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Editorial

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Editorial

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Preamble

To attempt to define *flânerie* is to get lost in a prickly bramble of urban rhythms, decay, planning, demolition, alienation, construction, voyeurism, renewal, melancholy, expansion, celebration, consumption, and spectacular display—an exhilarating brew of sociology and poetics. And if the blatant mixed metaphor of “bramble” and “brew” may offend, it speaks nevertheless to the collision of disparity that characterizes urban experience—country clashes with city, private with public, past with present, slow with fast. Allusions to nature’s weedy remnants along city streets and to an intoxicating aesthetic traversal of those streets, respectively, “bramble” and “brew” bracket terms describing rapid urban transformation and its affective intensity, which is *flânerie*’s preferred milieu for the recording and analysis of metropolitan sensations. Of course, my wide-ranging and excessively serial list applies not only to the effort at coming to conceptual terms with *flânerie*, but also to the practice itself.

Flânerie probably derives from the French verb *flâner*, which means “to stroll, to loiter, to dawdle,” and at its most literal denotes idling, pedestrian pleasantries.¹ The practitioner of *flânerie* is a *flâneur/flâneuse*. An excursive, restorative nature walk that induces poetic reverie and even poetry itself may come to mind. Indeed, the creative transcription of pleasure attained from walking through the natural world is almost as old as the hills that inspire it. *Flânerie* at its most sophisticated does involve leisurely walking that produces creative work, but it certainly does not evoke a distant, georgic past. Nevertheless, it is true that rural inflections often filter through the discourse of *flânerie*. Consider, for example, the notion of “intra-urban walking tours” to discover the “urban picturesque” with the purpose of tidying a city’s chaotic multiplicities (Bramen, 2000) or of identifying a good spot for a bit of urban-design adjustment (Isaacs, 2000).

Yet the typical 18th-century picturesque sketching tour that sought to domesticate the wilderness by distilling it into Romantic imagery is much too reductive to encompass the complex products of *flânerie*’s urban engagement. Social philosopher Walter Benjamin, *flânerie*’s preeminent theoretician, is much better at utilizing the trope of rural wandering toward defining its urban version, and his characterization from the essay “Berlin Chronicle,” bears quotation at some length:

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance—nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city—as one loses oneself in a forest—that calls for a quite different schooling.

Then, signboard and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest (1999, p. 598).

Benjamin's references to acute urban immersion induced through wilderness-guide savvy are ubiquitous throughout *The Arcades Project*, his unfinished yet encyclopedic study of 19th-century bourgeois Paris (Benjamin, 2002). In the section of *The Arcades Project* dedicated to the flâneur known as **Convolute M**, Benjamin exhaustively documents descriptions of forest-scout acumen applied to municipal prowling by the wildly enthusiastic French fan base of James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), everyone from Dumas to Balzac to Hugo and beyond (pp. 416-449).² Benjamin declares these novelists to be indebted to Cooper for their ability to give "scope to the experiences of the hunter" in their urban settings (p. 439). A hunter's keen senses serve "the principle of flânerie," which requires an intense, multisensory experience of city inhabitants, venues, scenes, and landmarks in order to properly detect modernity's metropolitan routes and detours so that "a new Romantic conception of landscape emerges—of landscape that seems, rather, to be a cityscape ..." (p. 420).

So far, my present discussion of flânerie's rural traces digresses considerably from more conventional introductions of a practice that emerged in conjunction with the industrializing, modernizing cities of 19th-century Europe. In fact, the beginning of flânerie's praxis away from mere urban idling toward the weightier responsibility of taking a city's measure—most notably in Charles Baudelaire's 1863 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" (Baudelaire & Mayne, 1970)—roughly coincides with the coining of the term *urbanization* in 1867.³ And while it might seem that the emergence of such a neologism would mark a widening distinction between the rural and the urban, its appearance actually marks the beginning of discourses that recognize the narrowing of the city/country divide. Now, almost 150 years after urbanization's coinage signaled cities' expansion, *rurbanization* and *peri-urbanization* are among the newest maxims to account for the extent of this growth. The more familiar *suburban* and *urban sprawl* are of older vintage and perhaps more prone to characterizing fringing edges between the urban and the rural rather than their out-and-out blurring by 21st-century globalization's border-transgressing flows of information, goods, and people.

