‘a man walking, as if alone, in its streets.’” Despite the obstacles that attempt to direct her walking, Vivian’s flânerie constructs a new perspective that creates the narrative of the novel. The flâneuse’s transgressive wandering delineates a new form of movement, one that comprises not just her journeying through the city but also the reader’s movement through the text.

Like Vivian’s movements through Dublin, reading the text of Eggshells is a wandering experience. The plot is not motivated by an end goal but rather consists of a series of fractal episodes. In her book Meander, Spiral, Explode, Jane Alison describes a fractal narrative as one that “branches from a core or seed, repeating at different scales the shape or dynamic of that core, possibly branching on indefinitely.” In this case, it is the pattern of Vivian’s days that constitutes the “core or seed” of the fractal. The chapters almost always begin at the start of the day with the words “I wake” occasionally breaking the rhythm with variations like “I can’t sleep.” She then states a destination, like “I’m going to visit the hidden pagan well under the Nassau Street entrance to Trinity College.” These repeated episodes at first leave the reader disoriented, but eventually, they begin to form a pattern. By the end of the novel, when the reader thinks back over what they have read, they see a series of attempts by Vivian to find meaning by wandering through the streets. They also see their own path through the narrative. The reader has encountered the narrative as Vivian encountered the city. Suddenly, they are able to make sense of its winding geography.

In her discussion of the different shapes narrative can take besides the wave, or Freytag’s Triangle, Alison posits that texts can meander, they can wind, they can double back, and through the act of reading, the reader “moves through the narrative itself.” Only when done reading can the reader look back and see that the “motionless movement leaves in [their] mind a numinous shape of the path [they] traveled.” After each of her ventures into the city, Vivian superimposes the path she traveled on top of a map of Dublin with a marker and greaseproof paper. She describes the shapes as “a fishing rod that has caught another fishing rod” or “a headless armless man, sliced vertically in two.” Only after she travels her path through the city is she able to examine her movements for a pattern, one she makes through the interpretation of her literal steps through the

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70 Lally, 123.
71 Elkin, Flâneuse: Women Walking the City, 22.
72 Williams qtd. in Parsons 4.
74 Lally 24, 47, 55, 62, 70, 85, 109, 147, 161, 172, 221.
75 Ibid, 120.
76 Alison, 5.
77 Ibid.
78 Lally, 45, 84.
city that she has plotted on a map. Sophie Calle engages with a similar sort of documentation, where she traces her pathway through Venice in order to visually understand the path she takes through the city. Alison’s description of reading a narrative, or the “motionless movement” of moving through a narrative, engages with a kind of mapping that both Vivian and Calle use to make sense of their wandering. Just as Vivian moves through the city, the reader of the narrative moves through the story. They are only able to make sense of their path in retrospect when they reach the end.

The fractal construction of the narrative Eggshells can also be considered in terms of Galen Strawson’s theories of self-experience. In “Against Narrativity,” Strawson introduces two forms of self-experience, one that involves narrativizing one’s own life, and one that does not. He defines Diachronic self-experience as a form in which “one naturally configures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.” He goes on to define the Episodic form in which “one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.” There is no “(further) past” or “(further) future” to each moment in Vivian’s life; instead, she does one thing, and then the next, and the next, each action falling away as soon as it is complete.

Episodic self-experience is a way of viewing oneself that is essential to the drifting of flânerie. In her essay “Street Haunting,” Virginia Woolf’s ambling narrator notes of herself and her wandering compatriots that “we are only gliding smoothly on the surface. The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks.” The eye does not delve for deeper meaning or see itself within a broader context. In other words, the eye does not position itself within a narrative. Instead, the eye absorbs what is presented to it and thinks no more of the object once it is gone.

However, Vivian’s particular mode of Episodic self-experience does not apply to flânerie broadly; instead, it speaks to a uniquely flâneuse way of being in the world. Like the barriers to Vivian’s linguistic comprehension within the city, Vivian confronts obstacles to positioning herself within a narrative. In the Dublin airport, Vivian follows a businessman as he:

...reads the back of a book...I write the first and last sentence of the blurb in my notebook, but there is no code or anagram, even when I add all the first letters of each word together. I follow the businessman out of the bookshop. I know his taste in books and his walk from behind; we are something close to friends...Now I walk to a green sign saying: “Meeting Point” and wait under it, but nobody comes...I leave the terminal because it has no centre, and it unmoores me. The airport is for people who are clean and efficient, people who dress like people they are not, people who know where they are going and why.

The events in this passage move episodically, presenting the events as a sequence of Vivian’s actions. The sentences begin with “He reads,” “I write,” “I follow,” “I know,” “Now I walk,” and “I leave.” This structure, which accounts for six of the seven sentences in this passage, presents the subject and the action first. As the narrative is in first person and present tense, it gives the sense that Vivian lists the actions as they occur, or as she enacts them. Vivian’s Episodic self-experience constructs the narrative itself as it jumps from disconnected moment to disconnected moment with little connective tissue in between Vivian’s actions.

