The Afropolitan Flâneur in Literature

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By

Carol Leff

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To Paul, Amy, Nathalia and Verena

Our way of belonging to the world, of being in the world and inhabiting it, has always been marked by, if not cultural mixing, then at least the interweaving of worlds.
~ Achille Mbembe *Afropolitanism*

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PREFACE

FINDING THE WAY

> Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. […] Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. (Michel de Certeau 1984, 97)

Cities fascinate. They throb with the pulse of human activity. They carry with them in their architecture a sense of history. In the fast-paced city, people rush from one place to another, mostly by some form of transport, but often also on foot. Walking allows one to connect to the environment, to find one's way, to perhaps encounter others en route. Walking is motion, energy, life. How strange it was in the first quarter of 2020 when cities suddenly emptied of people and fell silent as countries across the globe went into lockdown one by one in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was as if the heartbeat of the world had stopped. Globally, curfews were imposed, and people were prohibited from venturing out into the streets, in an attempt to stop the spread of a novel virus. In South Africa, where I wrote these pages during the pandemic, a national State of Disaster was declared, and one of the strictest national lockdowns in the world meant that people were not allowed out of their homes at all unless to obtain essential supplies. Ironically, even the beach less than a kilometre away became forbidden territory. Accustomed to walking with my dog every morning, I now planned ways of sneaking a walk on the beach unnoticed. Surfers were arrested, famous actors and even health ministers and presidents fell ill. In March 2020, in South Africa, the streets became deathly quiet: no vehicles, no individuals on foot.

Elsewhere, in Italy for instance, neighbours met daily (alone on their own balconies) where they played music, sang, or banged pots and pans, creating a sense of togetherness to lift the spirits and harness hope while remaining distanced. Worldwide, the urban once more became wild as animals such as buck, jackals, wild boar, sea lions, penguins and more, started appearing on grassy verges in suburbs and even on city sidewalks. While humans isolated themselves behind closed doors, exercising in their bedrooms or jogging in their living rooms, animals cautiously and curiously wandered city streets

and suburbia in search of food. Such animal behaviour reflected a change in human society, evidenced in the increasingly quiet city environment suddenly devoid of humans, where it had become illegal to be outdoors on foot.

The world held its breath. Tragically hundreds of thousands of people took their last difficult breath as they succumbed to the baffling coronavirus disease. The COVID-19 pandemic is not science fiction. A second wave presented itself and in December 2020, once again cities world-wide began to shut down and borders started closing as new variants of the coronavirus appeared and spread rapidly. Walking in the streets was once more constrained by a curfew and other emergency regulations in order to curb the spread of the virus.

Such a narrative serves well to illustrate how city life reflects human behaviour. A 2021 study by Hunter et al. investigated the effect of COVID-19 response policies on walking behaviour.[1] And *The Guardian* even went so far as to call 2020 the "year of the walker".[2] Now, more than before, people are certainly doing a lot of walking.

There are many different ways of walking, and the one that interests me the most is the way of the *flâneur*. The word 'flâneur' refers to a person engaged in the act of walking, wandering, or strolling and who carefully observes their surroundings and the society in which they wander. Flânerie is a pedestrian activity not specifically tied down by time constraints or specific duties. The flâneur, as acute observer of the sidewalks and city streets, through careful documentation, shares with others a way of interpreting the city and its inhabitants. Originally a literary figure, the flâneur has since taken on various meanings and flânerie can even become a way of life for some.

This book reads the city and its inhabitants via narratives that feature a flâneur figure who wanders the city streets while carefully observing their surroundings. Does the act of walking allow for a particular way of interacting with and reading the city and society? How is the individual

[1] In their 2021 study, R.F. Hunter, L. Garcia, T.H. de Sa *et al.* investigated the effect of COVID-19 response policies on walking behaviour in US cities by using data from mobile phones, and concluded that the pandemic has definitely changed walking behaviour.

[2] See the article by Alan Franks at https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/dec/18/how-2020-became-the-year-of-the-walker

subject affected by their walking or wandering in the city? Such questions point to a concern regarding the symbiotic relationship between human subject and cityspace, which is where this walking journey begins. It is through the simple act of walking that human beings connect directly with the earth, the landscape, the environmental surroundings, and with other human beings. While walking, the human mind is stimulated by what is seen along the way. The environment influences identity, which is not static, but rather it is protean and labile. By environment I mean not only buildings, streets and landscapes, but also people—as individuals, and as part of a broader community. When we find our way, we find our place in the world.

The experience of walking the city is described by Michel de Certeau (1984) in the epigraph to this preface as a weaving together of places, and for him it is by walking that one gains an understanding of the urban environment. Geographer and urban theorist, Edward Soja (2000), writes about the "unbounding" of the city which breaks down old boundaries, and moves into new spaces, where "territorial identity" is directly related to the "scale and scope of the modern metropolis" (218). Henri Lefebvre's (1996) arguably socialist understanding of "the right to the city" (147) is a call for equal access of all individuals to city space, indicative of the hybrid complexity of the city. Thus, de Certeau's "weaving" of places and Soja's "unbounding" of boundaries constitute methods of achieving Lefebvre's "right to the city".

