

## **Walking in the city: urban space, stories, and gender**

By Natalie Collie, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

### **Abstract:**

This paper outlines a feminist reading of Michel de Certeau's work on urban space and narrative in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau offers a persuasive, highly poetic theoretical framework for understanding the production of urban space and the way it is experienced – and 'written' – through the everyday practices of a city's inhabitants. The role of sexual difference in the production of this space is somewhat underdeveloped, however. In response to this gap, and with the help of Elizabeth Grosz's essay *Cities-bodies*, I develop a feminist analysis of the urban subjectivity implied in his work.

1 This paper outlines a feminist reading of Michel de Certeau's work on urban space and narrative in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau offers a persuasive, highly poetic theoretical framework for understanding the production of urban space and the way it is experienced – and 'written' – through the everyday practices of a city's inhabitants. The role of sexual difference in the production of this space is somewhat underdeveloped, however. In response to this gap, and with the help of Elizabeth Grosz's essay *Cities-bodies*, I develop a feminist analysis of the urban subjectivity implied in his work.

### **Urban space and narrative**

2 Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* investigates the spatial logics of everyday life and cultural consumption. The particular essay on which my reading is focused – "Walking in the City" – explores the use of urban space as an example of the ways in which consumers, as *bricoleurs*, actively re-use culture and "reappropriate the space organised by techniques of sociocultural production" (de Certeau, xviii). These ways of operating are "ruses of other interests and desires" that are not determined or captured by the systems in which they develop (de Certeau, xviii).

3 Everyday practices are enunciative for de Certeau (Collie). The physical act of walking realises the possibilities of space organised by the spatial order (the network of streets for example), in the same way that the act of speaking realises a language, its subject, and writes a text. This process "affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects etc., the trajectories it 'speaks'" (de Certeau 99). Walking is framed as an elementary and embodied form of experiencing urban space – a productive, yet relatively unconscious, speaking/writing of the city.

4 Walking and other spatial practices are individual modes of appropriation as opposed to collective modes of administration (96). And they are tactical in nature, rather than strategic. Tactical ways of operating appropriate and divert spaces away from administrative strategies designed to create abstract place (29-30). This distinction between strategies and tactics is closely aligned with the distinction de Certeau makes between place and space in “Spatial Stories”, another essay in *The Practice*. De Certeau’s use of place refers to a stable ahistorical configuration of positions ruled by the law of the ‘proper’, that is, defined by the distribution of elements in relationships of coexistence (117). Place enables an institution to delineate itself and its others and to exercise strategies of power using this distinction. Space, in contrast, is a ‘practiced place’, taking vectors of direction, velocities and time variables into account: “thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs” (117). Space is actuated by “the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (117) and situated by the actions of historical subjects.

5 Pedestrians, in effect, tell urban stories through their movements. A multitude of intertwined paths and detours weave the urban fabric. They give their shape to spaces and weave together places in ways that potentially transgress, from within, the abstract map imposed from above by the panoptic gaze and administrative strategies of corporate and government interests. Using speech act theory to think about walking and its relationship to the city thus enables a basic distinction to be made between the forms of a system (the organisation of the city, the city as a text or book) and the ways these forms can be used (the ephemeral, discrete and communicative trajectories of the walker, the walker as a user/reader/re-writer of the city-text).

6 As a form of enunciation, walking has its own rhetoric. The trajectories, shortcuts, and detours taken by passers-by are *turns of phrase* and *stylistic figures*. Any particular trajectory or detour composes an unforeseeable path, a “long poem of walking”, out of the formal spatial possibilities at its disposal (101). The city streets are filled with *forests of gestures* that cannot be fully captured or circumscribed from above by a picture, a text, or a map. The formal system of the city as text, its literal meaning, is subject to a semantic drift and wandering that makes “some parts of the city disappear and exaggerates others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order” (102). The narratives and “symbolizations” that create these habitable spaces are embodied by the city’s inhabitants, “encysted in the pain and pleasure of the body” (108).