Make no mistake: today's mingling of city and country skews urban. There is no returning to the traditional equilibrium (not that it ever truly existed) of longstanding between the country and the city, with "country" standing in for originary purity and "city" for civilization's necessary evils, generally inclining in the western popular imagination toward favoring the pastoral.⁴ The anti-pastoral, urban myth of the city as the true source of cultural production, which took shape during the Enlightenment, is not available for reprise either: it fell even faster than its pastoral counterpoint in the face of the inevitable cycles of urban decline. Today, city and country are shot through with each other's traits,

rural greenery wired with urban circuitry, the concrete jungle submitted to sustainability. Such is the nature of the “third urban revolution” (with urban emergence and urban industrialization comprising the first and second revolutions, respectively) that becomes a global phenomenon whereby an unprecedented, predominantly urban earth witnesses new ecosystems produced by megalopolitan agglomerations. Conversely, post-industrial metropolitan centers may recover their environmental prehistories (Short, 2006, pp. 177-187). The statistically laden Venice Architecture Biennale of 2006, “Cities, People, Society, Architecture,” and its subsequent re-presentation at London’s Tate Modern as “Global Cities” in 2007 feature a statement by curator Richard Burdett that embodies the notion of the third urban revolution:

The 21st century will be the first truly urban era, in which more than 75% of the world’s population will live in urban areas, much of it in mega-cities with more than 20 million inhabitants concentrated in the countries undergoing rapid development in Asia, Africa and South America. In the meantime, many Western and European cities are shrinking, or have been forced to re-invent themselves in order to adapt to a post-industrial condition (Burdett, 2006).

The above discussion may seem at the moment like a rather circuitous path through urban environmental history just to make the point that Walter Benjamin’s ambulant-urban-connoisseur-as-forest-scout metaphor anticipates current thinking about the rural/urban divide. I hope, however, that it soon will become clear that Benjamin’s prescience will also apply to the particular positioning of the flâneuse on today’s global stage, which is the theme of this special issue of *Wagadu*.

Flânerie Then and Now

A solitary, eccentric yet respectable urbanite with a touch of the dandy and a leisurely gait, the flâneur was a fixture on 19th-century Parisian thoroughfares as soon as they could enhance unhurried perambulation with a certain pedestrian right-of-way, sufficient “crowd cover,” and magnetic urban display. Throughout the first of half of the century, the shopping passages known as arcades that appeared throughout metropolitan Europe, with a particular concentration in Paris, quickly became preferred sites for flânerie. Arcades’ glass-ceilinged corridors admitted just enough of the natural environment in the form of light and sky to confer a certain landscape status upon their passages, which in their early days often housed further simulations of landscape in the form of dioramas and panoramas (Benjamin, 2002, pp. 527-536). The glittering, mercantile window displays lining the arcades were the “flora” that completed these walkways’ “urban naturalism.” Obviously, the arcades were not typically rural, picturesque paths yielding the contemplative rewards of ruined abbeys amidst overgrown foliage. Instead, their picturesque pleasures rewarded a

consciousness more reflexive, more “kaleidoscopic,” as Baudelaire describes it, a consciousness prone to an instantaneous immersion into the mutable disarrays of merchandise and people (Baudelaire & Mayne, 1970, p. 9). Like *kaleidoscope*, *phantasmagoria* describes a pre-cinematographic visual experience; it is a term for a magic lantern performance by which the means of projection are hidden and therefore heighten a “supernatural” effect to viewers not yet accustomed to the moving image. Benjamin invented the notion of “phantasmagoria of the urban” to apply to the dreamlike fantasies that intermingle with one’s waking experience of modern cities (Pile, 2005, pp. 19-20). It is not surprising that both Baudelaire and Benjamin would chose such terms of ocular derangement: they characterize flânerie as confronted by urban modernity’s dizzying overlap of banal everyday street life with architectural demolition and construction, rekindled memories of what was there before, commodity display, and all the new media comprising the urban spectacle. From the very start, this experience has been astonishing as well as both mobilizing and distracting, and today it is extended and even overwrought by the effects of 21st-century globalization. Right now, the terminological currency for the intertwining of the quotidian and phantasmagoric throughout today’s burgeoning megalopoli (especially applied to those beyond the strictly urban as well as beyond the west) is “urban imaginary” (Cinar & Bender, 2007), which despite its contemporaneity increasingly requires old-fashioned flanerierie’s embodied sensibilities for its artistic and intellectual rendering.⁵