While this book shares the concerns with the city explored by theorists such as de Certeau, Soja, and Lefebvre, it also pays specific attention to the *literary flâneur in an Afropolitan context*, or more precisely, examines what exactly constitutes an *Afropolitan* flâneur, and what specific type of flânerie such a figure presents in a variety of African and transnational texts. My interpretation—or reinvention—of the flâneur figure allows for a move beyond geographical limitations, as will be seen in the chapters that follow. Both the flâneur figure and the concept of the Afropolitan are redefined as I stretch their meaning and adapt them to contemporary surroundings. In this book I first examine the concept of the original flâneur so as to later point out how this figure has been rearticulated in selected African and transnational literary texts. Furthermore, I seek to disentangle both the '*Afropolitan*' and the '*flâneur*' from their generalised associations with privilege. By showing how the traditional definition of the flâneur has been subverted in the literature, and by studying such a figure in an Afropolitan and diasporic literary context, I aim to challenge simplistic or essentializing notions of Africa and African identity.

The term "Afropolitan" was popularised in 2005 by Taiye Selasi in an article titled "Bye-Bye Babar", in which she defines Afropolitans as "African emigrants" who can be recognised by their "funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes" (n. pag.).[3] Around the same time as Selasi's famous article appeared, Afropolitanism was described by Achille Mbembe (2005) as a "manière d'être au monde"[4] or "a way of being in the world" (Mbembe 2007, 28). A few years later Simon Gikandi (2011) asserted that to be Afropolitan is "to embrace and celebrate a state of cultural hybridity—to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time" (9). While the Afropolitan is an actual individual connected to cities of Africa and the diaspora, the flâneur was originally a literary figure connected only to cities of Europe. This book examines the intersection of these two figures in the form of an *Afropolitan flâneur* as interpreted in selected literary texts.

Since this book is based on literary representations, the study is not sociological, historical, or anthropological, although to study literary representations is to be aware of insights derived from other disciplines. The 'Africa' of the Afropolitan is seen here as a defined subjectivity generated through literary representation, and the flâneur in the following chapters is a literary figure who perceives an artistic and imagined Johannesburg, Lagos, or even New York, as the case may be.

To reflect a multiplicity of authorial positions, the selection of texts is broad. Twelve primary texts are consulted, mostly novels, but also an autobiography and a mixed-genre text. Published between 1999 and 2015, from six African and six non-African publishers, this selection is an archive of both the African and non-African city. Each of the three novels discussed per chapter features a flâneur character who reveals the intricacies of human subjectivity in the urban cityscape. Close readings of the texts are carried

[3] "Bye-Bye Babar" is popularly regarded as the founding essay on Afropolitanism. Written by Taiye Selasi (formerly Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu) in 2005, it appeared as an article in *Lip Magazine*, online at <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>, and this is the version to which I refer. "Bye-Bye Babar" also appeared in *The International Review of African American Art* 22.3 in 2008, as well as in *Callaloo* 36.3 in 2013.

[4] Achille Mbembe's article first appeared in French in 2005, titled "Afropolitanisme", and was translated by Laurent Chauvet in a 2007 article for the Africa Remix exhibition catalogue. Mbembe wrote the original article in French. That it was then translated into English by a Frenchman who settled in South Africa, enacts the "worlds in movement" idea which Mbembe espouses. Other translations of Mbembe's article also exist, such as that by Paulo Lemos Horta (Mbembe 2017) in *Cosmopolitanisms.*

out individually, while I also compare and contrast these texts in each chapter. Equal emphasis is placed on the subject (the Afropolitan flâneur) and the object (the city itself as seen by the observer). My literary analysis focuses on three cities in Africa (Johannesburg, Cape Town and Lagos), as well as three global north cities (New York, Paris and London), which will be considered through the eyes of what I term an Afropolitan flâneur.

The theoretical framework for the book which is set up in the **Introduction** is rooted in debates on the figure of the postcolonial flâneur in literature and postcolonial spatiality as theory. As this book is situated in the field of transnational literary studies, it has much to do with identity formation, how it is impacted upon by borders and boundaries, and how these are crossed or negotiated through movement.

Throughout **Chapters 1 to 4**, amongst other things the literary analysis: (1) identifies specific Afropolitan flâneurs in each text examined; (2) considers ways in which the city environment shapes the human subject and the human subject in turn shapes the urban environment; and (3) develops new theoretical ideas on the Afropolitan and the flâneur by revisiting and expanding upon existing scholarly and popular interpretations. Afropolitan flâneurs as examined in the twelve selected literary texts are analysed via a focus on different points of view, including that of the reader as flâneur, the writer as flâneur, or the protagonist as flâneur. Each text presents a unique Afropolitan flâneur. In this way it will be shown how these flâneurs and the literary texts themselves represent and inscribe a form of Afropolitanism and contemporary African diasporic identity formation in a selection of cosmopolitan cities.

To this end, **Chapter 1** is concerned with the spatiality of mapping. In this chapter, reading the cityspace of Johannesburg forms the focus for the texts selected. Particularly helpful to my approach in this chapter is the work of Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall and Lindsay Bremner, amongst others. The three texts I consider in Chapter 1 reflect flâneuristic impressions of the transitional city of Johannesburg: *Portrait with Keys* by Ivan Vladislavić, about the city and one man's place in it; *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* by Mark Gevisser, which is an autobiographical account of a white, Jewish, gay man growing up in the city; and the fictional *Welcome to our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe, which tells the story of a migrant's arrival in the city. The writers and their protagonists or narrators in the three texts examined are all Afropolitan flâneurs who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders in the city of Johannesburg.

