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On the Notion of the Counter-Flâneur: A Response to Cecile Sandten

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This response is a contribution to the debate on "'Vancouver Walking': Contemporary Canadian Urban Poetry" (http://www.connotations.de/debate/ries-counter-flaneur-response-to-cecile-sandten). Contributions to this debate are welcome; contact editors@connotations.de.

Abstract

This essay responds to Cecile Sandten's article "'Vancouver Walking': Contemporary Canadian Urban Poetry" and critically examines the concept of the "counter-flâneur." Sandten adopts it from Isabel Carrera-Suarez, defines it in opposition to a supposedly unified conceptualisation of the "modernist flâneur" and employs it as an analytical tool in the study of contemporary flânerie texts. The essay challenges this binary framework by arguing that there is no single, coherent idea of the modernist flâneur. Instead, it suggests that the history of the trope is marked by internal tensions and contradictions that have always allowed for practices resembling counter-flânerie. To substantiate this claim, the essay first delineates the heterogeneity present in classic literary descriptions and theoretical accounts of the flâneur. It then examines the relationship between privilege and precariousness in the history of flânerie, before concluding with a re-reading of Meredith Quartermain's poem "Thanksgiving" that is grounded in the assumption of diverse traditions of flânerie.

Introduction

In her article "'Vancouver Walking': Contemporary Canadian Urban Poetry," Cecile Sandten analyses three poetry collections by contemporary Canadian authors Meredith Quartermain, Michael Turner, and Bud Osborn through the lens of the so-called "counter-flâneur," a concept developed by Isabel Carrera-Suarez in "The Stranger *Flâneuse* and the Aesthetics of Pedestrianism: Writing the Post-Diasporic Metropolis" (2015). I take issue with the way both Sandten and Carrera-Suarez conceptualise the "counter-flâneur" as a figure opposed to what they term "modernist flâneurs" (Sandten 231), "the anonymous Parisian dandy" (Sandten 232), or a "disembodied eye" (Meskimmon, qtd. in Carrera-Suarez 857)—and as emerging chronologically *after* the modernist flâneur. Instead, I argue that the form of flânerie described by Sandten is deeply rooted in the European literary tradition of flânerie rather than representing a reversal of it.

According to Carrera-Suarez and Sandten, the counter-flâneur stands in opposition to an "invisibl[e] and untouched" (Meskimmon, qtd. in Carrera-Suarez 857) flâneur figure typified by the "anonymous Parisian dandy" (Sandten 232). This alternative flâneur is embodied, situated, and "physical[ly] and emotional[ly] engage[d] with the city" (Carrera-Suarez 857). Carrera-Suarez draws on Marsha Meskimmon's aesthetic of pedestrianism, distinguishing it both from the flâneur's detached gaze and from Michel de Certeau's concept of the walker, who subverts the imposed power structures of the city by navigating novel pathways through it. As Meskimmon's study focuses on female artists engaging in this aesthetic of pedestrianism, the counter-flâneur (or rather: flâneuse) is linked to notions of alterity, and both authors locate the figure in multicultural, post-colonial metropolises. For these counter-flâneurs, boundaries are not to be transcended but are embodied and interrogated. As Sandten writes, they "observe, question, and reimagine a number of different boundaries and urban identities" (231). Additionally, Sandten emphasises the "precariousness" of the post-co-

lonial counter-flâneurs she discusses in her article as opposed to a position of privilege (231). Ultimately, both scholars present the counter-flâneur as an "evolved" (Carrera-Suarez 856) or "transformed" (Sandten 232) version of the "modernist flâneur[…]" (Sandten 231).

I would argue otherwise. In my opinion, there is no single, modernist prototype of the flâneur within the European tradition, and there already exists a rich tradition of what could be termed counter-flânerie in the history of the trope. I do not disagree with Sandten's nuanced readings of the poetry collections; however, I contend that the poems draw on multiple strands within the tradition of flânerie, rather than articulating a wholly new, oppositional trope. In what follows, I will first address the assumed opposition between the counter-flâneur and the so-called modernist flâneur; then explore the relationship between flânerie, privilege, and precariousness; and, finally, I will demonstrate how a poem like Meredith Quartermain's "Thanksgiving" engages with diverse traditions of flânerie, rather than relying solely on the singular figure of the counter-flâneur.

