

THE POET *FLÂNEUSE* IN THE AMERICAN CITY:
GWENDOLYN BROOKS, ADRIENNE RICH, DIANE DI PRIMA,
AND AUDRE LORDE

By

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At a time when the American ideal placed women in the domestic sphere of suburban homes, Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde were all writing from and about such urban centers as Chicago, Boston, and New York. Their poetry negotiates the overlap of public and private space, resisting social expectations for post-WWII women in the city streets and in the poetic tradition. These women poets inherit a patriarchal legacy of urban poetry that responds to Charles Baudelaire's practice of *flânerie* as a method of observing and poetically responding to the city. This work examines ways that women undauntedly assert their private identities in public spaces, articulating poetic cities in order to redefine the physical city.

The city is a vexed place for women, for their creative and cultural power is contained by social expectations, consumer culture, and the architectural design of urban

spaces. As *flâneuses*, Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde are able to participate in the otherwise male-exclusive process of producing city culture. Their voices press both *flânerie* and urban poetry to incorporate perspectives that reflect different races, classes, genders, and sexualities to create a feminist urban poetics. Building off of work that genders *flânerie* by Anne Friedberg, Anke Gleber, and Deborah Parsons and off of urban theory of the city as labyrinth by Hubert Damisch, this work questions *flânerie*'s ability to both empower and prohibit women's urban gaze. Each of the poets responds to, rejects, or revises *flânerie* according to her understanding of its ability to empower her feminist poetics.

Together, the city poems of Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde validate women's gazes in the city: they are watching, recording, and contributing to the construction of metaphoric cities. Although the power that *flânerie* provides women is tempered by its limitations, the perspective of a *flâneuse* provides a scaffold for establishing a poetic image of the city that reflects the heterogeneous crowd.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In this work, I examine the work of four post-WWII women—Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, Diane di Prima, and Audre Lorde—through the lens of *flânerie* to critique their contributions to defining a feminist urban poetics. These women’s poetry of and thoughts about the city reflect their struggles to define their poetics and lives as separate from what was expected of them as women by both the literary establishment and post-war culture more generally. The city, always a site of paradoxes, provides them freedoms which they are not allowed in suburbia; but the liberties they take by participating in *flânerie* (whether consciously or not), writing poetry of the city, and living public, urban lives, are contained and restricted by the city’s labyrinthine architectural and social structures as well as by the history and influence of modernist city poetry written by men. *Flânerie* can provide a method to interrogate various aspects of the city including crowd culture, crime, consumerism, neighborhood mapping, and the aesthetic construction of the city as it will last in our collective, cultural memory.

At one level, urban poems by Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde suggest a corrective to Walter Benjamin’s limiting definition of the *flâneur* as necessarily white, male, and upper-class, enhancing the quintessential urban observer’s ability to interpret the heterogeneous twentieth-century city. As the seminal theorist of *flânerie* in the twentieth century, Benjamin’s definition of the *flâneur*—which he derives from Charles Baudelaire—establishes the archetype from which most critics evaluate *flânerie*. This dissertation establishes evidence of *flânerie* in women’s poetry in order to emphasize

valuable breaks that women poets make from Benjamin's notion of *flânerie* which can make the practice relevant to current discussions of cities and poetry in American literature. I contribute to current studies of representations of urban space, feminist literary studies, and poetry studies by assessing both the limits and powers of *flânerie*, particularly for women poets.

Although many respected critics (among the women: Susan Buck-Morss, Janet Wolff, and Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson) argue that women's participation in *flânerie* is impossible, many twentieth-century poets either respond directly to Baudelaire's model of writing the city or incorporate forms, perspectives, or images that imply *flânerie*. Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde all employ speakers who watch urban events anonymously, such as the unnamed narrator of Brooks's "In the Mecca," who moves through the crowded hallways of the Mecca building. Rich and di Prima both directly mention Baudelaire in urban poems, suggesting their familiarity with poetic *flânerie*. Furthermore, the influence of *flânerie* on urban aesthetics suggests that it is a method not only of responding to the city, but of constructing the city: the poems I examine in this dissertation help define particular cities in particular time periods for our collective cultural memory, so they are a part of the construction of an aesthetic and cultural history of urban America. For example, consider the way that nineteenth-century Paris is forever linked to Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*; nineteenth-century Manhattan to Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"; early twentieth-century, industrialized London with T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*; Harlem with Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Conventional literary history has elided women's voices in such poetic constructions of the city; but the urban poems of Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde offer both a living

meditation on how productive or problematic *flânerie* is for post-WWII women and a poetic construction of city spaces that defies the suburban, domestic imperative to which other post-WWII women poets succumbed (i.e., Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton).

Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde follow in the footsteps of such iconic male poets as Whitman, Eliot, and Hughes, writing the city from perspectives that acknowledge the influence of gender, race, class, and sexuality on urban experience. Their city poems prove that women do respond to city life in ways that reiterate Benjamin's *flânerie*.¹ More importantly, their participation in *flânerie* provokes questions about agency in the city crowd, about the overlap of public and private space in the city, about women's relationship with commodity culture, about urban poetics, and about the social function that poetry can have when it becomes political.

Because so much attention is given to women's roles in domesticity and suburbia in the decades after WWII (particularly in discussions about the 1950s), little attention is turned to the ways city life affected the women who were living in, working in, or writing about urban life—either as a rejection of suburban domesticity or celebration of urban life. Susan Merrill Squier notes that the text which she edited in 1994, *Women Writers and the City*, is the first “to explore women writers’ literary treatment of the city” (6). In Squier’s extensive bibliography of sources about literature and the city, only one other stands out as similar: a special issue of the journal *Signs* on “Women and the American City” in 1980 (Squier 294). This dissertation contributes to the few recent works, such as

¹ I use the term “reiterate” as I understand Aldon Lynn Nielsen’s use of it in *Black Chant* when he states that, “To reiterate, first we must reread and rewrite” (37). In this sense, “reiteration” has transformative powers that acknowledge and allude to inherited forms, but move beyond them.

Deborah Parsons's *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*, which attempt to correct that lack.

The paucity of critical analysis of women's literary treatment of the city is further compounded in poetry studies. Whereas critical exploration of novels such as Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* or, in British literature, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* often note the prominence of the urban context, few critics of poetry note the impact of urban scenarios on such well-known women poets as Amy Lowell, Denise Levertov, June Jordan, or, with the exception of Gwendolyn Brooks, the poets I discuss in this dissertation. By exploring the role of *flânerie* in women's poetry, I contribute to the kind of remapping of women's poetry in literary history that has been exemplified by critics such as Betsy Erkkila and Karen Ford.²

Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde complicate both *flânerie* and urban poetry. Their poetry fractures monolithic notions of women in the city by democratizing traditional definitions of American poetry, the American city, and *flânerie*. They are not in simple opposition to modernist poetry, the city, or *flânerie*, but they do not simply adopt the masculine practices of the *flâneur* without critical evaluation either. They press gender, racial, class, and sexual boundaries not only to challenge traditional aesthetic definitions and imagery of cities, but also to offer new aesthetic poetics of the city. This dissertation explores possible ways that poetic language can mimic city spaces, providing linguistic maps of the city that are multi-vocal and multicultural. Turned on its side, the silhouettes

² Erkkila and Ford endeavor to revise literary history's consideration of women poets. In *The Wicked Sisters* (1992), Erkkila emphasizes communities of women poets who influenced each other, using the term "wicked" to undermine traditional interpretations of 19th- and early 20th-century women poets and to suggest how bonds of "sisterhood" enabled their work. In *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (1997), Ford similarly uses the issue of excess to explore ways that women poets resisted silencing from traditional cultural.

of free verse poems mimic the skyline of a city. Rhythmically, lines of poetry imitate the sounds of the rise and fall of voices and traffic in the city. I ask questions about the poets' diction, about the formal structure of the poems, and about the different urban rhythms and syntax that reflect each poet's personal/political agendas so that the differences between their poetics are as evident as the similarities indicated by urban focus and evidence of *flânerie*. Together, these poets revise the American literary history of urban poetry, but without considering their common connections to *flânerie* and city poetry, their revisions and their contributions to poetry studies, urban studies, and feminist studies remain underdeveloped.