It is through the act of walking that boundaries are both defined, explored and transgressed. The Afropolitan flâneur who walks their urban surroundings is doing precisely that: defining boundaries, even challenging their own existence while exploring physical spaces. All three texts discussed in Chapter 1 carefully reference maps and mapping the city as a means of finding one's way. The spatial formation, or what Nuttall (2004a) refers to as the "citiness of cities" (740), is illustrated here in three very different texts that highlight in their own way the heterogeneous mixture of Johannesburg.

Chapter 2 helps to further my argument in relation to reading the city via a redefined Afropolitan flâneur. The texts discussed in this chapter feature a contemporary version of the flâneur in an Afropolitan setting of Cape Town: *Skyline* by Patricia Schonstein-Pinnock; *Thirteen Cents* by Kabelo Sello Duiker; and *Bom Boy* by Yewande Omotoso. These three novels are compared and contrasted in order to establish a conversation between the three as a means of re-examining urban identities such as the refugee and the migrant, and of considering notions of home and belonging as they relate to such identities. Each of the Afropolitan flâneurs in these novels taps into issues surrounding migrancy, and problematizes, in different ways, the lived experiences of migrants, of 'other' Africans in 'southern' Africa. Not only do these three novels share the same setting of Cape Town, but they all have a child or young adult protagonist who is a flâneur that walks the city streets. Since the Cape Town city novel generally carries forms of its shadowy past of slavery and colonialism, these three novels share a concern with intersections and alienation as they examine aspects of hybridity, transculturation, intersectionality and *ubuntu*[5] which help expand upon the existing definition of Afropolitanism.

In the three novels discussed in **Chapter 3**, the narrator or protagonist is an Afropolitan flâneur who negotiates his way through the city on foot, as a stranger, through a personal mapping of urban Lagos, where the Yoruba word *oyinbo*, or Igbo word *oyibo*, is a term used to refer not only to the language of the coloniser, but also to foreigners, strangers, Europeans or white people. In Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, Teju Cole's *Every Day is for*

[5] *Ubuntu* is a (South) African philosophy which, as an expression of humanity, recognises that an individual is not considered separate from their community. The idiom "*umntu ngumntu ngabantu*" (isiXhosa) or "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (isiZulu) or "*motho ke motho ka batho*" (Sepedi) means "a person is a person through other people". *Ubunt*u, as Desmond Tutu (1999) notes, "speaks of the very essence of being human" (31).

the Thief, and A. Igoni Barrett's *Blackass,* themes related to the construction of gender and racial identity are examined. Abani, Cole and Barrett use the topography of Lagos in a manner that reflects Afropolitanism, multiculturalism and dynamic urban identities to focus on different aspects of contemporary Nigerian life.

The final chapter, **Chapter 4**, deals with the ambivalent connection to home shared by diasporic subjects and returnees alike. These issues are explored in Alain Mabanckou's novel *Blue White Red*, set mostly in Paris, Biyi Bandele's *The Street*, set in London's Brixton and Teju Cole's *Open City,* set mainly in New York. *The Street* opens and closes with a dream, and both *Open City* and *Blue White Red* are similarly concerned with the dream of a better life elsewhere. In this final chapter, it is through the figure of the Afropolitan flâneur, which here also includes the *dériveur*[6] or drifter, and the well-dressed *sapeur*, that I interrogate matters of identity and belonging as a diasporic African individual in three global cities and I argue for a broader, more inclusive Afropolitanism. Metropoles such as Paris, London and New York are Global North cities which are inhabited and experienced differently by the Afropolitan flâneur from individuals born and bred in those cities. Many different feet walk the city streets, bringing contrasting worlds together.

You are invited to share my discoveries as you wander through the pages that follow.

[6] The terms *dériveur* (drifter) and *sapeur* (an elegant dresser) will be explicated in the introduction and elaborated upon in the literary analysis in later chapters.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My own journey as a flâneuse began several years ago when I had little idea what a massive undertaking this project would prove to be, and it could not have been accomplished without the help of a number of people. The chapters in this book originally shaped my PhD thesis titled "The Afropolitan Flâneur: Literary Representations of the City and Contemporary Urban Identities in Selected African and Transnational Texts" which I completed in December 2018. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my former research colleagues, in particular my supervisor, Samantha Naidu, co-ordinator of the Intersecting Diasporas Group (IDG) at Rhodes University, for her intellectual guidance, encouragement and support.

A version of a section of Chapter 2 appeared in an article on flâneusing the city that was published in the online open-access academic journal *de genere* in 2018. Other chapters, while still in the making, received brief airings at various conferences, and I am grateful to all who provided feedback during those formative stages.

My gratitude also extends to Adam Rummens, the Commissioning Editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, as well as the team members who were involved in various stages of the production of this book.

Thank you to each and every person who has helped me along this path. There are many who are not acknowledged here, but to whom I remain equally filled with gratitude. Thank you all for walking some of the way with me.

THREE BRIEF NOTES

Orthography

While standard UK English spelling has been used throughout, sometimes the orthography that appears in quotations will depart from this, in keeping with the spelling and punctuation used in the original source.