By the second half of the 19th century, both kaleidoscopic and phantasmagoric consciousness were well on their way toward creating future urban imaginaries, magnified as they were by the ever more spectacular deployments of urban design, planning, and architecture that burst out of the Parisian arcades and onto the sidewalks and boulevards broadened by Napoleon III’s “urban renewal” policies (Harvey, 2003). More fluvial crowds (efficiently thinned-out by omnibus transportation vastly improved by the macadam-smoothed rides) enabled a better drift for the flâneur whom Benjamin promotes from scout to detective (2002, pp. 439-442). Flânerie throughout wider Paris provided the flâneur with greater opportunities to derive pleasures and shocks from his observation of the urban experience, which he would ultimately recode into a poetics informing his literary, visual, and/or intellectual work. His insistently commodity-resistant and somewhat undercover glide through the crowd served as a critical thinking tool for a simultaneously subjective immersion in and dispassionate representation of the modern metropolis, and for this Benjamin elevates flânerie yet again—now to the level of the scientific—with the memorable description “botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin & Demetz, 1986, p. 36).

Benjamin’s constant tinkering with the flâneur’s “professional profile” throughout **Convolute M** (scout, hunter, detective, botanist, geologist, artist, journalist . . . the list goes on!) reflects a valiant effort to fashion an iconic figure who stands in for something as complex as the metropolitan spaces of economic expansion yet who is not only standing in for, but also passing considerable time

amongst, the everyday life of the boulevard, “and thus, as it were, exhibiting it” (2002, pp. 446-447). Baudelaire went through similar machinations, which is well recounted in Mary Gluck’s “The Flâneur and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-century Paris” (Gluck, 2003). Baudelaire must be credited with one of the first truly critical attempts to elevate the flâneur from a marginal, indolent ambler to *artist-flâneur* who produces creative work from the exploration, observation, and reading of everyday urban life. The critical theorist Susan Buck-Morss, one of Benjamin’s keenest interpreters, updates his notion of “industrious, productive flâneurs” (2002, p. 454), as “ur-forms” of modern intellectuals (1991, p. 304). Buck-Morss’s insight slightly post-dates “die Wende” of 1989 and slightly precedes a related sea change in scholarly thinking about urbanism as filtered through a variety of disciplines in a globalizing world. This interdisciplinary turn, often characterized as “affective,” registers vastly different modes of reacting to and then shaping the topography of emerging and expanding cities; it reinforces the importance of spontaneous and visceral reactions—marked by an emotional range from pleasure to trauma—for the consideration of the urban experience as it is happening. Lauren Berlant refers to a “sensualist turn” that “originates in an embodied subjectivity, at once overdetermined and permeable to contingent events” (Berlant, 2004; Seigworth & Gardiner, 2004). A new profession gets added to Benjamin’s list in the course of these “turns”—that of an ethnographer whose experiential fieldwork now takes a “performative turn” (Foster, 1995; Koepping, 2005). Obviously, the bibliography of the theoretical retooling of urban theory and practice dating from the early 1990s is vast, but Katarina Nylund’s “Cultural Analyses in Urban Theory of the 1990s” is an excellent summation of this phenomenon (Nylund, 2001) as is Ash Amin’s “Re-thinking the Urban Social” (Amin, 2007). Certainly there is plenty of evidence that (concurrently with the explosion of globalization and world cities) a new incarnation of decidedly transdisciplinary scholars with urbanist inclinations readmit subjective and aesthetic dimensions into their analyses. Rededication to autoethnographic circulations commenced throughout the 1990s and continues to this day. Not surprisingly, affective “aesthetico-sociology” combined with globalization reinvigorated flânerie as a valuable device for scholars and artists to navigate and represent the sensual bombardment of world cities. The aesthetic walking practice’s fruitful application far beyond its original proving ground of 19th-century Paris and its male-centered, Franco-European roots was re-established.