Flânerie

Women's participation in *flânerie* enhances its value to urban poetry studies by exposing problems with Benjamin's definition of the *flâneur* and expanding the form to incorporate multiple perspectives. Despite the insights into urban life which *flânerie* provides artists, studies of it have remained egotistically and unrealistically limited to white men until recently, when white women have been shown to have access. I press past the important work that demonstrates evidence of continued *flânerie* in the twentieth century, of white women's participation, and explore ways that *flânerie* changes when perspectives of women with different racial and ethnic perspectives participate.

Certain basic elements of *flânerie* in women's poetry remain the same as in men's. Defining elements of *flânerie* include: 1) inevitable, but unwilling, detection of crime in the crowd (maintaining a separation between *flâneur/flâneuse* and detective); 2) anonymous movement through the crowd (with at least the illusion of invisibility); 3) the *flâneur/flâneuse's* attention is directed by crowd activity; 4) exposure of the vexed relationship between the crowd and the commodity item; 5) heightened awareness of the

effect of the urban setting on the observer; 6) the *flâneur/flâneuse*'s sense of being at home in the crowd, feeling at least as comfortable in public spaces as in private spaces.³ As David Frisby explains, "*Flânerie* . . . can be associated with a form of *looking*, observing (of people, social types, social contexts, and constellations), a form of *reading the city* and its population (its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations), and a form of *reading written texts* (in Benjamin's case both of the city and the nineteenth century—as texts and of texts *on* the city, even texts as urban labyrinths)" (82–3, Frisby's italics). In this work, I focus on *flânerie* as a method of poetic production through which a poet attempts to capture fleeting moments in the crowd that are uniquely and insistently urban.

My concept of a poet *flâneuse* builds on the work, primarily of white women in cinema studies, of such critics as Anne Friedberg, Anke Gleber, and Deborah Parsons. They challenge the exclusion of women from Benjamin's discussion of *flânerie*, and demonstrate ways that white women successfully participate in forms of *flânerie* in the twentieth century. Traditionally, women are portrayed as consumers of products in the city rather than as producers of the city. They are prevented from exploring city streets alone because of potential physical risks (assault) or social risks (being mistaken for prostitutes). Women in novels such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or Crane's *Maggie: Girl of the Streets* pay terrible prices for entering public city life alone. Yet, potential danger has not prevented women from entering and observing city streets. According to Anke Gleber: "Despite the real material limitations of women's access to the street, their very presence in public spaces indicates their desire and determination to experience the city

³ These are elements of *flânerie* that I have culled from Benjamin's description in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.

on their own” (176). City streets were particularly problematic for women in nineteenth-century cities, but over the course of the twentieth century, women’s presence—as consumers but also as workers and observers—gradually increased. Friedberg bridges the gap between the role of *flânerie* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in her seminal analysis of women’s *flânerie*, despite the fact that Benjamin claims that *flânerie* disappeared when the arcades lost popularity.⁴

This project explores the cultural transition evident in women’s movement through urban spaces which begins with Anne Friedberg’s seminal work. Friedberg describes how, first, department stores replaced the arcades in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century and then shopping malls combine the concept of the arcades with the department store in the mid-twentieth century, enabling continual *flânerie* for women in enclosed, safe spaces. She explains that, “the female *flâneur* was not possible until a woman could wander the city on her own, a freedom linked to the privilege of shopping alone” (Friedberg “*Les Flaneurs*” 421). Friedberg’s *flânerie* maintains the pleasure principle of consumerism involved in the upper-class *flâneur*’s watchful stroll through the arcades, but in an explicitly gendered form. The shopping mall offers the ideal setting for women’s *flânerie* because, according to Friedberg, “it defers urban realities, blocks urban blights—the homeless, beggars, crime, traffic, even weather The mall creates a nostalgic image of clean, safe, legible town center” (“*Les Flaneurs*” 424). Although Friedberg’s analysis establishes the possibility of women’s *flânerie*, shopping relegates women to consumer address in a primarily suburban, artificial environment.

⁴ Friedberg’s revision of *flânerie* was first published in *PMLA* as “*Les Flaneurs du Mal(l)*” (1991) and extended in *Window Shopping* (1993).

Contemporary critiques of *flânerie* must move even further beyond gender studies which focus on white women to include women of different racial, ethnic, class, and sexual backgrounds. The *flâneuse* must be able to exit artificial and suburban consumer centers and emerge back onto the city streets in order to experience the city, her perspective reflecting the heterogeneous crowd. Friedberg recognizes the limitations of her consumer *flâneuse*, conceding that “the *flâneuse* may have found a space for an empowered mobilized gaze [in the mall] . . . yet analysis of the images she is encouraged to consume reveals this empowerment may be questionable” (“*Les Flâneurs*” 424). Therefore, although I employ the gendered model that Friedberg establishes, I look to women who describe experiences in city streets, squares, and parks: the public spaces of actual city life including all of the dangers rather than artificial versions. Each of the poets I consider in this dissertation lived in cities at times when women of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds were certainly members of the urban crowd, but when choosing an urban life meant rejecting the consumer comforts and domestic responsibilities of a suburban life.

The full impact of *flânerie* in the cultural construction of American cities cannot be understood without considering the practice as not only gendered, but raced and classed as well. The first women to move through the city streets without male chaperones were working women—who were often black. The specific marks of class that affect these women’s movement through the streets, separating them from women who are shopping, exemplify my use of the term “*flâneuse*” in this dissertation. As Gleber explains, “*flâneuse*” has implications that some critics find unsettling: “In its German usage, the term ‘*Flâneuse*’ suggests what is ‘typically’ female, is associated with ‘necessarily’

menial occupations such as those of the *Friseuse* (female hairdresser) or *Masseuse* (female massage worker), the latter two carrying suggestive and discriminatory connotations” (172). Gleber notes that such “dubious baggage” which “invites unwanted, unwarranted associations” makes the term “*flâneuse*” undesirable to her. It is for this very reason that I argue the term adroitly captures the way the *flâneuse* of post-WWII poetry has evolved from the nineteenth-century *flâneur*. Because “*flâneuse*” indicates a separation from economic or social privilege at the same time that it recalls the privileged perspective of the *flâneur*, it expands the position to include perspectives of working class women in the city. I press the term even further throughout this project to incorporate different racial, ethnic, class, and sexual perspectives as well.