Gender

Since language shapes the world we see, I have used unbiased language as much as possible. While gender-inclusive language is preferred in this book, and generally instead of *his* or *her* I use the word *their*, in some cases where specific terms have both masculine and feminine forms (such as *flâneur* and *flâneuse*), the gender specific word is used when discussing a particular character. For instance, in Chapter 2 the word *flâneuse* is used since the narrator of *Skyline* is a female flâneur. Similarly, while the term *sapeur* also has a feminine form (*sapeuse*), the feminine form of the term is not used as the sapeur analysed in Chapter 4 is a male character.

Race

Throughout this book, I avoid the use of inverted commas or capitalisation of initial letters for the terms *black*, *white* or *coloured*, as I do not wish to reify apartheid race classification which affected the lives of millions of people in horrifically unjust ways. Over the last few decades, such usage has been a controversial issue among scholars as the terms were historically constructed labels for racial categories.[7] While mixed race South Africans

[7] In *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough,* Mohamed Adhikari (2005) notes that during the apartheid period and beyond, certain scholars "refused to capitalize the first letter of the term *Coloured* in order to indicate both opposition to the enforced classification of people into racial and ethnic categories and distaste for ethnocentric values" (xv). More recently, adds Adhikari, such capitalisation was again in use, partly as "a response to the gradual normalization of South African society in the postapartheid period" and partly "in recognition of a growing grass-roots sentiment neatly expressed by journalist Paul Stober: 'As a distinct ethnic group with over three million members, we deserve a capital letter'" (xv).

are generally referred to as *coloured*, according to contemporary South African usage, the term *black* also includes the coloured community as well as the Indian and Asian population groups.

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST STEPS

New African Identities and Diasporic Approaches

> For itinerancy makes the alien familiar and vice versa, because no two walks are ever quite the same. It is a way to experience ownership without property. Walking is what turns spaces into places. (Appiah 2017, 19)

The above quotation comes from Kwame Anthony Appiah's Presidential address, "Boundaries of Culture", which he delivered at the Modern Language Association Convention in 2017, and in which he elaborated on how the act of walking forms a central concern of not only nineteenth-century writers but also of modernist and contemporary writers. Walking is a means of literally and figuratively crossing boundaries, not only physical, but also of language and culture, and in Appiah's words, "not as needful drudgery but as a mode of contemplation and observation, a way of being fully in the world, a mode of movement that was also a form of attention" (2017, 17). There are clear echoes here with Appiah's cosmopolitan ethic detailed in his iconic book *Cosmopolitanism,* where he answers his own question, "A citizen of the world: how far can we take that idea?" (2007, xv).

To bridge the gaps between cultures and bring people together in order to "recognise one's face in that of a foreigner" (Mbembe 2007, 28) is a global challenge. It is through walking that people and places may be connected. Michel de Certeau (1984) writes that:

> It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. (97)

In a similar manner, the novels analysed in this book are, like the maps de Certeau speaks of, records of walking. Each of the twelve texts discussed over the next four chapters has a flâneur figure, or a character who is a

flâneur, who walks and observes the urban environment. The literary texts I consider and analyse are illustrative of the paradox of detached immersion, which relates not only to the flâneur but also reflects the occasional sense of displacement experienced by the multi-directional Afropolitan. Both the figure of the **flâneur** as well as that of the **Afropolitan**, will be discussed in detail over the next few pages of this introductory chapter.

Taiye Selasi, who popularised the term "Afropolitan" noted in a 2014 talk,[8] that "replacing the language of *nationality* with the language of *locality* asks us to shift our focus to where real life occurs" (n. pag.). An individual might feel entirely 'at home' in a so-called 'foreign' land when there is a recognition by other people of cultural habits or mannerisms which reflect that which is familiar to them. Movement, whether simply on foot or by means of international air travel, for leisure or by forced migration, inevitably brings different cultures (such as African and European) in contact with one another, allowing for either conflict or change in terms of identity formation.

As a result of the "worlds-in-movement phenomenon" (Mbembe 2007, 28) which reflects continuous movement, both within as well as beyond the continent, Africa became a melting pot of peoples from elsewhere, including Europe and Asia. Mbembe points out that to be *African* is not necessarily to be black, since for him, contemporary Africa constitutes "forms of multiplicity" which include "racial multiplicity" (29). Mbembe's controversial idea "that 'Afro' is not necessarily a racial signifier" implies that "we should unhinge black from our conception of African" (Knudsen and Rahbek 2016, 151). While the racial openness espoused by Mbembe is contested and might appear to be a utopian idea, it resonates with the notion of a broad Afropolitanism as interpreted in the selected literary texts under analysis.

Situated in the context of transnational literary studies, this book is specifically concerned with *literary representations* of the city and contemporary urban identities. How is identity formation, in the literature, impacted upon by borders and boundaries, and how are these crossed or negotiated through the movement/s of the flâneur? Movement can be both large-scale movements, such as displacement or forced migration of groups

[8] Selasi's TED conference talk, "Don't ask me where I'm from, ask where I'm a local" can be viewed on YouTube at this link: <http://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local/transcript?language=en#t-30999>.

of people, as well as much smaller movements such as an individual walking in an urban environment.

