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Violette Leduc's Feminist Flâneries

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Violette Leduc's Feminist Flâneries

Abstract

Popularized by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, the modern figure of the *flâneur* disrupts the pace of the city as he strolls the streets, making his way into the world through wandering and daydreaming. Assimilated to an available body to seduce, a woman walking alone does not have the same experience. However, in spite of constant interruptions in her outward and inward exploration, the *flâneuse* reinvents the act of walking through a form of solidarity that enables her to transcend the limits of her own body. Focusing on Violette Leduc who wrote on female sexuality in a daring way, I read the act of walking through the lens of feminist and queer theory. I argue that female *flânerie* is negotiated as a bodily quest with the aim of travelling with one's gaze to reestablish female agency and cross the limits imposed by society. I study four different acts of Leduc's *flânerie* in Paris and the French countryside, moments that are particularly interesting because the woman *queers* herself to enjoy the privilege of idly wandering, liberating herself from the constraints attached to her "open" anatomy. The cis-woman's "disidentification" happens through masquerade, daydream, and drag, until the narrator finds female solidarity in the act of traveling.

Keywords

Violette Leduc, flânerie, gender studies, queer studies, tourism

Cover Page Footnote

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Violette Leduc's Feminist *Flâneries*

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In *Flâneuse* (2016), Lauren Elkin advocates for female idle strolling, still a luxury in certain areas. In the nineteenth century, wandering in the city was a masculine privilege, epitomized in the traits of the *flâneur* portrayed by Charles Baudelaire. The *flâneur* is a male aesthete lost in his thoughts, a spectator of the urban agitation who remaps the city in his mind throughout his urban itinerary. At the same time, modern women did not enjoy the public space in a similar manner and female *flânerie* was a daring enterprise that involved “redrawing the boundaries of feminine ‘respectability’ and reformulating feminine subjectivity” (D’Souza 124). A brief history of the concept of *flânerie* shows us the changes in this experience over time. Yet, a young woman’s daily commute in the age of Bluetooth earbuds and safety tracking apps might still be marked by cat calls. Identified as trespassers of social norms, walking women are soon reminded of their place. In her call for an intersectional non-ableist feminist city (87), Leslie Kern acknowledges that implementing such a utopia without falling into the traps of gentrification is not easy, thus transforming the intimate stakes of female independence into a crucial political matter.

Walking is both a public and a private activity: one moves in a shared space according to an intimate pace conducting a personal quest in the outside world doubled by an inward trajectory. Unlike male *flâneurs*, women have learned to negotiate their own space in the public sphere and to make do with unwelcome interruptions in their train of thought. Walking reveals the challenges in inhabiting a female body available to the male gaze as it was theorized by Laura Mulvey (1975), a gaze that “projects its phantasy onto the female figure” (11) and impediments the *flâneuse*’s walk. However, Virginia Woolf rejoiced in solitary “street haunting” in London as a way to escape forced domesticity and to expand her imagination (183). Following George Sand, Catherine Nesci argues that the modern *flâneuse* enacts a change she would like to see in society, relying on the possibility of equality between the sexes (42). In this article, I am following the steps of French writer Violette Leduc to study the female *flâneuse* walking against patriarchal structures in an itinerary marked by queer considerations on sex and gender. Leduc affirms her resistance to gender norms through the act of walking alone, offering an experience of the feminine self on the move.

In twentieth-century France, Leduc’s *flâneries* read like a reflection on her desire for independence. Recounting her ordeals as a solitary wanderer of urban and rural spaces entails a rethinking of the narrative norms framing a woman’s experience in literature. Without ever identifying as a feminist herself, Leduc

epitomizes the feminist claim that “the personal is political”: her largely autofictional novels remain politically charged without adhering to a well-identified political cause. Imitating her mentor Simone de Beauvoir who helped her edit and publish her first texts, she did sign the “Manifeste des 343 Salopes” (“Manifesto of the 343 Sluts”) in 1971 to advocate for reproductive rights; however, her battles take place on the literary terrain. For instance, *Ravages* (1955) ends on the graphic depiction of her own abortion in a first-person narrative.

In *Trésors à prendre* (‘Treasures to Take’ 1960), she undertakes a pilgrimage in the South of France to heal from the brutal censorship of the most daring passages of the *Ravages* manuscript, including the abortion scene, due to the misogyny of the editorial committee at Gallimard. Her picaresque itinerary takes her through isolated villages in the French countryside, where she faces forms of harassment similar to what she experienced in Paris during her youth, recounted in *La Bâtarde* (1964). The narrator cannot escape her situated experience as a white woman as she crosses paths with peculiar characters at the margins of society. These include La Chauplanat, who identifies as neither a man or a woman, a *sidi*—an Arab man ostracized by the local villagers—and a disabled man who tries to rape her in the fields. Favoring a lyrical tone in her gallery of portraits, Leduc incorporates the social outcasts into her experimental literary study on what it means to be a single woman in motion without a clear motive. I argue that her feminist *flânerie* is negotiated as a phenomenological quest with the aim of traveling through one’s gaze to reestablish female agency and cross the limits imposed by society, while gesturing at the limits of feminism in including non-conforming bodies. I will study Leduc’s urban walks in *La Bâtarde* and contrast them with her trajectory in the countryside in *Trésors à prendre* and her short story “Au Village” (‘At the Village’) to examine the transformation of the *flâneuse* in terms of masculinity and femininity, as she experiments with expanding her physical boundaries through masquerade, daydream, and drag.