For black women, such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde, participating in a poetic practice that has been defined by white men is particularly problematic, but it also gives them a tool to use in confronting the kinds of limitations which poetic tradition and urban spaces present. Just as bell hooks notes the chitlin circuit as a site of black community and homeplaces as locations of resistance, Brooks and Lorde look to the communities in black neighborhoods and the streets of inner-city areas as sites of resistance. Brooks’s poems record the culture in these black neighborhoods, reflecting the particular rhythms, diction, and creative forms of urban African-American communities. Lorde’s poems move through the city; they move between community neighborhoods, critiquing the power of neighborhood affiliation, and calling to the heterogeneous crowd to acknowledge its own diversity and multiplicity. As *flâneuses*, the speaker’s of Brooks’s and Lorde’s urban poems challenge the conflicts between their poetic identities,

their community affiliations, their ability to navigate the urban spaces, and the distanced observation of *flânerie*.

Departing from traditional interpretations of *flânerie* potentially undermines its value to twentieth-century literary studies and the risk does sometimes lead to dead-ends. Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde raise tensions about *flânerie*'s viability by sometimes exhibiting clear evidence of its influence, other times pressing the boundaries of *flânerie* to make it work for them, and still other times buckling under the limitations and expressing frustration at being prevented from achieving the kind of relationship with the city that *flânerie* implies. Ultimately, even the ineffective examples of *flânerie* in these women's poetry still participate in a dialogic relationship to its poetic legacy. Although I push the *flâneur*'s capabilities to the limit, I still maintain Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire as the scaffold-like skeleton of *flânerie*, challenging the ambiguities to make room for twentieth-century women.

In Benjamin's description, the *flâneur* is fascinated by the complexity of city life, symbolized by the constantly moving and changing crowd or masses. The *flâneur* attempts to become the pulse of the city by allowing the crowd to direct his movement, making his way randomly through the city landscape by following and observing interesting people or events. According to Benjamin, "the street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him, the shiny enameled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon" (37). In the *flâneur*'s estimation, the city has aesthetic value; it intoxicates him like a narcotic. He must keep moving with the crowd in order to know the city, and he must know the city in order to

know himself. As Keith Tester explains, the *flâneur's* constant movement was necessary to his philosophy of being: “if it is hoped to discover the secret of the truth of *being*, *doing* can never cease” (5). This *flâneur* becomes more than just a person “in” the crowd, he becomes a person “of” the crowd (Tester 3). A quintessentially urban figure exploring explicitly urban issues, the *flâneur* still resonates with city life today. People still sit at outdoor cafes or in parks and “people watch.” The constantly changing crowd is still a source of artistic fascination.

In Benjamin’s interpretation of the *flâneur*, the practice, perspective, and expression of *flânerie* is severely limited by class, race, and gender. Despite the fact that Baudelaire himself was often poor and running from debts when he entered the streets, Benjamin makes *flânerie* the exclusive domain of wealthy gentlemen in nineteenth century Paris (read: white) who would have the time to stroll leisurely through the streets or arcades. Freedom from obligations and time constraints was a necessary element of *flânerie* because it helped the *flâneur* create a space for himself in the crowd that was separate from the other people. Furthermore, Benjamin felt that the modernized city would preclude *flânerie* by ordering the city space and preventing the *flâneur* from being able to slip unnoticed between private and public spaces. Despite the popularity of studies about *flânerie* and Benjamin, few critics have been willing to challenge many of these limitations. The most successful transitions have been made by feminist scholars such as Friedberg, Gleber, and Parsons, as well as male scholars such as Tester and Sven Birkerts to demonstrate the viability of *flânerie* in the twentieth century.

I have chosen to focus this dissertation on Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, Diane di Prima, and Audre Lorde because their poetry makes use of the city as an

essential element, what Kevin McNamara calls presenting the “city as a protagonist” in literature (4). Their poems demonstrate a desire to participate in the production of urban life and space. Each poet’s perspective of urban space is affected by her affiliation with particular neighborhoods and racial, ethnic, or cultural communities. Therefore, each one’s urban poetics reflects her understanding of what Henri Lefebvre calls “the language of the city” and of “urban language” in order to reflect and contribute to the “writing” of the city (115).⁵ Brooks’s location is the South Side of Chicago; Rich’s is Cambridge, MA, and Manhattan; Di Prima’s are in Brooklyn, the slums of Hell’s Kitchen, and the tenements of the Lower East Side; Lorde’s are in Harlem, Washington Heights, Brighton Beach, and what we now call the East Village. Not only do they represent the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the crowd (Brooks as a black heterosexual woman, Rich as a white lesbian woman discovering her Jewish roots, di Prima as an Italian-American woman, and Lorde as a black lesbian woman), but their interpretations of the city are influenced by the lenses of those subjectivities and identities.

The frequency with which Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde note specific street locations in their poems emphasizes the importance of specific urban settings as defining factors of their poems. They also develop a sense of “urban authenticity” (anticipating the battles over “ghetto authenticity” which happened between rappers in the 1990s) which each of the poets cultivates as a symbol of her right to speak for certain communities in the city. Gwendolyn Brooks notes the address and cross streets of her various homes (and

⁵ Lefebvre explains that, “semiological analysis must distinguish between multiple levels and dimensions. There is the *utterance* of the city: what happens and takes place in the street, in the squares, in the voids, what is said there. There is the *language* of the city: particularities specific to each city which are expressed in discourses, gestures, clothing, in the words and use of words by the inhabitants. There is *urban language*, which one can consider as language of connotations, a secondary system and derived within the denotative system. . . . Finally, there is the *writing* of the city: what is inscribed and prescribed on its walls, in the layout of places and their linkages, in brief, the *use of time* in the city by its inhabitants” (115).

locations of poetry functions) in *Report from Part One*. Most importantly for this study, she writes “In the Mecca” almost like a history of the Mecca Building on Chicago’s South Side, quoting from John Bartlow Martin in the preface to note its exact location on Thirty-fourth Street between State and Dearborn (*ITM* 2). Adrienne Rich sets “Picnic” specifically in “Inwood Park,” mentions Central Park in “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib,” and the Westside Highway at Riverside Drive in “Twenty-One Love Poems.” Diane di Prima opens *Loba* with specific mention of women on “Avenue A,” “Bleecker Street,” “Rampart Street,” and “Fillmore Street” (streets in New York and San Francisco). In the volume *New York Head Shop and Museum*, Lorde wrote “A Birthday Memorial to Seventh Street” and mentions 125th Street in more than one poem. By marking the location of poems’ settings so specifically, Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde show their alliances with particular neighborhoods and they validate their “authentic” knowledge of city spaces. This knowledge affords them access, as *flâneuses*, to the city.

Although such specific locations validate women’s interaction with city spaces, like Baudelaire, these poets use those scenes to paint/explore/evaluate various social aspects of the crowd. Unlike landscape paintings, few of the poems describe city images at length. Instead they glean a sense of city life from people, events, and a connection to the crowd that are indicative of urban life. Jonathan Culler explains that Baudelaire’s poetry “is not descriptive poetry of the city, glorying in sights and sounds.... City life in this poetry is not modern inventions, commerce, and progress but dangerous passage through a forest of anonymous figures imbued with mystery, who produce a vivid sense of a world not masterable except by arbitrary and unstable acts of imagination” (xxvi, xxviii). This grand sense of the city as mystery is evident in Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde,

as their poems often attempt to exert control over the spaces around them. Rich, in particular, is frustrated by her inability to comprehend or “master” the urban space. These women also recognize the very real boundaries that exist between city neighborhoods, preventing the kind of free movement necessary to follow or understand the anonymous figures in the crowd. Some of the mystery is maintained through social boundaries which are designed for exclusion, surveillance, and maintenance of illusions of “urban authenticity.”