Increasing global patterns of migration which link individuals and societies to multiple cities are referred to by Steven Vertovec as "super-diversity",[9] which results in a multiplicity of evolving identities. Transnationalism, like diaspora, involves such diversity and change in individuals who are connected to various places through movement such as migration. Broadly speaking, transnationalism refers to "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (Vertovec 1999, 447). Thus, a Nigerian or Ghanaian who lives and works in New York or London, for instance, would be considered a transnational subject living in the African diaspora, having perhaps resided in multiple locations, and whose life has been influenced by a connection to these places through other people and cultures. As pointed out by Simon Gikandi (2010) by way of an example he provides in a discussion on globalisation and cosmopolitanism, "African street traders in New York or Paris do not necessarily conceive a radical disjuncture between their deep engagement with the modern city and their commitment to their local cultures" (31). The "local cultures" to which Gikandi (2010) refers are homeland cultures in Africa, as he goes on to talk about the "survival of locality outside national or ethnic boundaries" given that "locality itself has been globalized" (32). In other words, diasporic subjects do not necessarily lose their cultural roots and links to their homeland, rather they transport them elsewhere, thus changing their new locality. Examples of how diasporic subjects affect their new environment will be evident in the examination of novels such as Biyi Bandele's *The Street* and Alain Mabanckou's *Blue White Red* in a later chapter.

Diasporic subjects experience numerous incongruities in adapting to life outside their particular homeland and develop a heightened tolerance towards the local and global, what is familiar or unfamiliar. Many such transnational individuals live in an in-between state as they adapt to new environments, yet often still hanker for their former homes. As local and global blur into 'glocal', boundaries and entangled divides intersect all the more. Exposure to different languages, ways of being and cultures other than those from one's homeland affect an individual's constantly changing

[9] For more detail, refer to Steven Vertovec's (2007) article, "Super-Diversity and Its Implications". Elsewhere, Eva Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek (2016) use the metropolis of London to elaborate on Vertovec's super-diversity by explaining that it "focuses on the interplay of a range of factors that relate to ethnicity and the fact that there are multiple diversities *within* ethnic groups" (271, italics in original).

hybrid identity and, as pointed out by Gikandi (2010), "cultivating a cosmopolitan identity is also an attempt to deploy the resources of intellectual culture to produce and reproduce a subjectivity that is reliable and recognizable" (33) as a means of dealing with diasporic experiences such as the feeling of rootlessness. Teju Cole makes this quite obvious in *Open City*, as will be seen in Chapter 4, by problematizing the lived experiences of his Afrodiasporic narrator who walks the streets of New York.

It is arguably largely due to Stuart Hall's influence that the term "diaspora" has grown in popularity over recent years, and his concern with cultural identity, as noted by Floya Anthias (1998), has enabled the "concept of diaspora [to emerge] as a way of rethinking the issue of black cultural identity and representation" (560). This book aims to "rethink" such identities and reimagine the Afropolitan subject in a diaspora space, where identity continues to undergo certain shifts and fluctuations. Hall elaborates on diaspora and identity by pointing out that the diaspora experience is defined by hybridity.[10] It is the diversity and fluidity of identity which Hall (1990) speaks about that is of interest insofar as it relates to the literary texts scrutinised in this book. It is helpful to look at diaspora identities always with new eyes, and in particular when considering the impact of movement across and through national and international borders. Paul Gilroy (1994) explains his understanding of the term "diaspora" as identifying "a relational network, characteristically produced by forced dispersal and reluctant scattering" (207). A sense of coercion underlies this kind of movement and Gilroy debunks the false, glamorous image of diaspora by pointing out that it is not merely a term for a fashionable nomadism, but rather the word has connotations of "flight following the threat of violence" (1994, 207). Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (2010) suggest that "the best test for the present academic value of these concepts [transnationalism and diaspora] lies in their capacity to trigger new research perspectives and questions" (7), which is one of the aims of this book. By focusing on a specific urban identity—that of the Afropolitan flâneur—I imagine and examine new ways of understanding dynamic, transnational, diasporic, cosmopolitan subjectivities.

[10] The diaspora experience, according to Hall (1990), is defined "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (235).

Diaspora can be regarded as a way of being, rather than of relating to a specific grouping of people. Floya Anthias (1998) makes the point clear by referring to postmodern versions of diaspora—such as those propounded by Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, amongst others—as denoting "a *condition* rather than being descriptive of a group" (565). She adds that "this condition is put into play through the experience of being *from* one place and *of* another" (565). Contemporary diasporic identities are fluid, and do not exist in a vacuum. In Avtar Brah's (1996) discussion on diaspora space she says that it is important to note that it is particularly at the intersections of "economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes" that identities are contested (208). A range of conceptual metaphors which will be used throughout this book and which equate to Brah's understanding of what characterises "diaspora space" include Homi Bhabha's (1990; 1994) "Third Space", Breyten Breytenbach's (2009) "Middle World", Leon de Kock's (2001) "seam", and Sarah Nuttall's (2009) "entanglement".