7        Thus, cities become meaningful and habitable through the legends, memories, and dreams that accumulate in and haunt places (105). Stories about place produce a second, metaphorical geography of the city, insinuating *other routes* through which everyday urban practices are organised and given meaning. Stories, as enunciations, create space via an “enunciative focalization” that inserts the speaking body into the text (130): “the opacity of the body in movement, gesticulating, walking, taking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organises a here in relation to an abroad, a ‘familiarity’ in relation to a ‘foreignness’”. De Certeau explicitly links the art of storytelling with space and everyday tactics. Maps, on the other hand, function strategically to colonise space, rendering geographical knowledge as an abstract, ahistorical *place* that erases the spatial practices that are the condition of its possibility.

8        De Certeau’s framework thus rests on a central distinction between the ordinary practitioners of the city, living “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” (93), and the city as place, as an abstract concept and map produced and imposed from above by the panoptic eye of the planner or cartographer (Collie). The bodies of walkers “follow the thick and thin of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (de Certeau 93):

These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is though the practices organising a bustling city were characterised by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.

Escaping the imaginary totalisations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible.

9        A common criticism of de Certeau’s work also rests on this distinction. Morris (2004) suggests that de Certeau provides an overly simplified top-down model of power and its operations which produces a set of rigid either/or binaries: the official versus the everyday, the authorities versus the ordinary people, the symbolic versus the unconscious, strategies versus tactics, and compliance versus resistance, et cetera. The vertical one-dimensionality of de Certeau’s model also runs the risk of eliding the complexity of the street: in terms of differences and struggles between groups within an essentialised ‘the people’; and the possibility of complicity and acceptance of domination (Frow). These criticisms largely focus

on the question of power and the possibility of resistance formulated by de Certeau. I would argue that *The Practice of Everyday Life* clearly operates in dialogue with the terms and mechanisms of power set out by Michel Foucault. Rather than focus on the violence of disciplinary technologies, de Certeau examines the ideal of an everyday *anti-disciplinary* network composed of the “clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (xiv-xv).

### **Urban space, narrative, and the pedestrian subject**

10 The previous section of the paper outlined a reading of the relationship between cities and narrative. This next section will take up an important implication of this work – the centrality of the embodied subject in the production or ‘writing’ of urban space – and examine the urban embodied subject implied by de Certeau’s ideas about the city. This will lay the foundation for my subsequent analysis of urban space, narrative and gendered difference.

11 Michel de Certeau’s exploration of a city-text generated by acts of walking produces a particular kind of urban embodied subject: the pedestrian. The pedestrian subject reads/writes the city as an everyday user of place, producing space – writing the actual city – in the process. The kind of reading/writing undertaken by the pedestrian subject is framed by de Certeau as a form of *bricolage* and enunciation. The pedestrian subject engages in a practice of reading that involves an active appropriation and rewriting of the products of contemporary culture and systems of mass production. De Certeau emphasises the manipulative nature of acts of reading as “silent productions” that insert the reader’s world, histories, pleasures, and body into the author/designer/ administrator’s place of the city or the written text: “words become the outlet or product of silent histories. The readable transforms itself into the memorable...” (xxi). Reading as bricolage is “an art of manipulating and enjoying” (xxi) that rewrites a text or a place as habitable. Renters appropriate an apartment by furnishing it with their acts and memories. Pedestrians appropriate “the streets they fill with the forests of their desires and goals” (xxi).

12 De Certeau also suggests that this reading from the position of user or consumer of culture is an ephemeral, unstable activity that eludes legibility. (The bodies of walkers “follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” [93].) The reader does not have a stable ‘place’ from which to protect herself from the “erosion of time (while reading, he forgets himself and he forgets what he has read)” (1984, p. xxi). The reader is only able to ‘stockpile’ the experience if he writes/records while reading or

practicing space. The act of documenting and reflecting returns some of the particularities of this reading, the trace of its history, to the reader. It is here in de Certeau's schema that the reflective, productive activities of other kinds of urban subjects – the *flâneur*, for example – can be understood. More than a mere stroller or passive consumer (as consumption is conventionally positioned) of the city's spectacles, this kind of urban subject actively observes and documents the city.