Each poet’s identity affects her ability to participate in *flânerie* and comfortably write the city. This relationship is also affected by the influence of the established forms of city poetry from poets like Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Hughes. I have organized the poets in order by how strongly they rebel against these inherited literary forms, often in an effort to create an urban poetic space that has room for their identity development. Some are more successful than others in embodying a *flâneuse* and defining women’s *flânerie*, but the challenges that each presents to traditional *flânerie* expands our understanding of women’s urban poetics. In the simplest terms, Brooks mimics *flânerie* in her poetry, Rich resists *flânerie*, di Prima appropriates *flânerie*, and Lorde redefines *flânerie*.

Not all critics have agreed that *flânerie* is possible for women to practice, and even those who support its possibility note its vexed nature. I have positioned my concept of the poet *flâneuse* to challenge such claims that would prevent women’s participation in *flânerie*. Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde address issues of invisibility, of emotional involvement with the people and events which they observe, and of how having a destination affects urban movement through and observation of the crowd. Since Laura

Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" appeared, scholars have grappled with the issue of women's relationship to the gaze. For *flânerie*, the observer must have the ability to watch anonymously. This anonymity is implied in a sort of invisibility gained by going unnoticed within the crowd.

It is the particular hubris of Benjamin (and the critics who agree with him) to assume that the *flâneur* was capable of achieving some kind of invisibility that would be unattainable by anyone else. The *flâneur* as Benjamin defines him would not be capable of moving anonymously through all areas of the twentieth-century city: a wealthy, white gentleman would not go unnoticed in the Bronx, in East Harlem, or in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Yet Janet Wolff claims that, although men are capable of *flânerie*, women "cannot go into unfamiliar spaces without drawing attention to themselves or without mobilizing those apparently necessary strategies of categorization through which they can be neutralized and rendered harmless" (8). Wolff makes assumptions about women's appearances which the poets I discuss undermine. Lorde particularly notes the invisibility that wearing thick glasses, being overweight, and being black creates. In Rich's poem, "Frame," the speaker resists the invisibility of her presence, declaring that she will serve as a witness against the authorities who abused a woman on the street. These poets problematize assumptions about women's visibility and lack of agency in the crowd.

Women's presence as observers in the crowd complicates binary assumptions about visibility or invisibility. Her visible physical features are as much a disguise as an exposure since attire and posture can either mask or reveal sexual preferences. Baudelaire makes assumptions about women's lives in the series of poems about prostitutes in *The Flowers of Evil*. In his "To a Woman Passing By," the speaker imagines loving a woman

who passes him in the crowd, based entirely on her physical appearance (Baudelaire 189). Whereas such a male *flâneur* assumes he is invisible, feeling free to voyeuristically watch others, the *flâneuse* interrogates the contradictory invisibility/visibility she experiences in the crowd as a factor of her urban experience. The *flâneuse* negotiates the gaze from a position affected by three things: 1) her ability to observe, to be the gazer; 2) her role as the object of the male gaze within the crowd—a gaze which looks at her without really “seeing” her; 3) her apparent invisibility much of the time. Although supposedly the constant object of the male gaze, women are often depicted in poetry as ignored, overlooked, or denied visibility. The *flâneuse* has a heightened awareness of her body’s role within the crowd and as a factor in her urban experience.

Another argument against women’s *flânerie* is based on the assumption that women cannot adequately distance themselves from emotional involvement with the crowd to record it accurately. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson contends that women cannot practice *flânerie* because they are incapable of removing themselves from the woes of the urban scene sufficiently: “No woman, it would seem, can disconnect herself from the city and its enchantments. No woman is able to attain the aesthetic distance so crucial to the *flâneur*’s superiority. She is unfit for *flânerie* because she desires the objects spread before her and acts upon that desire. The *flâneur*, on the other hand, desires the city as a whole, not a particular part of it” (27). Ferguson assumes not only that shopping is the strongest social marker of female activity in the city (as Friedberg does as well), but that women are not capable of producing a sufficiently complex written account of what they witness in the city. Poems such as Lorde’s “New York City 1970” will certainly

demonstrate otherwise as the speaker attempts to reclaim the city for black women and children by destroying it.

The speakers of the poems I will examine by Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde—women who are looking for lost children, traveling to or from work, riding the subway, or waiting for buses—are not restricted by shopping as a sole reason for *flânerie* and are certainly speaking about the many ways women cope with the many obligations, demands, and stimuli of living in the city. Ferguson’s most outrageous claim is that “Urban stories, it is clear, can be told only by those immune to the stress and seductions of the city, who can turn those seductions to good account, that is, into a text that will exercise its own seductions” (Ferguson 27–8). In fact, few men’s poems give the kind of mechanical response to the city that Ferguson’s analysis suggests is necessary for *flânerie*. Such a response would have difficulty reaching an audience of twentieth-century readers who have witnessed the Civil Rights Movement and its repercussions on the city streets. Even Baudelaire has moments of sympathy in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The seventh line of “The Little Old Women” entreats the reader: “Though broken let us love them! they are souls” (181). Rather than being limited by their emotional responses, women poets are able to use emotionally-charged events in the city scene to record aspects of the city which would otherwise be ignored, squelched, or hidden by urban consumer culture. In fact, their emotional involvement with the events and people they watch often directs their observation of the crowd.

Perhaps the most difficult obstacle that post-WWII women poets face in participating in *flânerie* is the issue of having a destination that directs movement through the city. As twentieth-century, working women, Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde would

not have had the time to randomly stroll through the city at a turtle's pace,⁶ but their poems' speakers rarely indicate awareness of a destination in their movement through the city. Certainly destination provides a sense of purpose to most of the crowd that would preclude *flânerie* by not allowing a sufficient level of distraction, or what Benjamin would call "intoxication" in the crowd. Most members of the masses spend little or no energy looking around to notice the rest of the crowd or the city. The kind of tunnel-vision that New Yorkers are famous for—looking ahead toward their destination and never noticing their surroundings or others in the crowd—prevents the kind of observation upon which *flânerie* depends.

I make no claims that every member of the crowd in a *flâneuse* or *flâneur*, but if a poet is not interested in her/his destination, then she/he is free to mimic the kind of aimless observation that Benjamin claims is necessary for *flânerie*. It may not matter that the *flâneuse* has a destination if she still stumbles upon crime, feels a sense of intoxication in the crowd, allows events and people in the crowd to direct her attention, develops imaginary stories about or relationships with other members of the crowd, and goes unnoticed in these observations. Di Prima and Lorde both make the crowd as much a home as their actual places of living. Both fled repressive homes and lived communally with other artists or in buildings that were barely livable. Di Prima describes actually living on the streets—sleeping in the park with other homeless people—in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*.

I argue that rather than being excluded from *flânerie*, women poets are able to use the positions that are traditionally cited as reasons for their exclusion in order to move

⁶ Benjamin comments on the brief popularity among *flâneurs* of allowing a turtle to set the pace (54).

through and observe aspects of city life. By refusing to dress or wear their hair in traditionally feminine styles, by openly living lifestyles that reject what Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality,” and by insisting on breaking down boundaries between public and private life, these women poets insert their work into the style and tradition of *flânerie*. Gleber explains how women’s *flânerie* can empower feminist studies:

Recognizing a female flaneur would enable women to trace an active gaze of their own to a preexisting tradition of female spectatorship in the public sphere, to an already actively looking female figure who can return the gaze directed to her.... The discovery of a female flaneur would help to inscribe a model of resistance for women, one that would establish wide possibilities and open new spaces for their own gaze. (188)

As poets who are allowed the space to be conscious of social issues and who can observe and move through city spaces as members of the crowd without unwarranted stigma, the post-WWII *flâneuses* may finally “[grant] women authorship of their images” (Gleber 189). This is the call to action, to revise a tradition in order to empower women, which I argue Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde have all heeded in attempting to become authors of their own perception of the city.