The Masquerade of Femininity and Masculinity in the City of Love

In *La Bâtarde*, Leduc writes about her coming of age in Paris, where she divides her time between her lover Hermine and Gabriel, a companion/suitor who explores the streets with her. She troubles motifs of female sexuality without using the labels “lesbian” or “bisexual.” Coming to terms with her identity as an “ugly woman,” she qualifies a woman’s looks as a curse, a double bind. Relying on one’s physical appearance to make one’s way into the world means that it is impossible to please everyone, but even worse, impossible to be comfortable in one’s own skin (215). Her practice of *flânerie* reads as a way to escape “the prison of her skin.”¹

¹ *In the Prison of Her Skin* is the translation of Leduc’s first novel *L’Asphyxie* (1946).

Adopting the style of a dandy, the narrator dresses as a man, with a shirt, shorts, a tie and a flower at her buttonhole to mock femininity as a violent self-inflicted performance (178). She appreciates her connivance with Gabriel, who calls her “bonhomme” ‘little man’ and with whom she enjoys a fun companionship which reverses their gender roles: “J’étais son homme, il était ma femme dans ce corps à corps de l’amitié” (200) ‘I was his man, he was my woman in this friendly hand-to-hand.’² Gabriel warns Violette about becoming a basic woman who makes her way in society through trading her looks and sexual availability for male attention.

After failing her *baccalauréat*, Violette works as a secretary at a publisher’s office and sometimes meets famous writers (Jansiti 77). She fondly remembers Marcel Jouhandeau’s remarks on her unusual looks: “Vous avez un tricot de clown [...], nous sommes des clowns.” (147) ‘You have a clown sweater [...], we are clowns.’ Violette wants to enjoy her femininity by dressing up with a nice skirt and being admired in the streets, yet she struggles to come to terms with the demands associated with being a woman. She considers her own pampering as preparation for a performance in the streets of Paris: “Tu le sais que tu te prépares pour un cirque, clown effacé [...] je vais entrer dans le cirque, ma piste sera les grands boulevards” (214) ‘You know you’re getting ready for a circus, you self-effacing clown [...] I will enter the circus, my track will be the main boulevards.’ She describes her skincare routine as a succession of violent slaps in the face, thus aligning herself with Judith Butler’s definition of gender as a performance anchored in the body in *Gender Trouble*: “Consider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an ‘act’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (190, original italics). By identifying with the clown instead of the magician or the acrobat, Leduc makes fun of her own clumsiness and her physical flaws, specifically her long and large nose, a family trait and the sign of her bastardy that she carries in the middle of her face (*La Folie en tête*, 338). The nose acts as a stigma of illegitimacy in Leduc’s corpus, but “stigma” has to be understood as a two-faced word: it is a mark of disgrace, but in the botanical lexicon that the chosen pen name “Violette” calls for, it refers to the top of the central female part of a flower, where pollen is received. The stigma thus becomes a fertile breeding ground for more metaphors.

In the nineteenth century, *flâneuses* usually legitimized their presence in the public sphere by shopping and reminding onlookers that they were respectable matrons in charge of a household (Solnit 237). Leduc subverts the department store, associated with the construction of femininity since Emile Zola’s 1883 novel *Au bonheur des dames* (*The Ladies’ Paradise*), which depicts a young girl’s social ascension in a store modeled on Le Bon Marché through her hard work and her

² All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

marriage to the store owner. Leduc denounces the *grand magasin* ‘department store’ as a space that uniformizes all female bodies in the name of modern seduction. She steals lingerie items from different luxury sections, and explains her petty theft by a drive for restorative justice towards women: “Je cueillais des cache-sexe. [...] Je volais aussi pour dérober aux femmes ce qui les féminise” (190) ‘I picked up some G-strings. [...] I also stole to steal from women what feminizes them.’ She refers to the feminine lingerie as a unisex “cache-sexe,” borrowing the term from the world of male boxing, thus extending the metaphor of wrestling nestled in the “corps-à-corps” with Gabriel. However, caught by the security guard, she fails to explain her frantic quest to seize the trinkets of femininity, reverting to a posture of womanly helplessness.

Acting like a clown or a trickster allows the young woman to accept the “phallic” shape of her nose and to play with signs of masculinity (215). Her behavior in the department store resonates with Joan Riviere’s remarks in “Womanliness as a Masquerade”: “Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both, to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was to possess it—much—as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods” (176). Riviere’s case study details a fraudulent femininity in a “bisexual” intellectual woman (though, like Leduc, she does not use this term) who wishes to hide her masculinity behind a mask of womanliness to avoid retaliation from both men and women. Similarly, by crying when caught, the young woman confesses her helplessness to deflect the consequences of her actions, instead of acknowledging the subversion of her micro-resistance to fashion. Released by the guard, she disappears in the crowd with relief (190).