13 De Certeau's pedestrian can be understood alongside (and in the tradition of) other urban subjects who walk and read/write the city, the *flâneur* in particular. The *flâneur* not only uses but witnesses and responds to the city. Reading the city becomes a kind of writing in its documentation (e.g. the *flâneur*'s notes and sketches of the crowd). Pedestrian subjects write urban space via their bodies and movements as unconscious stories with neither author or spectator; yet, in the mode of the *flâneur*, they also observe and read urban space, and re-iterate or *re-cite* this movement/reading in subsequent representations and narratives that contain at least the trace of those trajectories (Whybrow, 19). Thus, these models of urban subjectivity – the pedestrian and the *flâneur* – cannot be conflated. Both types of reading/writing render the city as a text, but the kinds of consumption and city-texts they imply are of two different orders. The *flâneur* is a figuration of urban subjectivity that involves both “wandering and wondering” (Whybrow); that is, they involve both walking in the city *and* reflecting on the urban as spectacle, as text. The figure of the *flâneur* and other readers/writers of the city introduce a degree of detachment and estrangement (a degree of dis-embodiment) in the pedestrian subject that allows for observation and reflection. However, while they are engaged in actively observing and interpreting the city, they are also always practitioners of urban space: unconsciously producing the city as text through their movements and their bodies, in spite of their position as detached observer. They are returned from a relatively invisible, dis-embodied position of anonymous observer to their place as a body in the crowd, becoming spectacle for others, an everyday ‘common man’, one of the ‘masses’ once more. Hence, the basic ambiguity of the *flâneur* and other models of the urban subject such as the detective: they are both of the city and yet apart from the city; both enabled by urban culture and its complex concentrations of affect, capital, spectacle, and inspiration, and yet its critical observers, interpreters, and investigators. And hence, for example, Whybrow's exploration, via the work of Benjamin and Brecht on the city of Berlin, of the relationship between wandering and wondering: the “immediacy of the encounter (the city as ‘text’) and the complex elaboration of that encounter (the text as ‘city’)” (18).

14 Nord (1995), in her analysis of gender and the traditions of urban rambling and investigation, argues that the ‘urban panorama’ produced by the urban novelist as *flâneur* or social investigator relies on a disembodied, all-seeing eye that has much in common with de Certeau’s voyeuristic panoptic viewpoint from nowhere. I would suggest, however, that the difference between these figures and the imaginary panoptic eye of the planners and administrators of the city is found at the level of the street. As practitioners and observers, *flâneur* and detectives are always working at street level, with partial knowledge. They never operate solely from an imaginary position of an all-seeing, penetrative eye hovering ‘above’ the city. *They are always also urban bodies.*

15 The value of reading these figures alongside de Certeau’s formulation of the everyday practitioner of the city is thus twofold. The body and its movements are brought further to the foreground, re-embodying these observing subjects. In addition, the manipulations that the crowds of everyday practitioners make to the city-text are articulated alongside these more specialised readings. In doing so, it is possible to theorise a subject space from which to read and write the city that falls somewhere between two extremes. This idea of the subject re-embodyes the totalising abstract eye from nowhere (of the planner/cartographer) who is paradoxically unable to ‘see’ the everyday practices and trajectories that write the city in time and space; and, it liberates the urban subject from the fully imbricated ‘blindness’ of an ephemeral, everyday use at the street level, completely in the city’s grasp.

16 What difference, however, do different bodies make to these practices, and to the urban spaces, stories, and subjectivities that they articulate? How might the specific desires, perspectives, and needs of a female subject in the city be accommodated within the above logics of urban space, narrative, and subjectivity?

### **Urban space, narrative, the pedestrian subject, and gender**

17 The subject position of one who observes the spectacle of the city, rather than just one of its performers or practitioners, is not open equally to all of a city’s bodies (Parsons). For instance, the *flâneur* is traditionally a middle-class, masculine subject of leisure whose privileged position shields him from the curiosity of the crowd (Nord 237). He is the subject, rather than the object, of the ‘botanizing’ gaze by virtue of his privileged position as spectator not spectacle. Others, however, are less able to enjoy the privilege of being anonymous, of being one who sees, but is not seen. People’s gender, class and racial background, and to what degree their bodies conform to conventions of desire, or movement and anatomy, for example, affect their ability to extricate themselves from the spectacle of the city enough to

be its observer. Hence, Nord argues for the importance of cross-dressing for women at certain times and places; and I would add *passing* for those able to do so, in terms of race and of sexuality. On particular streets, this can be a matter of life and death, or at the very least a strategy for avoiding strange stares or verbal abuse.