The Modernist Flâneur

As many have noted (see, for example, Tester 7), the flâneur and the practice of flânerie are notoriously hard to define due to the trope's varied history. For my discussion, I therefore adopt Harald Neumeyer's minimalist definition of flânerie: flânerie is an open paradigm of aimless strolling through urban space, functionalised in diverse ways (see Neumeyer 17). To qualify as flânerie, a character's movement must satisfy all three criteria: it must be characterised as strolling, be aimless, and take place within the space of a city.[1]

Despite this flexibility, notions of a supposedly typical modernist flâneur, or of the flâneur as a typical subject of modernity (see, for example, Meskimmon 17), abound not only in secondary literature on the trope but also in its theoretical conceptualisations. Famously, Walter Benjamin's attempt at a "theory of the flâneur" (Benjamin, "Brief" 187; my translation), centred on analogies between commodity and flâneur,

was intended as a cornerstone of his theory of modernity. Yet, it is equally well-established that Benjamin never developed a unified theory of flânerie (see, for example, Neumeyer 14-24; Keidel 41-46; Vila-Cabanes, *Re-Imagining* 5-15; Gomolla 10; Solnit 199; and Ries 32-33). His writings on flânerie are marked by contradictions and inconsistencies, partly due to the fragmentary nature of his work, and partly due to the wide range of flânerie examples he cites. For instance, he both labels[2] and then later rejects[3] the man followed by the unnamed narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" as a flâneur, making it difficult to determine what traits he ultimately assigns to the figure.[4] Due to these and other contradictions, there is no unified theory of the flâneur as the subject of modernity to be gleaned from Benjamin's writings.

Nevertheless, the implicit reference in the phrase "modernist flaneur" is usually to Charles Baudelaire's seminal essay on the "The Painter of Modern Life," in which he develops his theory of the flâneur as emblematic of the modernist artist. Both Sandten (see 229) and Carrera-Suarez (see 854) also invoke this conception, associating it with "detachment" (Sandten 229), "anonym[ity]" (232)/"invisib[ility]" (Carrera-Suarez 857) and "dandy[ism]" (Sandten 232). While most of these traits certainly form part of Baudelaire's concept, overemphasising them overlooks the paradoxes inherent in his theorisation of flânerie.

Anonymity is indeed central to the Baudelairian flâneur, described as "a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito" (Baudelaire, "Painter" 9), which shields him from real interactions with others. Similarly, detachment is alluded to in Baudelaire's image of the flâneur as being "alone in a bustling crowd" (*Spleen* 20). In this, he does not—as contemporary writer Olivia Laing puts it—"engage with the reality of other people" (223), but he uses them simply as triggers for his inspiration by projecting imagined lives onto passers-by. Distance and detachment certainly occur in the practice of the Baudelairian artist, who does not aim at a realistic depiction of his objects but rather draws on the transient experience of those encounters to capture the spirit of modernity through his flânerie.

Yet, the issue is already more complex at this point: although Baudelaire devotes an entire chapter in "The Painter of Modern Life" to the dandy (see 26-29), he explicitly denies that his exemplary flâneur Monsieur G. is a dandy, precisely because he is *not* detached from his surroundings but rather "dominated […] by an insatiable passion" and a "passionate spectator" ("Painter" 9). That is, even though Baudelaire alludes to a certain kind of distance from the crowd in the flâneur, he sees him neither as a dandy nor as unaffected by his surroundings.[5] In fact, the flâneur's "passion and profession are to become one flesh with the crowd" (Baudelaire, "Painter" 9), and he is essentially curious about urban life.