Leduc then conducts another experiment. Following guidelines found in magazines, she dresses up and applies makeup to perform femininity. She enjoys the anonymity that comes with conforming to gender norms: “Je passe, inaperçue. Je me le redis, je me l’avoue, je me soulage : je passe, inaperçue. [...] Je suis dans le sein de ma famille : les passants” (216) ‘I pass, unnoticed. I repeat it to myself, I admit it to myself, I relieve myself: I pass, unnoticed. [...] I am in the bosom of my family: the passers-by.’ Violette’s transformation has immediate consequences when men ask her out for drinks and more. These short dialogues reveal that street harassment works as the interpellation theorized by Louis Althusser in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Despite its lack of specificity, the insult never misses its target and erases the woman’s individuality. For instance, the catcallers replace her face with what is between her legs: “Moi je pense à votre frimousse, à la frimousse qu’il y a sous vos jupes” (219) ‘I think of your face, of the face under your skirts.’ When she does not answer to his lewd remarks, one man tells her: “Va te faire foutre mocheté. Tu le croyais ? Tu ne t’es pas regardée” (219) ‘Fuck you

ugly. Did you think so? You didn't look at yourself,' protecting his pride by pretending that the game of seduction was just a mindless performance.

By detailing the difficulties in becoming a woman, Leduc highlights the inequalities in who gets to be a *flâneur* in the city.³ In the second volume of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the young girl's phenomenological "turn" in discovering that she inhabits a female body. During puberty, she realizes that she is perceived by others as a sexual object (64). In *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment* (2017), Fiona Vera-Gray defines the catcall as an intrusion, or "the deliberate act of putting oneself in a place or situation where one is uninvited, with disruptive effect" (11). Leduc also recalls being insulted by a woman on the Concorde Bridge during a walk with Hermine. The scene is striking because Leduc begins by describing her own bodily reaction when the insult changes her walking pace: "Mes blessures blessaient le trottoir. Je marchais centimètre après centimètre sur du mou de boucherie" (217) 'My wounds were wounding the sidewalk. I was walking inch by inch through the offal of a slaughterhouse.' Her body is dehumanized and turned into sheer flesh; one can comment on its poor quality without thinking about her decency, thereby erasing her sense of self. When Leduc reveals the insult, she does not use direct speech, but reports her words after a period of latency: "Cette femme a crié : moi, si j'avais cette tête-là, je me suiciderais" (234) 'That woman, she shouted: if I had a face like that, I'd kill myself.' The insult puts appearance and death on the same plane, the latter being the consequence of the former. Expressing a totalizing will, the personal point of view of this anonymous woman becomes a general rule. In her sentence, the first person appears three times, with an emphatic structure, whereas the person that she is judging is only designated by the derogatory "cette tête-là", with a depreciative demonstrative pronoun and an ironic distancing. Leduc describes patriarchal oppression as a fluid network of relationships that are not only attached to male bodies and that can also be enforced by women, which is why she originally struggles to find female solidarity in her solitary wanderings. By turning her gaze inwards, *flânerie* allows her to sit uncomfortably with the lack of female solidarity.

³ In André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), the female stroller is allegorized into the city. As a *flâneur*, the male narrator enhances his aesthetic roaming into a composite work of art weaving together snapshots of memories and photographs, whereas Nadja the *flâneuse* is diagnosed as a madwoman and locked up once her role as a muse is fulfilled. In a surrealist trajectory, the *flâneur* is rewarded by serendipity, whereas the wandering woman has to submit to the male gaze, offering an open body that becomes identified with the city. Male passivity is interpreted as intellectualism, whereas female passivity is a sign of sexual provocation. Drawing from Laura Mulvey's essay, Iris Brey proposes a theory of the cinematic female gaze that emphasizes female agency and mobility in the 2020 *Le regard féminin: une révolution à l'écran* ('The Female Gaze: A Revolution on Screen').

The Solitary Female Traveler in Public Transportation

I will now turn to Leduc's account of her experience in the countryside to examine the intricacies of the female solitude in wandering. *Trésors à prendre* begins in a crowded train departing for Vichy, where the healthy narrator fails to relate to other female passengers. Having a liver disease creates a bond between the women in the train (Leduc hints at a "confrérie," 'brotherhood' instead of a female friendship). They deem the narrator suspicious because she has no valid reason to go to Vichy. Even though they themselves are women, they assume that single women are not entitled to the freedom represented by private tourism; the narrator muses on the fact that a male priest is immediately accepted by the group that holds her in contempt (13). Leduc explains this rejection as a weakness in female solidarity (11).

Female solidarity is flawed because it does not instantly extend to other women: the glance of one woman traveler at another breaks the possibility of *flânerie* because it forces both women to acknowledge their own solitude and to turn their gaze inwards. The newly minted sisterhood embraces the priest's presence because his body resembles their old ailing bodies and he generously listens to the complaints of the group, his eyes signaling a path of compassion to the narrator. The presence of the priest enables the solitary woman to engage in an experiment of discreet and indirect spectatorship; she can be a *flâneuse* on the train as long as she witnesses the priest's active listening to the chattering women. Her staring is allowed by the male gaze coming from a male body that has renounced heteronormative life: "S'il est mime, s'il est infantile en mimant les mimiques, c'est par bienveillance, par humanisme." (13) 'If he is a mime, if he behaves like a child by miming and mimicking, it all comes from his benevolence and humanism.' By entering the circle of sick women, the priest is infantilized and loses his virility—the "m" alliterations suggest that he is "muted" or just nodding along, not even allowed in the conversation.