Flânerie’s Revival with a Feminine Focus

My original Call for Papers for this special issue of *Wagadu* was intended to elicit contributions that would explore the possibilities of a fully dynamic flâneuse in the world cities of the 21st century. Evidence of the female urban stroller during flânerie’s first round is scant since a woman could not maintain the necessary incognito or enjoy the required free passage throughout the typical 19th-century city, although there are exceptions. For example, Karin

Baumgartner presents a very convincing case for Helmina von Chézy, a correspondent for the journal *Französische Miscellen*, providing guidelines as early as 1803—almost pre-arcades era—on how to experience urban space as a woman (Baumgartner, 2008). An important body of scholarly work (which the contributors to this special issue review in detail) dating from the feminist priorities of the 1980s revises notions of the flâneuse's relative visibility in the 19th century. This scholarship asserts the flâneuse as a distinct reality in the 19th-century metropolis of the west, making a convincing case that public (so-called masculine) and domestic (so-called feminine) spheres were not so mutually exclusive as to completely preclude a proactive feminine presence in the streets. Just as her male counterpart, the flâneur could, within certain limitations, achieve some anonymity on the street, be a detached observer, and produce social criticism and art from her experience. In *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*, Deborah Parsons offers another, tantalizing scenario regarding the flâneuse's "absence" on 19th-century streets: she is actually hiding in plain sight as the feminine side of the typically dandified and androgynous flâneur, that her incorporation informs his love of masquerade and fine-tuned, emotional receptivity to the city's sensations as well as reflects a growing male anxiety about the liberalization of public life (2000, p. 26).

Urban public life in the west became increasingly available to women by 1900. Just as a feminine filtration of the 20th-century urban would seem to be imminent, however, the significance of flânerie's embodied process declined and with it the importance of its gendered dimensions. Modern western cities' increasingly prescribed routes, commodified pathways, and "heritage walks" managed flânerie to the point of near nonexistence. It has only been within the last two decades that the rapid and radical transformation in world cities from South America to Africa through the Indian subcontinent and Asia has renewed flânerie's credibility as an effective way through the unpredictable and transformative conditions inherent in today's urban spaces, rife with the creative chaos of self-generating networks of technological, economic, cultural, migrational, and even microbial flows. At the turn of the 21st century, flânerie was rekindled as a subjective process involving all five senses recording at full bore, and the examination of this reinvigoration in terms of the flâneuse's urban experience was overdue.

In response to my Call for Papers, I was expecting submissions of complex, experiential, and emotive documentations of the dynamics of today's world cities from the flâneuse's perspective, twining the aesthetic and sociological threads of her experience into visual and/or verbal renditions, providing not only vivid documents of cities in transformation but also representing their urban imaginaries. Indeed I did receive complex, experiential, and emotive accounts as the reader will discover, but some reflect more of the interurban circuit created by 21st-century globalization rather than the world cities themselves (Chisholm, Araya, Gould). These authors are more global nomad than flâneuse perhaps, practicing a broader, more cosmopolitan form of

flânerie than the strictly urban variety. Even more at odds with my original concept were other submissions that posited flânerie for regions neither urban nor rural, which I described earlier in this editorial (Chisholm, Gould, Gladdys, Gwiazda). Perhaps the most faithful to traditional flânerie is Ellis's blog about Kyoto. Still, while decidedly urban, Kyoto doesn't fulfill nearly enough of the criteria for a world city as developed by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network (<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/>).