Bhabha (1990) speaks of hybridity being a "Third Space" which "enables other positions to emerge" (211), and it is this liminal space between cultures which allows for the creation of different ways of being. As Knudsen and Rahbek (2016) argue, Bhabha's Third Space "can be seen as a qualifying precursor of the Afropolitan space" (33). It is in Bhabha's liminal space of in-betweenness where new identities are formed, spaces that are, and are not, home. Similarly, Breyten Breytenbach (2009) writes about a condition of living beyond exile, which he terms the "Middle World" and which J. U. Jacobs (2016) explains as being a "trope for those who share a diasporic consciousness" (158), who are "culturally hybrid and practitioners of nomadic thinking" (159). Breytenbach's Middle World inhabitants, as Jacobs (2016) elaborates, have "a fascination for metamorphosis and their consciousness is characterised by multiplicity, not duality" (159). This will be evidenced in the close examination of A. Igoni Barrett's novel, *Blackass*, in Chapter 3.

Leon de Kock's (2001) "seam" is a sewing metaphor he uses for "the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of the suture" (276), a site where "difference and sameness" (277) can come together. In a country such as South Africa, which suffers from binary overload, the seam is a useful image for joining those opposites, as such a coming together is not without tension, as will be seen for instance through examples offered in Chapter 2.

Sarah Nuttall's (2009) concept of "entanglement", which is concerned with constantly shifting interweavings, also serves as a useful metaphor for

bringing together sites or relationships which were formerly considered separate, such as black and white, as was seen with de Kock's "seam". Nuttall's concept of entanglement will be deployed in the analysis of the three texts discussed in Chapter 2. All of these terms—diaspora space, Third Space, Middle World, the seam, entanglement—relate to the transnational subject, who is to be found in such spaces.

To be clear, the terms *diaspora* and *diasporic*, as I use them throughout this book, relate to various peoples originating from Africa, who remain connected to Africa, and who reside either within Africa or in other countries world-wide, and whose identity formation is affected in a number of ways due to a sense of dislocation. Afrodiasporic identity formation that results from multi-dimensional flows will be further examined in the next section with reference to the literary figure of the flâneur.

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Pedestrian Perspectives

> Cosmopolitans are the flaneurs of our age, walking the cities of the world, convinced that their identity can only be mirrored through their engagement with others, sure of their mastery of global cultural flows and their secure place within it. (Gikandi 2010, 32)

While Gikandi here talks about cosmopolitans and actual people, the flâneur that will be considered in this book is *a construct, a literary figure* whose understanding of the urban environment comes about by means of walking, step by step, through the city. The texts that are analysed in this book provide examples of the literary flâneur, and therefore highlight the sociological phenomenon of flânerie. While the flâneur can indeed be an actual, living figure, I am interested specifically in how this figure interacts with the environment as seen in the selected literature. Simon Gikandi sees the flâneur as a global cosmopolitan who interacts with others in the modern metropolis. Key to the emergence of the flâneur were nineteenth century urbanisation and industrialisation, and thus the birth of the archetypal flâneur is closely linked to the birth of the modern city. The flâneur in literature was born at a moment of high imperialism, when Europe had colonised much of the rest of the world. During this time, the wealth and growth of the metropole was predicated on the success of empire, that is, of the subjugation of the colonies. Thus, the middle-class, white, dandy flâneur of nineteenth century Paris was a product of colonialism. That flâneur is no longer.

The postcolonial flâneur was influenced by, and appropriates, forms from the colonial encounter, and time and history bring about change. In some ways Africa followed Europe in terms of modern urbanity, however, the imposition of the coloniser's culture on Africa was violent and unjust and continues to have repercussions decades later. The effects of the problematic nature of colonialism are evident, for instance, in the way that even today walking the streets is different for individuals of colour in places such as South Africa or the USA. Examples of this will be provided in the discussion of texts in the forthcoming chapters.

To define a new flâneur that reflects the mutability of this literary figure, some scholars express the need for a different word, such as simply "pedestrian"[11] or perhaps the Spanish "*callejeralo*", (see Suárez 2015, 864), while Mary Gluck "distinguish[es] the 'popular' from the 'avant-garde' flâneur" (in Boutin 2012, 128). These ideas point to the existence in literature of a new type of flâneur: a contemporary, global and transnational figure that appears as an updated figure given the changes the urban environment has seen over the last two centuries. In this book the word flâneur (and its feminine form flâneuse) is used to refer to a contemporary literary figure who is a different figure to the original, itinerant literary flâneur made popular by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. While it may be unnecessary to change the word 'flâneur', it is appropriate to revise and update the word's meaning to reflect how this city stroller has evolved in the literature.

The experience of walking the city has been described by Michel de Certeau (1984) as a "weaving" together of places, and for him it is by walking that one gains an understanding of the urban environment. Sarah Nuttall (2004a) elaborates on this further when she explains that "de Certeau's key insight was that people use cities by constructing who they are, producing a narrative of identity" (741). The human subject, while walking the city, creates a unique narrative, without "know[ing] how their individual paths affect the city as a whole" and thus they "make a sentence or a story of particular places in the city, while the city is not available as an overview—the city is the way that it is walked" (Nuttall 2004a, 741). Nuttall makes clear the symbiotic relationship between the walker who writes the city step

[11] Isabel Carrera Suárez (2015) adopts Marsha Meskimmon's "concept of the pedestrian" where the pedestrian is one who "differs from the flâneur in locatedness and physicality" (856).

by step and goes on to decipher it through each step and the very space itself which is walked.