Later on, the narrator is invited to sit in a truck full of farmers who are going to sell fresh produce to the market (70). Her experience with young men conjures up memories of writer Maurice Sachs in the 1940s. Leduc wishes to preserve the memory of her unrequited love for him untouched by the war:

Le souvenir de Maurice Sachs surgit encore. Je l'imagine vivant, assis où je suis assise, le profil de son corps humecté de la sueur odorante du jeune athlète, son bras touchant le bras nu brillant de rosée de cet adolescent rectiligne, incorruptible, sa tempe cognant parfois la tempe de ce jeune empereur méridional qui refuse jusqu'aux gauloises dénicotinisées... Je n'hésite pas : je préfère dans ce cas Sachs mort plutôt que martyr. C'est à l'homosexuel que je pense. Je l'ai vu tant de fois martyrisé par des jeunes

gens, de beaux passants qui ne le voyaient pas, qui ne lui adressaient pas la parole, je l'ai vu tant de fois dédaigné par ces nullités, tant de fois Sachs se masquant l'âme et le cœur, tant de fois menant avec brio cette mascarade féroce—la sienne—tant de fois se tournant en dérision, mimant la gaieté tout en se fixant d'un seul œil dans le miroir au suicide, que maintenant je n'ai plus pitié de sa mort. (72)

The memory of Maurice Sachs rises up once more. I imagine him alive, sitting where I am sitting, in profile his body, moistened by this young athlete's heady sweat, his naked arm touching the upright teenager's naked arm glistening with dew, incorruptible, his temple sometimes touching the temple of this young southern emperor, who even refuses gauloises without nicotine... I am not hesitating: in this case, I would prefer to have Sachs dead rather than a martyr. I am thinking of the homosexual. I saw him martyred so many times by young men, beautiful passersby who did not see him, who did not talk to him, I saw him being held in contempt so many times by these nobodies, Sachs masking his soul and his heart so many times, so many times heartily carrying on this savage masquerade—his own—mocking himself so many times, miming gaiety while staring at himself with one eye in the suicide mirror, that now I do not feel sorry for his death.

The muscular male bodies surrounding the narrator in the countryside remind her of her old friend. She portrays him in the same style as a drawing by Jean Cocteau, embracing homoerotic aesthetics, transforming the farmer sitting beside her in the truck into Sachs's young lover touching his toned body. Leduc's model of masculinity is "the feminized, illegitimate, wholly *unnatural* masculinity [...] of the cross-identified folle" (Hughes 146, original italics). While walking in the streets of Paris, Maurice Sachs is repeatedly ignored by fine young men because of his homosexuality (the litany includes four occurrences of "tant de fois"). Just as for a woman walking alone, the dynamics of *flânerie* are detrimental to the gay man: Leduc remarks that while he notices desirable passersby, she only sees losers. In this triangular model, both are ignored by the object of their desire. Again, the female gaze looking at the public sphere is enabled by the male body situated outside heterosexual exchanges. In her mind, the miming of joy creates a continuity with the figure of the priest. Disdained by young men, Sachs has no other choice but to pretend to be like them, entering into the masquerade of heterosexuality. The lexical field of spectatorship and the litany of alliterations in "m" ("se masquant," "mascarade," "mimant") insist on the dichotomy between his superficial appearance and his inner self. His joyful dance hinted at by "menant," "mascarade," "se tournant," "mimant la gaieté" is in sharp contrast with his fixed stance in front

of the mirror, which offers him his true depressing reflection. At the end of the passage, Leduc seems to judge Sachs's masquerade as a form of death drive, as his martyrdom stems from the defective regimen of desire he imposes on himself. Fantasizing herself in the shoes of a (deceased) homosexual man allows the female narrator to express desire toward a male body, yet she needs to escape the optics of heterosexuality to do so. Identifying herself with a male body makes her feel safe. When women in the fields ask if she is visiting a relative, she confirms to avoid rumors. In the urban or the rural world, a woman has to state her relationship to a man in order to share men's space, whether physically or in a daydream. Critics have noted that Leduc writes to extract herself from her flawed genealogy (Frantz 169) or to escape a specific space and time (Collette). Her subjectivity building uses a mix of embodiment and disembodiment, "ranging from self-recognition to self-alienation" (Gallus 125). I would add that she queers herself to entertain fantasies of a sexual relationship devoid of embodiment. Leduc takes a critical stance from heteronormativity through the process of disidentification as explained by José Esteban Muñoz, a way to "scramble and reconstruct the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing end exclusionary machinations and recircuits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (31). The writer refashions her sexual identity as a homosexual man to allow her fantasies as an onlooker, however, blinded by her affection for self-victimization, she is less sympathetic to racialized masculinities.