I describe the shift from Benjamin’s and Friedberg’s enclosed buildings that create artificial urban spaces to the public spaces on city streets, in subways or train stations, and in parks. Returning the poet *flâneuse* from protected shopping areas to the city street is an important revision that I make to *flânerie*. As the most common location of the crowd (although certainly the crowd moves through other areas such as subway stations and parks as well), the streets are representative of city life. This kind of use of the term “street” in literary studies of city poetry is exemplified by Marianne Thormählen’s explanation of T.S. Eliot’s city poetry: “At times in Eliot’s early poetry the street is not only a scene but an agent... Usually, however, it is a natural stage on which the dreary

drama of modern urban existence is enacted. The street is where people move, meet and observe other people, vanish into buildings and emerge from them, all in accordance with the traditional idea of streets as the veins of a city” (134). By moving through the streets, *flâneuses* of the crowd, women connect to the pulse of the city.

Cities in American Poetry

My decision to return *flânerie* to poetry studies connects Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde to a literary history of the city—both in poetry and America—which consistently influences and imposes on their poetics. Benjamin locates *flânerie* in an American literary foundation by identifying the origins of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* in the detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly in “The Man of the Crowd.” Therefore, *flânerie* begins as an American concept that is adopted and named by European writers such as Baudelaire (Benjamin 48). Furthermore, although recent critical depictions of the *flâneur* depart from poetic analyses, often focusing on cinema (Friedberg, Gleber), Benjamin’s analysis of Baudelaire establishes poetry’s value to *flânerie*.

Poetry’s ability to articulate the compressed architecture of urban life (physical and social) makes it an ideal form of urban expression. As Audre Lorde explains, poetry is the most “economical” art form because it requires the least material or space and can be written “in between shifts” or “on the subway,” which makes it the most conducive form to the writer involved in the constant motion of *flânerie* (Lorde *Sister Outsider* 116). The ability to write poems on lunch breaks, on the subway, or wherever the writer wants/needs to is necessary for the poet *flâneuse*, who is caught up in the manic activity of urban life. City dwellers rush through and past things, so every encounter and experience is crammed with meaning, the same way it is in poetry’s lines and symbolism because there is no time or space for length. City streets are densely packed with different

cultures, languages, and events, just like the denseness of a line of poetry. Howard Moss explains that, “because [New York City] is perpetually changing, [it] eludes crystallization. Its essential nature—made up of glimpses, contrasts, fleeting encounters—is most tellingly realized in the short story and the poem, forms congenial to their subject” (xxi). Therefore, although many critics are looking to film and music for representations of urban life, I am returning to poetry.

Despite the fact that poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) were contemporaries of Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde, the role of the city in the male poets’ work is often noted, but it is overlooked in the women’s poetry. Women have not merely been left out of literary discussions of the city, they have been objectified in it. The poem “N.Y.” by Ezra Pound represents the insidious assumption of white male ownership of the city by conflating woman and city. The poem opens with an apostrophe to the city, who the speaker calls “my beloved, my white” (Pound 58). Peter Brooker identifies this poem as anticipating Pound’s modernist writing, but it also identifies the particular gender and racial inequality that women poets have to overcome when writing the city (41). By turning New York, metaphorically, into a woman—one who is owned by the male speaker of the poem (“my beloved”), and who is identified as “white” and “slender”—Pound writes the city into a racialized, hetero-normative, patriarchal space in poetry. Because of Pound’s profound influence on American poetry, women poets have to fight such a stereotype in order to write the city, and in order to be able to enter the role of observer and *flâneuse* instead of allowing herself to be the object of male poets’ possessive gaze.

Whitman was quite possibly the first well-known American poet *flâneur* (since Poe explored issues of the crowd primarily in short story form). Jill Wacker identifies Whitman as a “journalist-*flâneur*” and notes that his insistence on strolling leisurely through the city to sketch it often cost him his job as he was accused of being a “loafer” (86). Whitman’s poetry openly celebrates New York City and, as Alan Trachtenberg explains, he successfully writes the city by standing “at once inside and outside himself, within the crowd which comprises the city, part of it yet detached enough to hear his own voice” (169). In this description, Whitman achieves almost the exact definition of a *flâneur*. Whitman comfortably adopts Baudelaire’s pleasure in walking the city as a *flâneur*, but not all American poets of influence found the same source of inspiration in Baudelaire.

The women poets I discuss in this dissertation complicate the image of the city they inherit from Whitman, understanding it to be neither all good nor all bad. According to Graham Clarke, the city as an enigma causes responses that are either of despair and corruption or of vitality and possibility: “At its most baneful the response is intent on forging an art, and a view of the city, appropriate to the environment from which it comes” (9). As Clarke’s comment shows, even the artist’s response to the city is paradoxical since it is “baneful” and yet it “forges” an artistic rendition of the city. Whitman’s celebration of the city is often noted as the foundation for poets such as William Carlos Williams and Frank O’Hara, who similarly revel in urban life. On the other end of the spectrum, T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* is often noted as the foundation for negative response to the city. In American poetry, both positions develop in response to Baudelaire.

By referring to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the first part of *The Wasteland*, Eliot highlights the modern city as a contradictory place of both dreams and destitution. Eliot's first reference to Baudelaire appears in the simple, but famous, phrase "unreal city," which he footnoted with lines from *Les Fleurs du Mal* himself (Norton 1272). The lines that Eliot references conjure the image of a city that seduces with dreams and destroys with what Benjamin calls the phantasmagoria of the crowd, which might correspond for Eliot to the loss of individuality in the masses. The stanza ends with another line from Baudelaire that implicates the reader in the speaker's disgust with the city—with the resulting sin and stupidity of the masses in the city (Norton 1272). Eliot's response to the city establishes an urban poetics in opposition to Whitman's which post-WWII women poets must negotiate.

Although much of Eliot's later work is located in Europe, Marianne Thormählen points to the role and influence of American cities like St. Louis and Boston in his early poetry. Thormählen notes that, "the slightly sinister yellow fog which witnessed Prufrock's vacillations is of American origin, unlike the 'brown fog of a winter dawn' in the wasteland of post-war London" (127). Jay Martin builds on Thormählen's close reading, noting that, in general, "Eliot subsumed city life into poetry, as no American since Whitman had done, by concentrating upon its nightmarish, but also its marvelous, qualities; he saw it both as an illusion, deeply deceptive, and as a mirage, enticing and appealing" (13). Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde struggle with similar contradictions that plague the post-WWII American city as those raised by the industrialization and modernization of cities to which Eliot responded. Whereas Poe, Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Eliot all refer to a crowd that is homogenous except for the *flâneur*, Brooks, Rich, di

Prima, and Lorde indicate an important change that has occurred in our understanding of the crowd in the post-WWII American city. They privilege the individual differences between members of the crowd that make it heterogeneous, acknowledging the different cultures and experiences that each person contributes to the city scene.

