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Abstract

Review of Kelly Comfort and Marylaura Papalas, editors. *New Directions in Flânerie: Global Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge, 2022. 273 pp.

Keywords

Flanerie, Walking, Global, Twenty-First Century, Comparative Literature, Urbanity

Kelly Comfort and Marylaura Papalas, editors. *New Directions in Flânerie: Global Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge, 2022. 273 pp.

Kelly Comfort and Marylaura Papalas's edited collection, *New Directions in Flânerie: Global Perspectives for the Twenty-First Century*, provides scholars with a history of *flânerie* while compelling them to consider how the contours of contemporary depictions of *flânerie* invoke and subvert these very origins. The collection comprises ten essays that analyze works across a spectrum of genres and time periods, ranging from a novel by the nineteenth-century Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach to the film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* by Iranian American filmmaker Ana Lily Amirpour. Locating *flânerie* in so many works, eras, and regions underscores how the *flâneur/flâneuse* has, and continues to be, a figure that challenges and reshapes our understanding of urban spaces. In their introduction to these essays, Comfort and Papalas provide a concise genealogy of *flânerie* that scholars will find helpful, as it aggregates a wide swath of historical texts. Instructors designing a graduate course on depictions of urban walking would find this text, particularly its introduction, useful, as it provides a thorough and accessible scholarly framework on the subject.

In their introduction, Comfort and Papalas first analyze the primary texts that create our foundational understanding of urban walking, ranging from Charles Lamb's "The Londoner," to George Sand's *Historie de ma vie (Story of my Life: The Autobiography of George Sand)*, to Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life." The introduction then moves readers from a narrow, nineteenth-century understanding of *flânerie* that often centers the experiences of white male strollers in Paris or London towards a more complex, twenty-first-century one that challenges the belief that to participate in *flânerie* one must be a cisgender, heterosexual, white man. To draw clear comparisons between early foundational thoughts on *flânerie* and later revised theories on the subject, Comfort and Papalas divide their introduction into three sub-categories: geography, genius, and gender. The sub-section on geography moves us away from the image of a solitary figure wandering around Paris towards psychological wanderings, car trips, and cross-continental train rides. In other words, the pair examine twentieth- and twenty-first-century depictions of *flânerie* that focus less on physical walking and more on the "pace and time" of a *flâneur/flâneuse*'s movement, broadly defined (12). By noting that "pace and time" are inherent to *flânerie* but may take other forms of movement and transportation, Comfort and Papalas make space for scholars to consider how disability shapes *flânerie*, which is significant given that this remains understudied. This sub-section also interrogates the tension that globalization brings to *flânerie*: on the one hand, ease of travel (and digitization) means that people can see more of the world; on the other hand, the wide-ranging effects of globalization (climate change, pollution, etc.) have reduced walkable spaces. In their illumination of

“genius,” the editors neatly contrast how early texts on *flânerie* emphasize the *flâneur*’s artistic and observant nature, while later ones highlight how the *flâneur/flâneuse* hopes to recapture a sense of the city outside of capitalism’s reach.

Notably, the sub-section on gender is not reduced to the simple dichotomy of how a *flâneur* as opposed to a *flâneuse* experiences urban walking. For instance, scholars familiar with studies in *flânerie* will likely already know how notions of invisibility and anonymity have shaped discussions of the *flâneuse*. Here, Comfort and Papalas address these arguments, noting how women have historically lacked the safety to walk, a privilege that the *flâneur* largely enjoys. However, they add complexity to this subject, most convincingly, when they capture how women participate in “aimless” wandering when they drift through ads, television shows, and/or magazines (40). Furthermore, Comfort and Papalas qualify that they see gender as a flexible category that includes gender expression, identity, sexuality, an expansiveness that is demonstrated by one of the strongest essays in the collection, Darío Sánchez González’s “Cruising Flânerie,” which explores the nuanced relationship between queer men and walking.

The distillation of *flânerie* into these categories is so convincing that the choice to arrange the essays that follow it chronologically somewhat undercuts the intrigue that the introduction generates. That said, the essays coalesce nicely around similar ideas, even as they analyze works that are geographically, generically, and culturally diverse. For instance, many of the essays, such as those written by Oliver Bock, Osvaldo Cleger, Comfort, González, and Mei Mingxue Nan explore how writers, songwriters, and video game designers use the *flâneur/flâneuse* to remap familiar cities and/or regions, often subversively. Other essays written by Papalas and Lavinia Brydon, Bibi Burger, and Louis Rice complicate the argument that the *flâneur/flâneuse* is always solitary, challenging assumptions about the figure and its relationship to the crowd. Meanwhile, essays by Tessa Ashlin Nunn and Jeremy Glazier debate whether misogyny and ownership are inherent to *flânerie*.

The most significant contribution of this collection, however, is its exploration of whether the *flâneur/flâneuse* can be a political figure, a question that continues to haunt scholarship on *flânerie*. An astute essay by Nan takes up this question, proving quite effectively that Hong Kong writers/songwriters have used depictions of *flânerie* to dismantle the stories written about the city by colonialists. Along similar lines, Brydon, Burger, and Rice outline why they used walking tours and reflective writing practices to help citizens of the South African city Pretoria/Tshwane re-conceive their city. For the writers of these essays, those participating in *flânerie* are not apolitical wanderers but instead people using their keen observational skills to decolonize places and narratives. Ultimately, as *New Directions in Flânerie* demonstrates, there is value in upending what we understand about *flânerie*. To reduce the *flâneur/flâneuse* to an affluent, aimless stroller is to

miss how this figure dismantles our understanding of cities, while inviting us to see them anew.

Emily Hall