79 Galen, Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” in Ratio (new series) XVII, no. 4. (Ratio, 2004), 430.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
83 Lally, 92.
84 With the exception of the deictic “now,” although the phrase in which it appears still prioritizes the subject-action construction of “I walk.”
Vivian’s hunt for clues in the blurb on the back of the book and connection under the “Meeting Point” sign are instances in which Vivian futilely attempts to construct Diachronic meaning. She removes these signs from their context, as though her Episodic view strips everything of its natural meaning. Vivian does not open the book as she hunts for an anagram; instead, she studies the blurb—or an extraction of the novel’s contents. The blurb is meant to capture the essence of the book; it describes the plot and characters in abbreviated form. As such, it is also partial: the blurb cannot give away the whole story, lest the book-shopper be left with no desire to read the book itself. The blurb is a fractal—a tantalizing, yet incomplete, story. Vivian abstracts the words into basic symbols in search of an anagram, removing it from its linguistic context as well as its narrative context.

Similarly, she fails to position the “Meeting Point” sign within a greater narrative. The “Meeting Point” sign is for people in the airport who already know one another and are separated. Vivian only grasps the sign’s literal meaning and waits for a connection that never comes. She is unable to generate a relationship, and thus a narrative, from this fragment, as it requires completion from an outside source as well as positioning within a narrative. Vivian takes both the blurb and the “Meeting Point” sign out of their intended contexts, rendering them as Episodic and therefore as bereft of narrative as Vivian herself.

Eventually, Vivian abandons the airport because she is unable to find the patterns she seeks. Vivian is entirely out of place among people who “know where they are going and why.” Their direct, destination-motivated movement is the exact opposite of a flâneuse’s walking. For Vivian, there is no ‘somewhere else.’ There is only the immediate, the here and now, her physical reality. The literature surrounding the flâneur emphasizes the moment-ness of his experience—he is not thinking about his “(further) past” or “(further) future,” as Strawson says. As he wanders, the flâneur is without narrative—he only writes of his experience later, after it is over. Even flâneuses like Sophie Calle, who record their walking as they go through film or photography, only form a narrative retrospectively; they have no sense of where their path will take them until after it has ended. In this way, Episodic self-experience is the bedrock of the flâneuse. Like the reader after they have completed the text of *Eggshells*, it is only in looking back over their movement that they are able to see a pattern form.

The difficulty in “looking back” for Vivian and constructing a vision of the path she traveled is why her wandering is particular to that of the flâneuse. Vivian rarely acknowledges the abuse she experienced as a child when her father attempted to “send [her] back” and “swap [her] for his human child” by passing his young daughter through fire or drowning her in the sea. Nevertheless, it is this insistence that Vivian belongs to a different world that drives her hunt for a portal to the faerie realm in Dublin. Vivian is unable to interpret this senseless violence within a narrative that could possibly make sense of her childhood. Thus, she lives from moment to moment, looking for answers and connection in her immediate environment. Not being able to understand the greater narrative meaning of a “Meeting Point” sign or being discomfited by people who have destinations could be read as a tragedy, one in which Vivian is unable to move on from her trauma because she cannot confront the events of her past.

However, Vivian’s inability to live Diachronically is not a failure, just as the novel is not a series of senseless episodes in which a woman wanders Dublin, terrorizing upstanding citizens with her eccentricity. Instead, the episodes that construct Vivian’s life and the perspective of the novel are a series of attempts to make sense. They demonstrate that Vivian is not passive. She is an agent who refuses the narratives people impose on her to explain her position in the world. When she passes a kiosk on the street, she muses to herself, “I’d like to live in this kiosk because it looks

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85 Ibid.
86 Strawson, 430.
87 Lally, 250.
the cosiest." To test the feasibility of this action, she lies “flat on [her] back and [stretches her] body along the length of one side” to see if her bed could fit inside the kiosk. Instead of moving steadily forward through the city, with purpose and destination, Vivian sometimes walks backward; she lies down. For Vivian, the city is a scaffolding upon which she can build her own world, one that she moves through as she pleases. Even kiosks become a place of new possibilities—rather than a functional box to house a telephone or from which to sell magazines, Vivian sees it as a potential site for a home, a place she could dwell in quite happily. As she rejects narratives that try to prescribe a certain way of being in the city and thinking about her position within it, Vivian constructs a radical second reality in which she does not need to explain her selfhood in terms of anybody else’s language. She does not experience the city as anyone else does and produces a new series of texts testifying to that fact. She rewrites the city as a place that is all her own.

Through her refusal to live by its codes, Vivian unleashes the liberating potential of the flâneuse walking in the city. Vivian’s transversal of the city presents an alternative mode of being in the metropolis that is only made tangible through her flânerie. Like when Vivian repeats the word “Kiosk” so many times it almost loses its meaning, and writes it down on a piece of paper “to make it real,” her walking through the city ‘makes the city real’ through the creation of the path she travels. Unlike the typical conception of the flâneur, the flâneuse does not just passively absorb her environment, though that can be an aspect of her experience. Instead, the flâneuse draws to the forefront the impossibility of moving through a city without in some way participating in its generation. She changes her environment through the assertion of her presence, and of her perspective. The literary theorist George Butte argues that subjects are both “a body, an experience of that body and its gestures, and intentionality grounded in that body—and a mirroring of other bodies, gestures, experiences and discourses.” The flâneuse is aware of the gaze that falls on her—she acts in spite of it. She changes her environment through the assertion of her presence, and of her perspective. She sees the mechanisms of the city telling her where to go, the narratives written by other people that profess to explain to her who she is. Instead of accepting these, she adapts. She walks, and by walking, articulates a different way of moving that responds to these forces, and offers an alternative.