The White Privilege of Rural *Flânerie*

As a solitary female traveler, the narrator compares herself to male characters in a subordinate position, such as a boy scout who eats alone or a *sidi*, an itinerant Arab merchant, without taking into account her own whiteness and privilege. Originally, the word "sidi" was an honorary salutation similar to "sir," but then evolved into a derogatory term to refer to a North African man. The comparison between the woman tourist and the *sidi* reads both as a sour assessment of the female condition in twentieth-century France through recognition of a minor figure and a careless appropriation of subjugation. Through a contemporary lens, the narrator's complaint appears as white feminism with tunnel vision, as the brown man upsets the interplay of whiteness and solidarity. Leduc uses the dynamics of staring to try to understand the *sidi*'s predicament, to "orient" her interpretation of his rejection. Her gaze is not entirely compassionate but rather an "attempt to impose a frame of reference on the chaos of a visual field by integrating what is unknown into what is already known" (Garland-Thomson, 21). Leduc does not refer to the tensions between France and Algeria during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), which culminated in violent incidents in France in

October 1961 and February 1962 in Paris. In so doing, she forgoes the contextualization necessary to understand the apparition of a body marked as “foreign,” while favoring a flawed universalizing gaze.

Leduc thinks she shares the *sidi*'s predicament because she sold food on the black market during World War II. During her trips from the countryside to Paris, her body was a hybrid apparatus of flesh and goods. Carrying contraband butter or meat under her cloak, she walked through the streets with a monetary goal, animated by the belief that she was helping her fellow citizens in a period of scarcity. Anchored in trafficking, Leduc's experience is marked by social and geographical mobility, transcending the binary oppositions by which individuals were defined during the Occupation (Fell 875). However, her exploration of the countryside as a tourist differs from her urban trafficking.

In *Trésors à prendre*, she is reduced to a solitary female body wandering alone, but with the possibility of finding allies or protectors. By contrast, in spite of all the merchandise he carries on his back, the *sidi* is rejected from places of social entertainment, such as the roadside café. In this instance, the brown man is compared to a woman because of his dismissal from places claimed by white men. Identified with his merchandise, he does not appear as a respectable supplier (77). Violette Leduc implies that, like women, the *sidi* trades parts of his body to be allowed to survive in a hostile environment. In so doing, his ontological status changes: he is compared to a dog and not entitled to any service by the innkeeper. In “naturalizing” his selling technique as part of a survival mode, Leduc hints that his behavior does not come from his free will, but from an inherent ethology, a set of behaviors chosen to adapt to his location or *milieu*.

The interaction at the roadside café recalls an evening at the jazz club recounted in Leduc's second novel *L'Affamée* ('Starving'), published in 1948 “Je suis seule. C'est monstrueux d'être seule. Je renifle leurs danses de loin. Je suis leur chienne” (84) ‘I am alone. It is monstrous to be alone. I am sniffing their dances from afar. I am their dog.’ An American couple feels at home dancing in the club, but a French woman alone in a place of entertainment is bound to be a misfit. The sexual undertones of the feminine noun “chienne,” absent in the masculine noun, alludes to the availability of the female body alone in places of entertainment. Leduc contrasts her solitude with the confidence of a rich middle-aged man sitting next to her, “un homme cerné par ses quarante ans, les soins, l'aisance [...] il se distrait de lui-même, avec lui-même” (83) ‘a man surrounded by his forty years, the attention given to him, his wealth [...] he is enjoying himself, his own company.’ The middle-aged man is self-sufficient. He can engage in the contemplation of dancing bodies without being questioned, because his financial status allows him to stand on his own. The only physical attribute cited by Leduc is his male gaze: “cerné” can describe both the bags under his eyes and the fact that he is constantly surrounded by his wealth. Sitting alone in a public place is a privilege of class, race,

gender and sexuality: only certain male citizens are allowed to carry themselves independently, others run the risk of being disrespected or harmed.

In *Trésors à prendre*, the narrator witnesses the *sidi* being teased by twelve workers in the café and denied food, but chooses not to intervene. She remarks that the workers have signaled their absence of consideration for the *sidi* by their glances and that he should have understood this hint and walked away. The stare to assert dominance works as “cultural othering” (Garland-Thomson, 42) and “‘fixes’ a person in gender, race, disability, class, or sexuality systems” (43). Leduc’s confusion as to her own privilege appears when she identifies with the *sidi*, because she does not acknowledge her participation in the spatial fragmentation and racial exclusion. The locals’ stares addressed to the foreigner indicate their refusal of a “stranger” in a territory they claim as their own. In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), Sara Ahmed analyzes a scene of ordinary racism taken from Audre Lorde’s autobiography. When a wealthy white woman recoils from the black little girl on the New York subway, Ahmed writes that enforcing boundaries between bodies demands “practices and techniques of differentiation” to create a “social space” (46). Leduc’s closed body is eloquent in speaking a language of rejection and eviction, one in tension with a lingering gaze on the undesirable being. Her lack of empathy marks the *sidi* as a strange body that stands at “the border that defines the space into which the familiar body—the body which is unmarked by strangeness as its mark of privilege—cannot cross, and the space in which such a body constitutes itself as (at) home” (54). As a white woman, she still holds the privilege to align herself with the majority when an oppressed being comes into the public space.