18 What difference does this differential access make? Is, in fact, the *flâneuse*, for example, an impossibility, unrepresentable, invisible, as some have suggested (D'souza & McDonough; Wilson)? Traditionally, a woman walking the streets is a 'street walker' – 'all body' – part and symbol of the spectacle and decadence of urban culture. Women have historically been represented as an "interruption in the city, a symptom of disorder, and a problem" (Wilson 9). The specifically female urban subject is thus a problem from both the point of view of traditional phallogentric representations of gender and urban life – for reformers, designers, administrators, and moral crusaders – and also from the point of view of those wishing to positively explore this identity and mode of urban corporeality from a feminist perspective.

19 Keeping in mind the problematic nature of theorizing a specifically female gaze (e.g., Mulvey, Parsons, Pollock), it still may be more productive to ask what difference gender makes to the position of observer (Nord 12):

the particular urban vision of the female observer, novelist, or investigator derives from her consciousness of transgression and trespassing, from the vexed sexuality her position implies, and from her struggle to escape the status of spectacle and become spectator.

20 The point-of-view of the female reader/writer of the city is thus split between that of a privileged observer (in terms of class and culture, for example) and that of the object and symbol of the degeneration and contamination of urban life as it has been conventionally written. The city, then, exerts a particular force on those traditionally assigned as the corporealised 'other' and subject to the disembodied male gaze. The gendered pedestrian subject's point-of-view is drawn 'down' to the level of the street by the difference her gendered body makes socio-culturally. The fantasy of dis-embodiment and an all-seeing eye is more difficult to sustain under such circumstances.

21 It is no coincidence then that feminist analysis has identified the gendered nature of traditional discourses of space and corporeality: solidity, separateness, distance, coherence, activity, time, and the mind are coded masculine; liquids, relationality, proximity, incoherence, passivity, space, and the body are coded feminine (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*). Associated with these discourses is the gendered nature of narrative, space, and point-of-

view. The traditional hero of classic urban narratives, such as the detective story, is coded an active male subject who ‘penetrates’ and conquers the passive, feminine-coded urban landscape, evil other, or object of desire. This suggests the need to interrogate the fundamental discourses of cities and corporeality, and the relationship between the two, underwriting my analysis. Elizabeth Grosz’s essay, *Cities-bodies*, is one such attempt at doing just that. It is to her essay that I now turn.

22 Grosz argues that our thinking about the relationship between bodies and cities tends to fall into two dominant narratives. The first assumes a one-way causal relation: cities are physical entities designed by the minds of people and built by the body. A body is thus a physical tool used in the service of the mind, a disembodied consciousness, to make a physical city. Another common version of this dominant way of seeing bodies and cities is that the city is ‘bad’ for the body, ‘unnatural’ and damaging; this is still, however, very much a one-way relation.

23 The other dominant narrative posits a more social, and parallel, relation between bodies and cities that effectively naturalises the social organisation of a city (especially its social hierarchies). The city is not just material, but a socio-political construct, a ‘body-politic’ modeled on the structure of the body; an “anatomical allegory” (McGraw and Vance 67). Thus, for instance, the political rulers of a city are its ‘head’. Not only does this model of the relationship between bodies and cities render ‘natural’ the social organisation and power relations articulated in the spatial figurations of a city, it also assumes a particular, masculine kind of corporeality. This assumed corporeality, Grosz argues, is thus overwhelmingly phallogentric; that is, the sexual specificity of the universal human body used to model this relation is disavowed. And finally, the body-politic assumes a particular, implicitly gendered, relation between nature and culture (248): “nature is a passivity on which culture works as male (cultural) productivity supercedes and overtakes female (natural) reproduction.”

24 How can the relation between bodies and cities be rethought without assuming either an oversimplified causality or parallelism that, in their effects, prioritise one of the binary over the other and renders that relation in gendered terms? Grosz suggests that the body and the city might be best thought of as ‘mutually defining’, as a two-way dialogue or interface that is mutually productive in the practical sense. Her suggested model relies on a particular way of conceptualising the body.

25 Bodies, for Grosz, are always sexually specific (never gender neutral), and understood as the “material condition of subjectivity...as the locus and site of inscription for specific modes of subjectivity” (241-43):



By body I understand a concrete, material, animate organisation of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organisation only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality. The body is, so to speak, organically/biologically/naturally “incomplete”: it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities which require social triggering, ordering, and long-term “administration,” regulated in each culture and epoch by what Foucault has called “the micro-technologies of power.” The body becomes a human body, a body which coincides with the “shape” and space of the psyche, a body whose epidermic surface bounds a psychical unity, a body which thereby defines the limits of experience and subjectivity, in psychoanalytic terms, through the intervention of the (m)other, and, ultimately, the Other or Symbolic order (language and rule-governed social order).