As the flâneuse acts in the face of obstacles that attempt to prevent her from walking, she mirrors back to the city her own presence, which, in turn, adapts to her movement through its space, and so on. This mirroring creates an “embodied community,” the “partial and always partly blinded transcendence of the subject body.” Like the flâneur, the flâneuse transcends the bounds of her own subjectivity. The flâneur’s absorption into the crowd is a paradox—he is part of the crowd even as he gazes from outside of it. He is detached—and meant to be so—through the emphasis on his anonymity and ability to gaze without being gazed upon. The flâneuse remains attached. The mirroring of gazes, both her own and those within the city, makes her as integral to the conception of the city as the city is to the articulation of her own self-hood. Instead of being subjective, like the observing, drifting eye of the flâneur, the flâneuse is intersubjective. She remains attached to her own subjectivity, the awareness of herself within the crowd and within the city, while also transcending the “subject body,” merging into the crowd as she walks. Her walking is not a given—she must demand each step she takes from the city that tries to regulate her movement. As she walks, she is self-apparent—she asserts her presence. She forces the city into dialogue with her.

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88Ibid, 209.
89Ibid, 203.
90Ibid, 199.
91George, Butte, I know That You Know That I Know: Narrating Subjects from Moll Flanders to Marnie (Ohio State University Press, 2004), 5.
92Ibid.
The Numinous Path Traveled

In the summer of 2022, I followed Vivian’s winding path through the pages of *Eggsheells*, onto a plane out of San Francisco, and into the streets of Dublin. I tried to walk as Vivian walks. I hunted down the places she mentions, taking guesses at her route every time my path forked left or right. I photographed myself in the places she traveled. Every night when I returned to my Airbnb in Temple Bar, I traced my path for the day in Google Maps.

Though I followed Vivian’s footsteps as closely as possible, the maps I drew at the end of the day never looked like hers. I visited the same places and tried to take the same streets, but the city had changed. Roads were blocked, buildings had been torn down, new ones erected. The crowd buffeted me in different directions, or I made a detour when something in the distance caught my eye. Eventually, I stopped referring to the text of *Eggsheells*, which I carried with me on each excursion into Dublin. Like Mrs. Dalloway’s flowers, it provided the pretense of a destination. I began to recognize familiar landmarks, and where they stood in relation to one another. I pieced the city together with my feet. Each night, the curves, backtracks, and intersections of my pathways on the map of Dublin were all my own.

Before she published *Suite vénitienne*, Sophie Calle invited Jean Baudrillard to write an accompanying essay to the book. In this essay, “Please Follow Me,” he asks, “And you, have you already closed your eyes on your own image, behaved blindly, lost your way blindly, loved blindly, and sensed in the darkness the tactile detour of the streets, the tactile detour of ideas?”" To behave blindly, to sense rather than think, to feel the world around one, to be an intrinsic part of it, rather than to just pass through it: this is what it means to inhabit the city through flânerie. But by walking where she is not meant to, by walking in a way no one else understands, the flâneuse’s footsteps propose a new path through the city—one that is ultimately not determined by gender. Though created by women walking transgressively through the city, the meandering path of the flâneuse can be taken by anyone who walks (or reads) against the barriers that attempt to constrict their movement.

Calle follows Henri B. for reasons incomprehensible to anyone but herself. She fears a confrontation with him because “There is such a gap between his thoughts and mine. I’m the only one

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93Baudrillard, 81.
dreaming."94 Calle’s steps actualize the ‘dreaming’ that compels her through the city. Her wandering is irrational—there is no real reason for Calle to follow Henri B. Rather than justify herself, she walks. She creates a path through the city liberated from the conventions that would prevent its existence. Like Vivian rewriting the city of Dublin, she generates her own logic of movement, in which she is no longer a transgressor. She changes the codes by which she is understood. She rewrites the old world with her own.

Calle and I both walked in the footsteps of others, driven by an impulse to inhabit the places they inhabited, to see the world through their eyes. But both of us saw the world through our own eyes instead. We could not help but make new meaning as we walked. My pathway through Dublin reflects the work of Lally, Woolf, and Elkin as much as it reflects my own. We are now part of a greater whole—the city, myself, the writers who came before me, and the narratives we create together.

J. Hillis Miller asks whether narratives reveal the world as it is or create new possibilities for the world as it can be.95 The flâneuse answers that it is both. Her walking makes visible the invisible boundaries of the city. In seeing them, we can begin to challenge them. The flâneuse does not just participate in the flux of the city; she participates in its generation. The flâneuse’s steps are enunciative. They speak the city into being.

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94 Calle, 25.
Bibliography