Race adds another layer of rejection. Travel literature has often emphasized traditional virile traits such as bravery and sexual dominance while being dismissive of “subordinated” and marginalized masculinities (Azéma 55). In *Open City* (2012), Teju Cole sustains that the black *flâneur* still struggles to walk in the city. Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire have both written about public transportation as a site of racial misrecognition where the black body is immediately noticed, making it thus an ideal space of resistance. In her study of Black women travelers, Sarah Jane Cervenak argues that their “wandering—day dreaming, mental and rhetorical ramblings—offers new pathways for the enactment of black female philosophical desire” (2), by developing “a mutant form of enunciation, articulation, and textuality but also an enactment that signals the refusal of all three qualities” (3). Cervenak remarks that by walking, the minor subject dislocates the discursive rational and agentive subject, which also holds true in the case of Violette Leduc and the strange characters she encounters. In *Trésors à prendre*, the brown man is animalized by his rejection from the restaurant. With a strong penchant for self-victimization, the narrative voice creates a problematic parallel between the *sidi* and the wandering woman, even if the characters avoid an

interaction. Relegated to a corner, the *flâneuse* is in a minor position, but has a vantage point from which she can assess the relationship between race, class and gender.

In spite of herself, in the café, Leduc sides with the workers, identifying with them because they are French and white, and refers to the entire group with the pronoun “nous.” She justifies her moral cowardice by reminding her reader that she is, after all, only a woman without a say. Her depiction of ordinary racism is linked to an indictment about the condition of women in France:

Je suis de sexe féminin, mon sexe doit se taire, demeurer neutre, se vouloir faible, effacé dans une salle de douze hommes, douze puissances d’indifférence après le boire et le manger. [...] Je ne me délivre pas d’une éducation innée, de ma saloperie d’hérédité de bâtarde, je ne m’en délivre pas surtout dans un cas de terrifiante injustice comme celui-ci. Je ne peux pas parler en public au-delà d’un auditeur, je ne peux pas m’imposer. Ma réclamation dès le début eût tourné à la clownerie. [...] Je suis une femme seule donc à cause de cette fatale anomalie, je dois la fermer. J’ai moins droit à la parole qu’une femme accompagnée. (84-5)

I am of the female sex, my sex needs to keep quiet, to remain neutral, wishing to stay weak, withdrawn in a room full of twelve men, twelve powerful forces of indifference after having drunk and eaten. [...] I am not freeing myself from an innate education, from my filthy bastard birth, I am not freeing myself from it, especially in such a terrifyingly unjust situation. I cannot talk publicly about it in front of more than one listener, I cannot impose myself. From the start, my complaint would have turned into a joke. [...] I am a woman alone and because of this fatal anomaly, I need to shut up. I have less the right to speak than an accompanied woman.

The woman is similar to the “human dog”—she is not a complete human being because she is deprived of speech by social norms. Here, the narrator uses her lack of authority to excuse her lack of solidarity with a subaltern figure, while centering the narrative around her deficient lineage. Speaking up for the *sidi* would have meant speaking up for herself too, which is not possible when one is embroiled in familial tarnation. For Leduc, being a woman means accepting an inherent vulnerability and unfairness of treatment. In *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* (2011), Catherine Malabou states: “It may be that woman is only defined negatively with respect to the violence that is done to her and the attacks on her essence, but this negative definition nonetheless constitutes the resistant stock that distinguishes the feminine from all the other types of fragility, from overexposure to exploitation and brutality” (2). At first, Leduc seems

to embrace her victim identity because it allows her to complain and turns to her usual metaphors of the “circus” (such as “clownerie”) to comment on social norms as a joker or trickster figure.

The narrator is forced to remain silent when she is witnessing discrimination; however, she fails to acknowledge her privilege as a white woman and to name the hostility directed at the *sidi* as racism. In *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019), Michael Rothberg has theorized such a position as that of an “implicated subject,” a silent beneficiary of acts of injustice who probably helps “propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mark the present” (1). In her writing, Leduc struggles to find a place devoid of oppression, where the writing woman would be neither victim nor perpetrator, but she is hindered by her own penchant for fetishizing gender and sexuality. Despite the fluidity enhanced by her daydreaming, she promptly returns to a place of powerlessness, echoing Iris Marion Young’s claim that “women in a sexist society are physically handicapped” (153) and confined to a limited agency. In *Le complexe d’Ève* (2013), Anaïs Frantz highlights that Leduc “begins to write in the remorse of a failed relationship, in the contrition of a repressed desire for a bastard union: between a misogynistic homosexual and a lesbian married with a man” (180). It seems that going back to a sexually charged situation of powerlessness, frustration and renunciation is actually a place of potentiality for Leduc.

Finding Female Solidarity Through *Flânerie*

Traveling through the countryside is a transitory voyage giving Leduc the opportunity to project her daydreams on other bodies and temporarily free herself from the constraints of being a woman. Changing sexes is an easy empowerment fantasy for the writer, as long as it remains on the surface, without implying a real unsettling metamorphosis. From Sarah Marquis to Flora Tristan and Isabelle Eberhardt, numerous women travelers have disguised themselves as men to protect themselves (Azéma 70). To escape from the rejection associated with deviating from her assigned gender role, Leduc seeks the company of homosexual men, with whom she feels like “la représentante d’un sexe neutre” (117) ‘the representative of a neutral sex’ as they do not impose their desire on her. She explains her preference by remembering her doting grandmother Fideline, whose sex was obscured by her long black dress reminiscent of a priest’s dark robe. In searching for an “ideal version of maternal femininity in which she can find refuge” (Fell 150) outside of gender norms, Leduc operates a disjunction between sex and race in delineating limits that can be crossed or not. Adhering despite herself to twentieth-century standards, she still considers the neutral as a “neutralized” or “neutered”

masculine body. Walking alone in the countryside is an exploration of the limits and volatilities of gender traits.