Indeed, anonymity and dandyism sit uneasily together. While the flâneur does enjoy his being incognito, dandyism thrives on performance and visibility, traits usually not associated with anonymity.[6] This is not to say that the dandy can never be a flâneur (see n6), but neither is every flâneur a dandy, nor is every dandy a flâneur. Sandten explicitly points out that "the heyday of European imperialism" is linked to "the rise of the male, middle-class dandy flâneur evoked by Benjamin" (229). I agree that the economic success of the French bourgeoisie, among whom the practice of flânerie in dandyesque attire was popular (see n6), is inextricably linked to imperialism and colonisation, but I disagree when it comes to assuming that this was the only kind of flânerie discussed by Benjamin or equating it too closely with the flâneur as artist. What is problematic about defining the counter-flâneur in opposition to an assumed modernist flâneur is rather the conjecture that a single version of flânerie, based on the abovementioned characteristics, dominates the tradition. In reality, those traits occur in multiple, sometimes contradictory, configurations throughout the history of flânerie, several of which might be individually referenced within contemporary flânerie texts.[7]

As Baudelaire's essay shows, many traits associated with the modernist flâneur are riddled with contradictions: the flâneur is both distant from and immersed in the crowd; his anonymity depends on being seen *in a certain way*; and even his supposed disembodiment is questionable,

given that flânerie is fundamentally a *bodily* practice of walking. Thus, the supposed characteristics of the modernist flâneur, against which the counter-flâneur is defined, are far more unstable and internally paradoxical than the binary opposition suggests.

The Privilege of the Flâneur

Nevertheless, I do not think that the main objective of both Sandten's and Carrera-Suarez's comments on the modernist flâneur is to proclaim a single, unified concept but rather to highlight the trope's entanglement with privilege and power. Yet, in my opinion, both privilege and precariousness are embedded in the origins of the flâneur trope. The counter-flâneur's subjection to, as well as resistance against, discourses of power can therefore just as well be traced back to earlier conceptualisations. Moreover, Sandten and Carrera-Suarez omit what is arguably the flâneur's most significant source of power: representation. To further elucidate this point, I briefly sketch how power and precariousness intersect across the history of flânerie.

The flâneur has long been linked to social privilege. He is typically male and—unlike the flâneuse—conforms to nineteenth-century gender norms by moving freely through public urban spaces, even though this distinction primarily applies to upper- and upper-middle class members who could afford to relegate women to the private sphere of the home.[8] Flânerie also implies leisure and financial stability, with figures like the fashionable bourgeois flâneur displaying their economic success through public strolling (see n6).

Yet, flânerie also intersects with economic precariousness. The writers and journalists who later adopt this practice are often far from financially secure. Baudelaire himself, as Benjamin claims, often wandered the streets of Paris to escape his creditors (see *Gesammelte Schriften* 550). In fact, the border between strolling leisurely along the streets and actually living on the streets is a contested one in the flânerie tradition. David Kishik, for instance, argues that the unhoused became the twentieth-century flâneurs (see 182-83), yet examples of this kind of

precarious flânerie already occur much earlier, as is the case with Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), which anticipates Baudelaire's *Artificial Paradises* (1860) and constitutes an autobiographical account of De Quincey's opium addiction, including extensive passages of the author strolling through London while under the influence of opium.[9]

This is, however, not to say that instances of power or privilege disappear from the writings of De Quincey and Baudelaire. Especially in Baudelaire's work, the poet is still framed as a "*prince*" whose power becomes most evident in his representation of the city, which he bends to his imagination.[10] It is in the flâneur's writings that he appears most powerful. This power is particularly evident in the genre of the physiologies, literary sketches that classify the urban types through the flâneur's observational gaze, implicitly asserting the writer's authority over the urban landscape. While they often include idealised descriptions of what constitutes a flâneur, the implicit assumption is that these sketches are based on the observations of a writer engaged in the practice of flânerie. The ordering principles and stereotyping involved in the flâneur's classification of types quite explicitly wield the power to produce knowledge about the city and its inhabitants. A similar argument might be made regarding flânerie texts *avant la lettre,* such as Addison and Steele's *The Spectator*, which frequently reports normatively on manners and social issues in eighteenth-century London (see Ries 56-61). Overall, this also points to the power dynamics inherent in representation itself, with the inhabitants of the city being turned into objects of the flâneur's gaze.[11]