For de Certeau walking can be a subversive act, even "a mode of political resistance" (Middleton 2010, 579) and he also notes how cities are designed in ways that afford control by those in power—citing for instance the former towers of the World Trade Centre. There are those who can view the city from above, in a Foucauldian panopticon sense, or a god's-eye view, and those who only see it from below at street level. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984) suggests that it is pedestrians who create the city by walking about, applying their imagination to what they see, thus giving meaning to these spaces:

> Their *intertwined* paths give their shape to spaces. They *weave* places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these 'real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.' They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize. (97, italics mine)

Viewed this way, those who walk the city give it life, and are part of its very bloodstream. Similar to entanglement, the intertwinings and weavings that de Certeau speaks of here echo strongly with themes of transnationalism and diaspora that run through this book. By viewing the city on foot, one is wholly immersed in the space, somewhat different to how it might be seen through the window of a moving vehicle or from the top of a high-rise building. The Afropolitan flâneur, does not necessarily only walk the city on foot, but also sees it from a distance as a voyager from inside an aeroplane or from a height through the windows of high-rise buildings. Sarah Nuttall (2004a), notes that the flâneur comes in many guises: the "tourist", "player", the "vagabond or vagrant" and the "commuter" (26).

At the beginning of the novel *Open City*, Teju Cole's narrator, reminiscing on how he started walking New York City, muses as follows:

> Not long before this aimless wandering began, I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment, and I wonder now if the two are connected. […] Each time I caught sight of geese swooping in formation across the sky, I wondered how our life below might look from their perspective […]. (Cole 2012, 3–4).

If it is through walking in the city as the flâneur does, that the connection between identity and space is foregrounded, Cole takes this one step further by allowing his narrator-flâneur to imagine a bird's eye view of the city, affording him a bit of distance. Vehicular or aerial flânerie, while an option for some, is different for individuals driving a vehicle to those who are

passengers. For example, in their article "Afropolis: From Johannesburg", Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2007) write the city of Johannesburg as experienced by them while driving in a car:

> Surface and depth: a city of shallows and depths, surfaces that have forgotten their depths […]. A city of surfaces, capitalist brashness, in which only some want to remember, or in which the past appears fleetingly, glimpsed as parodic reference or embedded in a space or a face, an ash drift, an exfoliation. (286–87)

As one drives, there is a limited way of seeing, as described above, and this reflects the ephemeral quality of the city as it is caught simply in a flash. Driving provides a different depth perspective to walking, it is more like skimming quickly through a book, whereas walking is more like a careful reading that provides the individual with a deeper understanding of the book.

The flâneur today continues to be an interesting figure in urban discourse ever since the emergence of the figure in 19th century France. By means of critically engaging with a range of definitions from various sources, over the next few pages, conventional notions of what the flâneur is, will be challenged through the argument that the practice of flânerie is no longer exclusive, and is a practice that occurs in the current day irrespective of place, race, culture, gender, or mode (on foot or in transit). While the act of flânerie can be seen as a sociological phenomenon, and indeed the flâneur can be an actual individual who walks the streets, the focus in this book is on *the flâneur as a literary construct*.

There appears to be a resurgence of interest in the figure of the flâneur in literature, as evidenced by the publication of titles such as Edmund White's (2001) *The Flâneur: A Stroll Through the Paradoxes of Paris* and Lauren Elkin's more recently published *Flâneuse* (2016).[12] Testament to the ongoing fascination with the topic of flânerie, in 2017 at The Jewish Museum in New York there was an exhibition titled "The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin" which explored the ongoing relevance of Benjamin's incomplete magnum opus[13] which dealt, amongst other things, in some detail with the original Parisian flâneur. Further

[12] Edmund White's (2001) book, *The Flâneur: A Stroll Through the Paradoxes of Paris*, is a personal account of his walks in Paris, while Keith Tester's *The Flâneur* (1994) provides a selection of essays by experts in the field.

[13] For more on this, see <http://thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/the-arcades-contemporary-art-and-walter-benjamin>.

evidence of this figure's popularity is the "Gallery Flâneur" in Adelaide, Australia, which is "dedicated to Adelaide's urban wanderers and explorers"[14] with contemporary art exhibitions running back-to-back. This revival of the figure of the flâneur is topical, but what exactly is a *flâneur* and what is the meaning of *flânerie*?

From street wanderer to solitary onlooker, the figure of the flâneur has traditionally been associated with nineteenth century Paris, as interpreted by Walter Benjamin with reference to Charles Baudelaire's poetic descriptions of how a flâneur strolled through the streets and arcades of the city. Historically, it was thanks to Baron Georges Haussmann,[15] commissioned by Napoleon III, that the city of Paris was restructured, thus altering the way the inhabitants of the city negotiated shared public spaces such as the boulevards, cafés and arcades. The flâneur's act of walking and observing urban life came to be known as flânerie. According to Elizabeth Wilson (2001), the nineteenth century *Encyclopaedie Larousse* suggests that the term 'flâneur' might have originated from the Irish word for 'libertine' but the editors of *Larousse* also "devoted a long article to the flâneur, whom they defined as a loiterer, a fritterer away of time, associated with the new urban pastimes of shopping and crowd-watching" (75). However, the new *Larousse Encyclopédie en ligne* (launched online in 2008) offers merely the following definition for flâneur: "Qui flâne, aime à flâner; promeneur"[16] meaning one who enjoys the act of flânerie or promenading.[17] This definition is useless, but, as pointed out by Keith Tester (1994), since "the *flâneur* is fundamentally a figure who can only be known through the activities of *flânerie*, a certain mystery is intrinsic to his identity" (7).