Throughout her life, Leduc struggled to find solidarity with other women, with the exception of Simone de Beauvoir. Leduc criticized the performance of femininity in *La Bâtarde*; then, in *La Folie en tête* ('Madness First'), she notices that the philosopher is able to write in public without performing femininity: "une femme, vêtue comme tout le monde, écrivait ses livres en public mais elle ne regardait pas autour d'elle. [...] non, ce n'était pas du cinéma" "a woman, dressed like everyone else, was writing her books in public, but she wasn't looking around [...] no, it wasn't a movie" (44). Beauvoir does not engage with *flânerie* at the Parisian café as she is too busy writing, yet Leduc writes through the act of looking at others. *Trésors à prendre* allows her to occasionally come to terms with the possibility of female solidarity. Rich with walking experience, the narrator is finally drawn to other women traveling alone, a silent camaraderie found in bookstores (205) and the exchange of sweets (284). She approaches another female traveler at the Gare de Lyon and they sit together on the train, a revenge on the opening scene (283).

Leduc refrains from female companionship because she struggles to identify as a woman herself. Her "out of place" feminism performs solidarity as disidentification from both the oppressor and the victim in the act of writing the self. Sara Ahmed defines feminism as "a history of willful tongues", adding, "feminism: that which infects a body with a desire to speak in ways other than how you have been commanded to speak" (191). Without ever labelling herself as a feminist, Leduc speaks back in a feminist snap, writing: "Que mon pays est arriéré, que son horizon est bouché par le sexe" (86) 'My country is so backwards, with its horizon blocked by sex.' She loses herself in the countryside to question the extent of a woman's possibilities once she strays off the beaten tracks of marriage and domesticity.

Her obsession with male homosexuality asserts her dream of transcending her assigned identity as an illegitimate daughter. Through her sympathy for homosexual men, she finds new ways to establish kinship and to bypass the "bastard" condition inherited from her father. According to her, gay men who crave femininity are incapable of hurting women (aside from rejecting their unrequited love), thus homosexuality appears as a safe haven free from the imperative reproduction of social norms, a "reaction against a (male) erotic rhetoric" (Hughes 1994 137). However, Leduc's queer non-futurity is tainted by melancholia: the homosexual male body has an "exiled sex" that immerses men's experience in a perpetual nostalgia (121). Enumerating the mannerisms of homosexual men dressing as women, the "folles," (poofs) Leduc focuses on the "tricks" of femininity, on practices of citationality rooted in the body. She does not define gender as a "free-floating artifice" independent from a sexual body, but seems to

share Butler's view that gender is constructed through iterations and repeated performances that conceal themselves.⁴ For Leduc, women's difficulties are grounded in the sexed specificity of the female body, and their learned *habitus* of accommodating and pleasing men, by being a body given over to others.⁵

In March 1951, Violette Leduc published "Au Village" in Sartre's literary journal *Les Temps Modernes*, a short snippet that was supposed to act as a teaser for *Trésors à prendre*. I read it as a companion text to the novel, as both of them are weaving the same themes. The short travel diary is a collection of portraits of eccentric characters, including a cross-dressing man expressing his identity through drag:

La Chauplanat est un homme. Marié à un œuf (son épouse chauve porte turban nuit et jour), le Chauplanat est père et grand-père : trois fils, trois petits-fils. Celui qui se coiffe comme Ingrid Bergman, qui équilibre sur cette coiffure la haute casquette galonnée des girls de défilé new-yorkais, celui qui est chef de fanfare, tailleur, organiste, caissier chez son fils charcutier se veut femme et femme chaste. (1951, 1599)

La Chauplanat is a man. Married to an egg (his bald wife wears a turban day and night), le Chauplanat is a father and a grandfather: three sons, three grandsons. The person whose hair is fixed like Ingrid Bergman's, who balances on top of that hair one of the tall striped cap worn by a New York showgirl on a parade, the person who is the bandleader, tailor, organist, and cashier in his son's delicatessen thinks of himself as a woman, and a chaste one.⁶ (191)

La Chauplanat is endowed with a strong lineage of masculine offspring over several generations, a token of their virility and an indisputable proof of their biological sex. Engaged in heterosexual reproduction as a father, when they dress up as a stylish cosmopolitan woman, they do not wish to seduce anyone. Their femininity

⁴ "That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality." (Butler 1990, 180).

⁵ "Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do." (Butler 2016, 26)

⁶ I am using Michael Lucey's translation, and the non-binary pronoun "they" to refer to the character.