26 The city, then, can be understood as a key factor or tool used in the regulation and social production of the sexed body (242-43):

The built environment provides the context and coordinates for most contemporary Western and, today, Eastern forms of the body, even for rural bodies insofar as the twentieth century defines the countryside, “the rural,” as the underside or raw material of urban development....it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced....[its] form, structure, and norms...seep into and effect all the other elements that go into the construction of corporeality and/as subjectivity. It affects the way the subject sees others...as well as the subject’s understanding of, alignment with, and positioning in space...moreover, the city is, of course, also the site for the body’s cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, and the arts – the place where the body is representationally reexplored, transformed, contested, reinscribed.

27 Thus, not only do cities help produce bodies and organise familial and other social relations, through domestic architecture, the arrangement of rooms, the divisions between public and private space, for example, they also produce a pattern of automatic links and inequalities of power between otherwise unrelated bodies.

28 However, the metropolis is also, in turn, produced by corporeality – not just designed by a dis-embodied consciousness – as the work of de Certeau and other urban theorists have also made clear. The city is subject to transformation and reinscription by the changing demographic, economic, and psychological needs of the body. Bodies “reinscribe and project themselves onto their sociocultural environment so that the environment both produces and reflects the form and interests of the body” (Grosz 242). The body and the city, both sociocultural artifacts, are involved in a complex feedback relation of introjections and projections that “produce each other as forms of the hyperreal, as modes of simulation which have overtaken and transformed whatever reality each may have into the image of the other” (242).

29 Thus, neither the city nor the body should be understood as monolithic or distinct entities that would make it possible to have clear uni-directional causalities or for either to artificially mirror the other. Instead, Grosz wants us to conceptualise bodies and cities as mutually defining, co-building assemblages (248):

...or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or microgroupings. It is not a holistic view, one that stresses the unity and integration of city and body, their “ecological balance.” Instead, [she is] suggesting a fundamentally disunified series of systems and interconnections, a series of disparate flows, energies, events or entities, and spaces, brought together or drawn apart in more or less temporary alignments.

30 Grosz gives us a fragmented, provisional collection of body/city parts coming together (or apart, as the case may be). Along with its resonance with a Deleuzian model of a Body without Organs, there is an obvious connection to be made here with various formulations of cyberfeminism and work on the posthuman from a feminist and/or queer perspective (e.g., Hayles; Haraway; Flanagan & Booth). In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, for example, Donna Haraway suggests that we are all cyborgs: “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism...the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (150). For Haraway, a cyborgian subjectivity is useful for feminism because it confounds the binarised discourse that devalues nature, space, and the body as feminine. This resonates with Grosz’s work on the relationship with bodies and cities because of the emphasis on the breakdown of the borders between categories of human and non-human, body and city, organic and non-organic, culture and nature, whole and part.

31 What this suggests for our investigation of urban space, narrative, and subjectivity, is the always already embedded, culturalised and sexed ‘nature’ of urban corporeality and spatiality. The work of both Haraway and Grosz also suggests a pragmatic engagement with the concrete details and materiality of the highly technologised everyday spaces, cultural narratives, and identities within which we invariably work. This, then, returns us to de Certeau’s notion of everyday makeshift stories – tactical *bricolage* – as the appropriate mode through which to “reappropriate the space organised by techniques of sociocultural production” (de Certeau xviii). As *bricoleurs*, female pedestrian subjects re-write the city in idiosyncratic, unforeseen ways and detours that resist, from within, the disciplines of gendered space and identity to which they are subject and through which they are conventionally objectified as urban spectacle.

32 The reconceptualisation of the relationship between cities and bodies afforded by Grosz's work opens our analysis towards the possibility of a specifically gendered pedestrian subject. It brings to de Certeau's discussion of urban space and narrative the capacity to better differentiate between differently embodied urban subjects, by way of a critique of the gendered representational logics of space and corporeality. Urban spaces, narratives, and subjectivities are thus understood as the products of cities and bodies mutually *writing each other*.

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