Like Eliot, Rich invokes the specter of Baudelaire to articulate disillusionment with the city. In “End of an Era,” Rich’s speaker calls, through apostrophe, to a city that “once had snap and glare,” but which has become flattened by the weight of her sensitivity to it. In the second stanza, the apostrophe is repeated, but this time to Baudelaire in an attempt to recapture an earlier belief in the city. The speaker concludes that “nothing changes,” her disappointment in the city is not alleviated (Rich *Collected* 174). Rich’s appeal to Baudelaire assumes his ability to redeem the city, but his inability to do so exposes the limitations of his *flâneur* for her. Instead of discovering the intoxication that can disorient the *flâneur*’s vision of the harmful aspects of urban life, Rich’s vision remains focused on social ills and inequality.

Diane di Prima invokes the image of Baudelaire to a different end than Eliot or Rich. In the poem “Magick in Theory & Practice,” the speaker addresses, through apostrophe, young artists “under the shadow / of MOMA” in New York City, saying, “oh how my love reaches for you.” The speaker sympathizes with the painters who are “flanked by skinny girls,” but the image is a fleeting memory. The poem concludes:

... oh home
 I may never see again oh glamour
 like Baudelaire fading in a long hall of mirrors
 called past as I move backwards over
 its black velvet floor (Pieces 75)

The nostalgia of these lines conflates Baudelaire—whose image repeats in the mirrors—with home. The lines combine memory and surrealism to allude to Baudelaire’s influence

on the urban art scene, which calls to Baudelaire as he fades into the past, recalls the past, and also calls into the past, moving backward. The hall of mirrors image of Baudelaire is juxtaposed with the sentimental loss of “home” and “glamour” (the romantic “oh” repeated as yet another way of recalling a past art) to achieve a simultaneously frightening loss of time and space and a pleasant tribute to a poetic influence. Like the looming shadow of MOMA on the young artists’ canvases, Baudelaire’s image looms over her poetry. Di Prima’s “Magick in Theory & Practice” lacks the edge of anger and disillusionment that Rich’s “End of an Era” exhibits. But the poem ends with di Prima moving backwards, as if she is being lured down the hall of mirrors into the past, over the superficial comfort of the velvet on the floor.

Many poets who looked to Baudelaire for guidance did so primarily as an aesthetic move. After WWII, many poets began to consider political influences in the city as well as aesthetic ones. In Chicago, Carl Sandburg’s socialist free verse spoke for the masses as the proletariat. The speaker of “I am the People, The Mob” declares, “I am the people—the mob—the crowd—the mass / Do you know that all the great work of the world is done through me?” (Sandburg). Sandburg’s poetics captured life in Chicago and the attention of the Chicago people it spoke to and about by using language that was familiar and common. Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry similarly spoke to and about Chicago, but to a different crowd within that urban space. The workers Sandburg addressed were primarily white (even if immigrant). Brooks’s 1950s Bronzeville is almost completely separate from Sandburg’s WWI-era Chicago, and her poetics better resemble those of Claude McKay.

McKay's political agenda was racial, but, unlike Sandburg, he esteemed traditional poetic forms and endeavored to write poetry that reflected African-American urban life, often in strict sonnet form. His political message is clear, though. "The White City" opens with the line, "I will not toy with it nor bend an inch." Such forthright language is undermined, however, by literary allusion. As Cary Nelson explains in the footnotes of the Oxford *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, the line refers to a line in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (317). From Sandburg and McKay, women poets inherit the vexed relationship between the racially segregated neighborhoods of the city and the similarly racially segregated history of American poetry. Having a political agenda would seem to preclude *flânerie*, but as working class poets begin to participate in a *flâneur*-influenced gaze, their political positions become infused with their poetic response to the city.

Langston Hughes connects political poetry with *flânerie* in the discussion of the literary history of urban American poetry. As Arnold Rampersad notes, Hughes "learned much from Carl Sandburg, himself one of Whitman's most fervent disciples, whose *Jazz Fantasies* (1919) pointed Hughes in the direction of his own music-inflected verse" (4). Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred* was published in 1951, after Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville*. But the syntax, diction, and jazz-influenced rhythms which Hughes employs challenge urban poetics to incorporate African American language, culture, and experience. By showing Harlem as culturally rich, but economically disenfranchised, Hughes further fractures notions of *flânerie* being able to capture a unified urban image. Like all inner-cities that have properties of the larger city, but a community and culture of their own as well, the Harlem of Hughes's poetry is distinct

from the rest of New York City. Hughes could be one of the first to employ *flânerie* from a race-conscious perspective, and he opens the door to considering the possibility of the *flâneur/flâneuse* as a black poet.

In *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Hughes depicts a variety of scenes in Harlem that readers can experience as representations of *flânerie*. The short poems that make up *Montage of a Dream Deferred* move through different visual images of the city. From the organized crowd movement in “Parade” or the series of store signs that create the effect of walking down the street in “Neon Signs,” to the political implications of “Corner Meeting” and the reflection on deferred dreams in “Good Morning” and “Island [2],” the poems of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* combine to create an image of Harlem in a form that alludes to Baudelaire’s Paris.

It would be unrealistic for Brooks, Rich, di Prima, or Lorde to completely eschew the urban poetic tradition that precedes their work. Their conscious efforts to build from the productive aspects of that work and their explicit divergences from the detrimental aspects of the traditions create some of the most complex and fascinating conflicts in their poetry. It is in the space created by this conflict that they can develop an urban feminist poetics from a *flâneuse*’s privileged perspective.

The Labyrinthine City

Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde make the city legible by writing poetic maps: alternate interpretations of the city space that may guide reader’s understanding and knowledge of the city. As Deborah Parsons explains: “The urban writer is not only a figure within a city; he/she is also the producer of a city.... The writer adds other maps to the city atlas; those of social interaction but also of myth, memory, fantasy, and desire” (Parsons 1). Especially for women, these metaphorical maps are crucial to navigating city

spaces which have otherwise been defined by men. Cities are traditionally “produced” by men: male architects, politicians, engineers, construction workers, and urban planners design the spaces. By writing the city, poets such as Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde begin to make the spaces more legible for women.

The city is illegible because of the labyrinthine nature of the streets, its sheer size, the constant movement and change of the crowd, the raising and tearing down of buildings, and the intersection of both horizontal and vertical movement. Making the city legible requires navigating two maze-like spaces: the ordered, horizontal and vertical mazes created by streets and buildings and the chaotic crowd. A member of the crowd is presented with so many possible routes through streets, buildings, and within the constantly changing crowd that she has an indefinite number of options, which could all lead to different sights, experiences, and destinations. Women’s *flânerie* depends on being able to navigate these multiple labyrinths successfully.

Generally, labyrinths today are conceived as replicas of the Greek labyrinth, which are small versions of Egyptian labyrinths. As Hubert Damisch explains, the streets of older urban areas, such as the Wall Street district of Manhattan or parts of Boston, resemble the familiar twists, turns, and dead-ends of the Greek labyrinth. But Egyptian labyrinths were so tremendously enormous that travelers would be disoriented by sheer magnitude of space and the repetition (both vertically and horizontally) of spaces. In this sense, all of Manhattan—or Chicago, or Boston—resembles a labyrinth. In such spaces, travelers must rely on local landmarks to navigate the space. Like the *flâneur* in Paris before Haussman’s nineteenth-century urban planning which modernized Paris, the traveler had to know the spaces intimately in order to navigate them. Adding street signs,

building numbers, and boulevards wide enough to permit pedestrian passage inserts this kind of order onto the space, making the labyrinth easier to navigate.