At the same time, these texts also reveal the limits of that authority. The predominance of genres such as the physiologies, essays, or poems—as small forms—attests to the fragmentation with which the strolling subject is confronted in their experience of the city and runs counter to any attempt at representing the city in its totality. Charles Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, for example, his early journalistic texts in which he describes various aspects of nineteenth-century London, breaks up the representation of the city into the eponymous "sketches":

short essays devoted to "The Streets—Morning" (49-54), "The Streets—Night" (55-60), and "London Recreations" (94-99). Similarly, Baudelaire, as the plural in the titles implies, relies on small poetic forms in his *Petits Poèmes en prose* or "Tableaux Parisiens." The fragmentation of the flâneur's perspective implied by these short forms intensifies in modernist texts such as Hope Mirrlees's *Paris: A Poem*, which represents the city through an array of disparate impressions, ranging from the inclusion of musical notes to elements of concrete poetry and references to contemporary advertisements. Thus, the flâneur's representational power is constantly undermined by the urban environment's complexity.

One might interject that this falls still far short of the embodied precariousness central to the counter-flaneur. Marsha Meskimmon's notion of embodiedness, which is crucial to her "aesthetic of pedestrianism" (21) and foundational for Carrera-Suarez's concept of the counter-flâneur, foregrounds precisely this aspect. Meskimmon contrasts the detached, disembodied flâneur with the pedestrian who inhabits a body that is socially read, situated, and exposed to cultural norms:

> The 'body' in this context is not a biological given or imperative but the site at which biology and cultural productions meet and produce a sense of identity or subjectivity. The pedestrian's body and embodiment are themselves a space which permits engaged interaction with the world around her. She is not a disembodied eye like the theoretical flâneur who wanders through the city 'invisibly' and untouched, but a sentient participant in the city. (21)

Meskimmon thus shifts the focus to the interaction between embodied identity and spatial experience. Yet, the idea that the flâneur is subjected to economic and political forces, such as capitalism or the technocratic redesign of the city, is not new. Flânerie has always been shaped by larger systems of power and control as suggested in Benjamin's description of Paris's remodelling under Baron Haussmann (see *Gesammelte Schriften* 589). What Meskimmon then adds is the locatedness of the pedestrian in a complex field of discursive practices where identity to a certain extent determines interaction, that is, where the flâ-

neur cannot remain invisible due to identity markers that possibly assign a marginalised position to those practicing flânerie. The artists Meskimmon describes in her study engage in a re-negotiation of identity that deconstructs the hegemonial distribution of centre and margin or subject and object. A consciousness of the performative nature of identity, however, is deeply embedded in the history of the flâneur as the proximity of the flâneur to the dandy as well as some nineteenth-century flâneurs' parody of bourgeois attire proves.[12]

Equally, "an engaged interaction with the world" indeed occurs in the flânerie tradition in terms of a political flânerie: Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* (1781), a politically charged collection of essays on life in pre-revolutionary Paris that is often referred to as being paradigmatic for the flânerie tradition (see Köhn 17-26); Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1836), which includes explicit pleas for empathy with London's poor (see 58-59); or A. B. C. Merriman-Labor's *Britons Through Negro Spectacles* (1909), a satirical flânerie-text-cum-travelogue that presents the British capital through the eyes of an immigrant from the African continent.[13] Flânerie can therefore be both affirmative and resistant to such discourses, depending on which power structures are under consideration.

Hence, rather than equating flânerie with privilege alone, it is, in my view, more productive to examine how power *operates within* flânerie: how it is exerted, questioned, reproduced, resisted. This approach opens up space to explore how (contemporary) flânerie texts critically engage with the history of the trope and how they might themselves participate in or expose discourses of power, particularly from an intersectional standpoint.