In the early 1800s the flâneur was regarded as a lowlife type, with a popular definition being as indicated earlier, a "loafer, a man of insufferable idleness" (Ferguson 1994, 24). This early flâneur, who enjoyed comfort and routine, differed from later versions, who exhibited a flair for spontaneity (Wilson 2001; Ferguson 1994). Honoré de Balzac (1834) offered a

[14] More on the Gallery Flâneur can be seen at <https://splashadelaide.com.au/project/gallery-flaneur>.

[15] According to Katheryn Kramer and John Rennie Short (2011), "Hausmannization destroyed true flânerie" as a range of new "commercial devices […] restricted creative wandering through the streets" (328).

[16] From <http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/rechercher?q=flaneur#g4YrcVbH1VGfpwpX.99>.

[17] For a detailed discussion on Elizabeth Wilson's useful etymology of the word "flâneur", see Kinga Araya's (2009) article "Walking the Wall: Global Flâneuse with Local Dilemmas".

description of socially distanced flânerie in his *Physiologie du Mariage* which appeared originally in 1829. The Balzacian flâneur, Ferguson (1994) explains, was imaginative and knowledgeable, "a living guidebook" (31), yet at risk of being overwhelmed by the city (33). This flâneur nonetheless continued to stroll spontaneously and without direction through the city streets, distantly observing people and places, recording with a realist's eye.

Charles Baudelaire, French poet and essayist credited with coining the term "*modernité*", brought the streets of the city of Paris to life through his writing, responding in particular to the modern developments taking place in the surrounding spaces. In the words of Heather Acott (2011), "[a]s *a literary construct*, the flâneur owes its origins to the Parisian prowler of Baudelaire […] an anonymous consumer of spectacle who looks without touching but who retains some sympathy for the outcasts of the city; part detective, part sociologist, part journalist, part rogue male free from domestic constraints" (n. pag., emphasis mine). Examples of the early literary flâneur appear in Baudelaire's 1857 collection of poetry titled *Les Fleurs du Mal,* in particular the "Parisian Scenes" section. Later, in Baudelaire's seminal essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863)[18] which has been much cited as one of the earliest texts and main works relating to the flâneur (Tester 1994, 1–2; Wolff 1985, 40; Minnaard 2013, 82), he provides the most well-known description of the flâneur whose "passion and […] profession are to become one flesh with the crowd" (9). In the words of Baudelaire (1863):

> For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (9)

Although detached or separate from the crowd, as a solitary figure that does not join in a group, the flâneur is nonetheless a part of the environment, both in and of the crowd, which might seem contradictory. The detachment allows the flâneur the space to observe objectively, while yet remaining connected to the crowd. It is evident that Baudelaire (1863) romanticised this individual, to whom he refers as "the painter of the passing moment"

[18] Although Baudelaire's essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" was written between November 1859 and February 1860, it was only published in instalments in 1863 in the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro.*

(5), one who is able to capture fugitive moments of eternity. This same flâneur Baudelaire likened to "a mirror as vast as the crowd itself" or even "a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness" (9). The connection between painting, literature and flânerie is fairly clear in Baudelaire's descriptions of realist painter, Constantin Guys, and similarly, while literature remains the primary focus of this book it will at times be crucial to consider visual texts that are included in some of the primary texts, thus entailing an ekphrastic[19] approach. Ekphrasis, simply put, is the literary or narrative description of an artistic creation.

When describing the flâneur as a "man of the world", Baudelaire makes mention of Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 short story "The Man of the Crowd", set in the streets of London, where the crowd is symbolic of the constantly evolving city.[20] It is worth noting that Poe's detective Dupin (who made his first appearance in an 1841 short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue") can also be considered a flâneur to some extent[21] because Dupin is a fictional character in a literary text who has "an appetite for urban observation" (Brand 1991, 95). As mentioned by Rob Shields (1994), the flâneur "is like a detective seeking clues who reads people's characters not only from the physiognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the streets" (63).

Almost a century after Baudelaire wrote about the flâneur and provided examples of the literary figure in his poetry, Walter Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire depicted the modernist, nineteenth century Parisian flâneur, who, while walking, became a "chronicler of his and his own epoch's misery and a witness to his times, as a rigorous observer, an amateur geographer and historian" (Ivanchikova 2007, 20). The negativity of the "epoch's misery" reflected here relates in part to the social conditions of the time as well as to Baudelaire's own gloominess and suffering. The flâneur's act of walking is described by Benjamin ([1983] 1997) as "botanizing on

[19] For instance, Mark Gevisser includes maps at the beginning of his memoir. Besides cartography being a visual aid, so too are photography and cinema. Susan Sontag (1977 in *On Photography*) writes about how the camera has become the tool of the flâneur, and this is exemplified for instance in *Every Day is for the Thief,* where Teju Cole includes some of his own photographs.

[20] Baudelaire translated Poe's stories from English into French in *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires,* published in 1857 (see Murail 2013, 269).

[21] For a discussion on Poe's detective flâneur, see James V. Werner (2001), "The Detective Gaze: Edgar A. Poe, the Flaneur, and the Physiognomy of Crime" in *American Transcendental Quarterly* as well as Chapter 5 of Dana Brand's (1991) book *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature.*