The *flâneur* reveled in the kind of pre-Haussman spaces of the city that allowed his knowledge of the city to ensure his safety in the urban labyrinth. According to Damisch, “What Benjamin retained from Poe and Baudelaire is the notion that, beyond a certain critical mass, the paths traced by the man of the city, by the man of the crowd, effectively evoke the illegible, indecipherable figure of a labyrinth whose subterranean presence will obliterate the image of the city all the more insofar as the latter is homogenous and extended” (14). The speakers of urban poems by Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde allude to a similar understanding of the city that is evident in their regard for the invisible or silenced members of the crowd. For the *flâneuse*, the ability to write, navigate, and redefine these urban labyrinths is the necessary power that she needs to contribute to the city’s social and political structures.

In Greek mythology, a woman plays an integral role in the navigation of Daedalus’s famous labyrinth. By providing the thread for Theseus to follow and find his way out of the labyrinth, an idea that she borrowed from Daedalus, Ariadne is a precursor to the *flâneuse*. Although Ariadne understood how to navigate the labyrinth, she never navigated it herself. In fact, the labyrinth remains a symbol of her own entrapment in the story since she was actually trapped within the invisible labyrinth of social expectations. Ariadne not only never navigates the labyrinth herself, but she is unsuccessful at extricating herself from the patriarchal labyrinth which controls her life as well. She needs Theseus’s help to leave Crete and her controlling father, but Theseus abandons her along the journey from Crete and she is “rescued” by Dionysus. Women’s *flânerie* is

similarly threatened by dependence on men's definitions and forms. From a contemporary perspective, Ariadne demonstrates the danger that women face in attempting to break out of a patriarchal tradition and control their own movement and direction. The *flâneuse* must break out of the confinement she inherits from Ariadne and find a more successful tool than thread—which primarily provides an escape route—to navigate the urban labyrinths.

The *flâneuse* in the twentieth-century American city faces a different kind of labyrinth than either Ariadne or Baudelaire's *flâneur*. In order to consider the poet *flâneuse* navigating the city, it is important to consider the historical context of the city she is in. The post-WWII poet *flâneuse* negotiates urban spaces which are shifting from modern to post-modern. According to Sharpe and Wallock, urban areas like older sections of Manhattan represent a stage of urban life which was marked by “concentrated settlements,” the urban planning of midtown Manhattan is an example of the modernist stage of urban life that is marked by a clearly demarcated center with a developing “suburban ring” surrounding it, and the post-modern city (beginning around the early 1970s), such as Los Angeles, is decentered (10). Benjamin appears to locate the *flâneur* in pre-modern city spaces, but those spaces are on the cusp of becoming modernized.

Although the modernist city orders urban space, it still maintains the size and repetition of spaces that makes the city labyrinthine. Celeste Olalquiaga explains how the city dweller's sense of time and space becomes skewed by the sensory overload in the city. She compares the skyscrapers to a hall of mirrors, like a labyrinth:

Contemporary architecture displays an urban continuum where buildings are seen to disappear behind reflections of the sky or merge into one another, as in the downtown areas of most cosmopolitan cities and in the trademark midtown landscape of New York City. Any sense of freedom gained by the absence of

clearly marked boundaries, however, is soon lost to the reproduction ad infinitum of space—a hall of mirrors in which passersby are dizzied into total oblivion. Instead of establishing coordinates from a fixed reference point, contemporary architecture fills the referential crash with repetition. (2)

Like the hall of mirrors in di Prima's poem, "Magick in Theory & Practice," Olalquiaga's description of the city as an "urban continuum" disrupts the space with repetition, confounding the city dweller. In James Baldwin's version of this disorientation, the height of skyscrapers and inability to see the sky causes city dwellers to become divorced from reality and other people (34).

Moreover, the sheer volume of people in the modernist city crowd allows the *flâneur* or the *flâneuse* to move anonymously. Cities naturally continue to change, but the necessary factor for *flânerie* is the crowd. In cities like Chicago and New York, quintessentially modern cities designed to have a single center, walking in the city is still possible and crowds remain a central aspect of city life. According to Nan Ellin, the modern city focuses on legibility through order and functionalism, but the post-modern city focuses on legibility through humanizing (45). In post-modern cities, such as Los Angeles, city dwellers rely on independent means of transportation, moving in and out of gated, surveillance-controlled shopping malls or residential districts in their individual cars. In such post-modern cities, the crowd does not flow through city spaces on foot. In general, modern cities are more conducive to walking because of the creation of sidewalks and pedestrian passageways. I have chosen poets who write primarily about Chicago and New York for this reason.

Within the larger labyrinth of the modernist city as a whole exist invisible boundaries and barriers that allow city dwellers to develop a sense of community and ownership in the overwhelming urban space. Neighborhoods are enclosed spaces, but

enclosed by social boundaries rather than by physical walls the way the mall spaces are. The neighborhoods contain elements of nostalgia the way mall spaces do: Friedberg describes how malls recreate town squares which are small enough to create a community but urban enough to provide space for a crowd. Similarly, neighborhoods allow for the nostalgic creation of spaces that remind immigrant communities of their cultural roots. The *flâneuse* must have the ability to cross boundaries, moving between neighborhoods, even though she may define herself based upon a particular community. Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde all recognized the ways that neighborhood affiliations could be both empowering and limiting.

Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde

The profound effect that living in cities had on the lives and poetry of Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde is evident from descriptions in their autobiographical writing, which inform the appearance of specifically urban scenarios and settings in their poetry. Each of the women wrote essays, memoirs, or autobiographical pieces that describe her relationship with and opinions about city life. Brooks associates events, periods in her life, and poetic development with particular locations in Chicago throughout *Report from Part One*. Rich describes deciding to live and work in New York City in the essay “Teaching in Open Admissions.” Di Prima provides extensive stories of street life and the impact of New York City on her work in both *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and *My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*. Lorde’s “biomythography,” *Zami*, indicates the profound effect of life growing up in New York on her identity and poetry. Their poetry interrogates these spaces from the particular observer positions that incorporate (and may be dependent upon) *flânerie*. Correlations between the urban perspectives in these women’s poems and *flânerie* are undeniable, but they require a revised understanding not

only of *flânerie*, but an expanded understanding of women's participation in urban life in the decades after World War II (1950s–1970s), a time otherwise remembered for booming suburbia and domesticity.

The dissertation begins, in the chapter “Gwendolyn Brooks: Detecting *Flânerie*,” by looking at Gwendolyn Brooks's Chicago, specifically the South Side—her Bronzeville—where the poem “In the Mecca” takes place. “In the Mecca” transitions between a poet *flâneuse* who, like Friedberg's figure, is confined architecturally to a poet *flâneuse* who more readily enters the streets in the poetry of Rich, di Prima, and Lorde. “In the Mecca” is framed by the physical structure of the Mecca, a building on the South Side of Chicago. Like the arcades for Benjamin or the department stores for the early *flâneuses*, the Mecca provides an enclosed labyrinth of hallways that mimic city streets. The poem is driven by the story of Mrs. Sallie's search for her missing daughter, Pepita, who is revealed under the bed of another Mecca resident, Jamaican Edward, at the end of the poem.