Case Study: Re-Reading Meredith Quartermain's "Thanksgiving"

Apart from Osborn's poems, the negotiation of identity central to the concept of the counter-flâneur is, in fact, largely absent from the poetry collections Sandten discusses. Moreover, not all lyrical personae speak from positions of marginalisation, and all of their authors are white;

just one is female. Notably, the identity of the lyrical persona is only foregrounded in Osborn's poems, which Sandten links most directly to precariousness. By contrast, the identities of the lyrical personae in both Quartermain's and Turner's poetry collections appear largely irrelevant to their perception of the city, suggesting that their identity aligns with societal norms. These poetry collections are rather proof of an engaged kind of flânerie coupled with fragmented form than playing with the identity of their strolling lyrical personae. Hence, I suggest to distinguish between Osborn's work and that of Turner and Quartermain.

Quartermain's collection draws on various elements from the flânerie tradition, combining historiographical approaches with both the fragmented perspective and form typical of flânerie texts, as well as a political orientation. As Sandten explains, the lyrical persona of the poem "Thanksgiving" uncovers repressed histories while walking through the city, "transforming them in a postmodernist manner into multi-perspectival assemblages" (233).

Yet this historiographical function is not new to flânerie. As Benjamin writes of Franz Hessel's *Walking in Berlin*, flânerie can function as "a walking remembrance" ("Return" xiii); he famously notes in the *Arcades Project* that "[t]he street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. […] a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private" (*Arcades* 524). Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer suggests that the flâneur allows "the past [to] remain[] attached to the places where it was at home during its lifetime" ("Straße" 173; my translation). Though the figure of the flâneur as mnemotechnician might not yet occur in Baudelaire's version of the trope, it certainly precedes contemporary iterations like Quartermain's.

The poem's fragmented form likewise fits into a long-standing critique of the flâneur as a coherent, sovereign subject, particularly common in modernist texts like Mirrlees's *Paris: A Poem*. And despite claims that the flâneur is apolitical due to his detachment (see, for example, Vila-Cabanes, *Re-Imagining* 19), many examples point to politically engaged forms of flânerie.

Quartermain's "Thanksgiving" reflects such influences: the flâneur as historiographer, the fragmentation of perception, and the construction of counter-narratives. The poem presents an individual perspective that deviates from "official archival records" (Sandten 239), not to replace them with a new totality, but to open a space for alternative histories through its fragmented form. This is particularly significant given that Quartermain herself does not belong to the marginalised groups she writes about, such as the Chinese immigrant community, whose oppression is referenced in the collection (see Sandten 238) or the First Nations people addressed in "Thanksgiving" (see Sandten 235). Instead, the poem adopts what Andreas Mahler calls a "limited, subject-oriented view of the city" (22; my translation), typical of flânerie, to acknowledge the boundaries of its own historiographical stance, an account that remains open to further articulation by members of the marginalised groups it refers to. Moreover, the poem's fragmented form resists easy access to its historical references, requiring readers to engage with Vancouver's history as evidenced by the collection's endnotes (see Quartermain 111-16). This interplay of historiographical references with fragmented flâneur experience invites readers to undertake their own flânerie through the city's past. The flâneur trope thus implies both the white artist's representional power to create an alternative perspective on the city and the limits of any subjective view of it.

In conclusion, I reject the notion of the so-called counter-flâneur as an analytical category, particularly in the context of contemporary flânerie texts, because it obscures the diversity of the trope of the flâneur and limits access to the complexity of references and their interactions within individual flânerie texts.

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NOTES

[1]It must be noted, however, that the flâneur's supposed aimlessness is not as clear-cut as it seems. Neumeyer argues that aimlessness does not imply a lack of intention but rather the absence of a fixed destination. As long as intention does not determine the flâneur's path, his status remains intact (Neumeyer 52). Nevertheless, Neumeyer acknowledges that intention shapes perception. If the function of flânerie alters how the city is perceived, it stands to reason that it might also guide movement, whether consciously or not. A choice at a crossroads may reflect the broader purpose behind the walk. Aimlessness, then, is not absolute but fragile—a condition constantly at risk. For a more extensive discussion of Neumeyer's influential definition of flânerie, see Ries (18-20).

[2]See Benjamin (*Writer* 79): "This unknown man is the flâneur."