is a guise devoid of the stigma that comes with being born with a female anatomy. The Chauplanat is without doubt a man, yet their body is adorned with artifice. As such, their masculine body as a site of transformation becomes, once embellished by clothes and jewelry, a normative feminine creature who chooses to remain modest and work in an enclosed space. The visible contradictions between gender and sex become acceptable if the performance is recognized as such and directed at a patriarchal purpose. “Au Village” is an episode of *flânerie* with the narrator reflecting on different forms of sexuality rooted both in sociological and geographical location, an approach to sexual relations deemed “sedimentological” by Michael Lucey in *Someone: The Pragmatics of Misfit Sexualities from Colette to Hervé Guibert* (2019, 188). Through an array of ethological remarks about the ordinary life of the fabulous creature, Leduc alludes to the birth of a new species of man that could disrupt the order of things in rural France. She “sensationalizes and desensationalizes” the situation, weaving odd details on their gender nonconformity, then adopting the stance of an accustomed local (192). Her indifference is a way to root herself in the community and to examine “the complexity of sexuality in situation” (193) with compassionate eyes. Solidarity is possible as long as heteronormative relationships are preserved, through the crafting of a family nucleus. The performance of drag and masquerade participates in adopting what Jack Halberstam describes as a “queer ‘way of life’ that includes ‘subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being’ (1). Leduc’s discovery of a “queer ‘way of life’” in a small town begins by peeling off the many layers of everyday masquerade. Her queer experiments demarcates a mindscape to remap the female experience through risk.

The title “Au Village” alludes to possibly returning to one’s original provincial region, and connecting with people one grew up with. In these kinds of the narratives, homecoming usually gives rise of a feeling of unbelonging due to the writer’s intellectual trajectory in Paris.⁷ Appreciating traits of femininity when they are attached to a non threatening male body is a reconciliation between Leduc and women. Locating herself outside the norms of success for a woman, she finds solace in the company of misfits that allow her to witness “the complexity of sexuality in situation” (Lucey 193). Punctuated by passages explicitly addressed to Simone de Beauvoir, *Trésors à prendre* ends abruptly on a scene of sexual assault: a disabled man tries to rape the narrator near an alfalfa field. After a narrative ellipsis, Leduc’s last words addressed to “Madame” (Simone de Beauvoir), saying that she is back in Paris safe and sound, read like an anachronistic version of “text me when you get home” insisting on the importance of language for geographically

⁷ Today, such writers include Didier Eribon with *Retour à Reims* (2009), as well as Annie Ernaux et Edouard Louis’s entire oeuvre.

situating one's body in the world and giving an account of its physical integrity, while never really labeling herself as a survivor of sexual assault.⁸ The final address acknowledges all the risks taken by walking alone while inhabiting a female body and reestablishes a particular relationship to writing as a survival trace, a message sent from woman to woman without searching for sympathy. The writer's true pilgrimage is the quest for female friendship in straying away from narratives of heterosexual reproduction, capitalism, and domesticity.

Woman: A Creature on the Move

From Plato to Rousseau and Nietzsche, philosophy has long been linked to the act of walking. Assimilated to available bodies, walking women are excluded from this intellectual tradition as they endure sexual harassment in the city and the countryside; both spaces challenge the abilities of inhabiting or escaping one's gender. Being able to walk alone without being harmed or disturbed is still at the heart of feminist struggles today, and an inspiring filiation can be drawn from daring solo *voyageuses* to mundane passersby. Despite her setbacks, Leduc becomes a real *flâneuse*: the aimlessness of her strolling and the reflectiveness of her gaze outline a feminine subjectivity straying from the normative roles of the bourgeois consumer or the alluring woman of the streets. Her fascination with masculinity and the male homosexual body signals a "lack" in her act of wandering, one that makes her vulnerable to symbolic and physical violence.

Moving away from the dichotomy of sex and gender by studying different identities, Leduc highlights the struggles of having a female body in public and maintaining its boundaries, while getting in touch—through man-imposed violence, or identifying with a man—with her inner self. She maps the difficulties of being a woman walking alone, articulating them only after experiencing them physically, sometimes having to come to terms with her own privilege. *Flânerie* first appears as an intimate public activity on the edge of feminism, allowing one to be an engaged observer rather than an activist, before revealing the perils of having a female body.

Looking at Leduc's travel writings under the lens of feminist and queer studies, I have argued throughout that the *flâneuse* dislocates the category of woman both through physical movement and a self-reflective gaze, sometimes by

⁸ In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002), Susan J. Brison, who interviewed Simone de Beauvoir in the 1970s, reflects on her sexual assault in a village outside of Grenoble, France, when she was walking on a country road near a field. Like Leduc, she tried to appeal to the humanity of her assailant, but to no avail (2). Brison notices the policeman's added "detail" when she makes her deposition, who explains her walking alone in the morning by the (invented) fact that she jogs regularly (7). In 1990, women still needed to justify their presence in the countryside to escape blame. Angela Maxwell, who walked alone for six years and 20,000 miles, was also sexually assaulted in Mongolia.

identifying with the male body. Leduc questions how a woman should ever be defined or framed without submitting to a totalizing or fetichizing gaze. Ahmed claims, “I am referring to all those who travel under the sign *women*” (14, original italics) reminding us that the female body is first of all a body of citations, weaving Beauvoir and Butler together when she adds, “no one is born a woman, it is an assignment that can shape us, make us, and break us” (15). Ahmed defines feminine resilience as a way of slowly giving in to daily microaggressions, until somehow, a “snap” happens. Bodies defined as women are endowed with linguistic mobility; traveling exposes their vulnerability while displacing their sexual and ontological availability. As her tourist experience is marked by attempts of “hybridization” (Delaitre 365), trying different kinds of embodiment, Leduc redefines “woman” as contingent, elusive, transient, ephemeral, far from any essentialism, reestablishing the unsettled boundaries of her body in an intimate quest to unpack and subvert heterosexist automatisms in modern times.

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