At first, I thought that the nature of these submissions may indicate that flânerie could not yet be confidently or consistently performed by women on a world city stage, and certainly Monnet's autoethnographic experiment in a busy Barcelona plaza may confirm this suspicion in part. It was unavoidable also not to think that 21st-century female flânerie was taking place on peripheries, was still marginalized. However, as I pondered such possibilities, I realized that certain assumptions of my CFP were flawed: I had committed the error informed by what Janet Wolff so aptly terms "a politics of correction" that

has generally been motivated by the imperative to challenge and contest an androcentric universe, to correct its one-sided terms and assertions, to fill its gaps and to modify its canon (Wolff, 2000, p. 34).

Wolff says this is a laudable but misplaced motivation, and I agree. Today's global flâneuses as represented by the authors/artists in this special issue are not on the margins of world city flânerie, but rather at its frontiers as urban expansionism redefines the sites that may newly accommodate their walking practices.

And it is just those aesthetic walking practices featured by each of the present contributors that link them to traditional flânerie more than their venues. No theorist of flânerie past or present, even when they come up with witticisms such as "driveur" or "phoneur," denies that being afoot is the only real way for bodies to absorb sensory stimuli necessary to gauge urban vitality. In "What We Talk about when We Talk about 'Walking in the City,'" Brian Morris states "... even the most automobile-oriented and/or technologically mediated contemporary urban environments still exist as sites of meaning and desire articulated through walking practices" (2004, p. 693). A new buzzword, "walkability," not only confirms Morris's claim, but also often serves to identify those emerging extraurban sites that increasingly invite flânerie (Ewing, Handy, Brownson, Clemente, & Winston, 2006; Forsyth & Crewe, 2009). So, walking remains central: the best way to interact with urban space is still to hit the pavement. The problem these days is defining "urban space."

The present volume's contributors are immersed in labyrinths of the urban, interurban, extraurban, nomadic, and diasporic. Their pedestrian experiences would shatter Baudelaire's kaleidoscope, yet they maintain strong ties to classic flânerie in that they translate their wanderings into a combination of art and social science. As a mode of analysis combining aesthetic, geographic and ethnographic attention to the urban experience, Baudelaire's and Benjamin's

flânerie was relational aesthetics *avant la lettre*, an insight clearly foregrounded by the pieces in this issue. The elision between the aesthetic and the sociological is almost seamless in the works included here, all of which partake of the visual, subjective, memoirist, and sociological in measured doses.

Today's Global Flâneuse is a departure for *Wagadu* in that it is a hybrid volume of sociological aesthetics—part ethnography, part artist's illustrated book. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mechthild Nagel, *Wagadu* Editor-in-Chief, for agreeing to experiment with *Wagadu's* standard journal conventions. Most of all, I am very grateful to the efforts of Justin Stewart, Assistant Web Developer (although his work for this issue amounted to a job description of Copy Editor and Art Editor rolled into one) whose expertise made it possible to realize the inclusion of time-based media in the HTML version of this issue. The importance of capturing the intrinsic mobility of flânerie with appropriate media cannot be overstated, and this mobility requires appropriate reproduction as well. I would also like to thank Kathryn Russell, Andrew Fitz-Gibbon, and Daniel Harms for strategic support at crucial moments.

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Endnotes

¹In addition to various forays into flânerie's etymology throughout the essays of this special issue, Rebecca Solnit's discussion of the term's murky origins is also informative (2001, pp. 198-199).

²**Convolute M** is a compendium of Benjamin's aphoristic musings as well as his citations of a comprehensive range of 19th-century French thought devoted to flânerie's development: it is an invaluable record.

³The Spanish urban planner Ildefonso Cerdá invented the word to describe the process of a city's expanding infrastructure (De Baan, Declerck, Patteeuw, Sigler, & Frausto, 2007, p. 17).

⁴In *Imagined Country*, urban geographer John Rennie Short accounts for this persistence over centuries in part due to mistrust of sweeping change brought on by urban development and the market forces that accompany it, mistrust so initially ingrained that it forged the stuff of pastoral myth (Short, 2005, p. 31).

⁵The appearance of Keith Tester's edited volume, *The Flaneur*, in 1994 signaled the beginnings of the revival of "old-fashioned" flânerie as a critical tool for the assessment of urban (and interurban) socio-spatial mobility.