[3]See Benjamin (*Writer* 188): "Baudelaire was moved to equate the man of the crowd, whom Poe's narrator follows throughout the length and breadth of nocturnal London, with the flâneur. It is hard to accept this view. The man of the crowd is no flâneur. In him, composure has given way to manic behavior."

[4]See also Neumeyer (15); Vila-Cabanes, *Re-imagining* (12); and Müller (208).

[5]The paradoxical relationship between distance and proximity does not only occur in Baudelaire's conceptualisation of the flâneur but is essentially tied to the flâneur's status of an observer in the midst of things (see Müller 211).

[6]In general, the relationship between the dandy and the flâneur is a contested one, with some scholars arguing that the two must be considered entirely distinct from one another (see Müller 209; Vila-Cabanes, *Re-imagining* 44), while others suggest that flânerie and dandyism may in fact coincide (see Hohmann 130; Wuthenow 190; Herbert 34-35; Köhn 28-30; Keidel 14; Gomolla 39; Ries 22-24). This debate is further complicated by the import of dandyism to France during a wave of French anglomania, in which the French bourgeoisie adopted the external features of the dandy—"British top hat and formal clothes" (Herbert 34-35)—as a means to demonstrate their economic success to the outside world. This performance was based on the assumption that Britishness was associated with prosperity. At the same time, artists such as Honoré de Balzac criticised this merely superficial appropriation of dandyist fashion, contrasting it with the internal attitude of elegant life as exemplified by what he sees as the true dandyism embodied by Beau Brummel (see aphorisms 39, 40, 45, and 48). The only viable synthesis of anonymity and external dandyism may thus be found in flâneurs who adopted British fashion to blend in with the crowd and gather material for their writings. See, for instance, Herbert (34-35), who notes that "[i]n his British top hat and formal clothes, however, the *flâneur* was not immediately distinguished from the mass of French upper-class men of the Second Empire." The practice of flânerie became especially popular among writers and journalists who described the city or reported on local gossip for newspapers, which—thanks to technological advances and the integration of advertisements—were becoming increasingly accessible to a broader readership (see Keidel 14; Neumeyer 89-91; Köhn 34; and Kracauer, *Offenbach* 73).

[7]For a discussion of the various functionalisations of flânerie during the European modernist period, see Neumeyer (67-286), who uses the figure of the flâneur as an interpretative lens to demonstrate the existence of a plurality of modernities.

[8]The broader issue of the flâneur's relationship to privilege is reflected in debates surrounding the concept of the flâneuse. Theoretical reflections on this figure begin with Janet Wolff's seminal essay on "The Invisible Flâneuse," which was influentially challenged by Elizabeth Wilson's article on "The Invisible Flâneur." Whereas Wolff argues that flânerie was essentially inaccessible to women in the nineteenth century, and largely ignored as a female practice in prominent theoretical discussions such as Benjamin's, Wilson contends not only that women were indeed present in the public spaces of nineteenth-century cities, but also that the flâneur himself is often a marginalised figure who "represents masculinity as unstable, caught up in the violent dislocations that characterized urbanization" (109). Furthermore, Deborah Parsons argues that the origins of the flâneuse can be traced back to Baudelaire, who imagined women as observers in the city, suggesting that this is where "the beginnings of the conceptual idea of a *flâneuse*" (24) can be located. While this does not deny that the situation of the flâneuse is more precarious than that of the flâneur, it shows that flânerie is not exclusively or inherently tied to privilege.

[9]For a discussion of De Quincey's text as an example of flânerie literature, see Vila-Cabanes, *Flâneur* (62-64).

[10]See also Neumeyer, who refers to Baudelaire as the "sovereign of the city" (135; my translation).

[11]This is also implied in Carrera-Suarez's reference to the flâneur as a "disembodied [that is, unaffected] eye" (Meskimmon, qtd. in Carrera-Suarez 857).

[12]On this practice, see Vila-Cabanes, *Re-imagining* 40.

[13]Merriman-Labor does not specify exactly where his narrator comes from.

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