“In the Mecca” employs several narrative devices that imitate elements of *flânerie*, including character vignettes which mimic nineteenth-century Parisian *physiologies* and the unwilling detection of crime within the crowd. Connections between *flânerie*'s literary roots and “In the Mecca's” narrator suggest her role as a *flâneuse* and are further supported by the poem's narrative movement. The speaker is an “outsider within” the Mecca, knowledgeable about the residents and the ways through the labyrinthine halls, but unnoticed by the other people and capable of moving through spaces others are prevented from entering. The speaker uses this position to follow events or characters of interest. Through these explorations into the lives of the Mecca residents, “In the

Mecca's" speaker narrates an epic-like account of black urban culture. But this speaker/*flâneuse's* ability to navigate the urban labyrinth is limited to the Mecca building. "In the Mecca's" *flâneuse* imitates aspects of *flânerie* to reveal the kinds of insights and events to which such anonymous observation has access, even pressing *flânerie* to incorporate socio-political commentary, but she fails to enter the actual city.

Whereas "In the Mecca" navigates an arcades-like building that makes a labyrinth, Adrienne Rich explores the labyrinths created between people by gender and sexuality differences. In the chapter "Adrienne Rich: Resisting Ariadne," I analyze the ways that Rich recognized her potential to become an Ariadne-figure in city poetry, abandoned by the patriarchal forms which she emulated and prevented from navigating the urban labyrinth. Rich's city poems, like Baudelaire's, frequently explore urban themes without assigning specific local landmarks. Some of the most prominent and concrete images of the city appear in poems such as "Frame" and in some of the ghazal poems. Rich's *flâneuse* moves through the city crowd, but cannot find a home there because she continually sees the way her path is defined by patriarchal influences. In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, the city landscape lingers in the background of the narrative of lesbian love, intruding upon their relationship with reminders of public restriction and eventually physically separating the two women from each other.

Rich is frustrated by modernist poetics in the modernist city, but incapable of defining a form for urban expression outside of *flânerie*. Like Ariadne, she ends up trapped in the labyrinth of social expectations and language structures, never fully becoming a *flâneuse*. The correction that Rich makes to the city's illegible labyrinth is to provide a map, or atlas, of her own. The volume of poetry, *An Atlas of a Difficult World*,

published in 1991 is the culmination of this effort and only one poem, “VII (The Dream-Site)” explicitly details city life.

For di Prima, *flânerie* was more like an urban adventure, one of her many experiments in poetics and life. In the chapter “Diane di Prima: Pirating *Flânerie*,” I take as a starting point the description from *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* of di Prima’s game of dressing up as pirates with friends and exploring the city. The pirate motif is particularly useful here because it not only connects di Prima to a poetic practice reminiscent of *flânerie*, it also implies her rejection of dominant consumer culture. Like Rich, di Prima was not interested in the traditional domestic options for women in the 1950s. She looked as far from suburban domesticity as she could—to urban street life—to find a community with which she could identify.

Di Prima’s urban writing appropriates and experiments with various personal and poetic roles, including *flânerie*. Although di Prima’s memoir and autobiographical writing provides extensive evidence of *flânerie*, her poetry exhibits little of this. Certainly caught up in the phantasmagoria of the city, di Prima picks up for her poetry few of the usual symbols, landmarks, or commodities which define the city for the *flâneur*. She revels in her ability, while appropriating *flânerie*, to define an “authentic” city that is beyond the reaches of consumer culture. She looks to mythology, to existentialist searches for meaning in life, and to her own body as issues that the city makes relevant and vital. The realist markers of urban life that Brooks, Rich, and Lorde use to define their urban experiences do not ground di Prima’s poetics, which float into the intoxication of a *flâneuse* in the city crowd. By ignoring the limitations of *flânerie* for women, di

Prima is both empowered and blinded. But her poetry indicates that it elevated her poetics to something beyond the concrete city.

Audre Lorde made a concerted prioritization of the city in her poetry, even titling her fourth book of poetry *New York Head Shop and Museum* in 1974. In the chapter “Audre Lorde: Activating the *Flâneuse*” I show how Lorde’s political activism against racism and homophobia in the city defines her *flânerie*. Lorde’s use of the city in her poetry, like di Prima’s, is often in an attempt to destroy it. Many of Lorde’s poems have the tone of a call to action, an insistence on the city as a site of necessary revolution, that suggest her writing is intended to promote a political activist approach to reform in the city. In the poems of *New York Head Shop and Museum*, Lorde captures the movement of the crowd through city spaces, chronicling the events and images that she observes as a black *flâneuse*.

Lorde achieves the kind of invisibility and anonymity necessary for *flânerie*, and her poems move through city spaces fluidly, capturing city life. But her politically activist agenda pushes *flânerie* to do more than merely observe. She demands that poetry contribute to social change in the city, but often despairs that it is possible. In “Revolution is One Form of Social Change,” she writes that when “the man” runs out of race reasons to discriminate against others, he will simply switch to other differences, ending up at sex “which is / after all / where it all began” (139). The displeasure that Lorde expresses with city life in such poems eventually leads her to abandon living in New York, spending the end of her life back in the Caribbean.

In each of the chapters I examine the ways that Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde incorporate, resist, and change the poetic standards they inherit from high modernist and

Harlem Renaissance poets. By looking at syntax, diction, and formal structure, I show how their attempts to extricate their poetics from patriarchal influence are defining elements of their attempts to participate in *flânerie*. Rich's desire to inherit Baudelaire's poetic vision and di Prima's attachment to Pound are two examples of the conflict between guidance and limitations that these poets face when inheriting masculine-defined poetic practices. Each of these poets breaks away from traditional poetic forms, delving into black language, surrealist imagery, avant-garde or jazz-influenced language, and feminist revaluations of poetic structures to write the city as *flâneuses*. Although each achieves varying degrees of success in these attempts, much about her poetic process is revealed by considering her work in these terms.

CHAPTER 2
GWENDOLYN BROOKS: DETECTING *FLÂNERIE*

Gwendolyn Brooks's personal attachment to Chicago's South Side focused her attention on the city crowd. Her work validates the language and community of the South Side neighborhood to which she devoted her life. Brooks explained to Paul M. Angle how the city shaped her concept of herself as a poet: "When I was a child I used to think that I would write better if I lived in the country.... But I feel now that it was better for me to have grown up in Chicago because in my writing I am proud to feature people and their concerns—their troubles as well as their joys. The city is the place to observe man *en masse* and in his infinite variety" (*Report* 135). For Brooks, the crowd—"man *en masse*"—defined life in the city. She looked to Langston Hughes as a model of how to write the city from within the crowd. "Mightily did he use the street. He found its multiple heart, its tastes, smells, alarms, formulas, flowers, garbage and convulsions. He brought them all to his table-top. He crushed them to a writing-paste. He himself became the pen" (*Report* 71). Brooks saw that by bringing Harlem into his work, by making it the very form and function of his writing, and then by becoming the pen himself, Hughes became Harlem. His poetry is the city because he was able to become the city. By tapping into the connection between poet and city that *flânerie* provides—utilizing the perspective of a black *flâneuse* in "In the Mecca"—Brooks can become Chicago's South Side.

In the Mecca is a transitional text in Brooks's oeuvre, having been written and published prior to her conscious decision to incorporate Black Arts Movement language

in her work, but breaking with some of the more traditional forms in her earlier work.¹ By telling the story of one black girl's disappearance in the Mecca building through the perspective of a black flâneuse, the title poem of the volume, "In the Mecca," demonstrates the presence of black women in flânerie, how black women's flânerie can expose social inequalities, and how a poem can construct poetic city spaces and lives that challenge traditional forms, pressing against the boundaries of flânerie and the city. Although many of Brooks's poems, especially those from A Street in Bronzeville, have evidence of flânerie, I have chosen to focus on "In the Mecca" in this chapter because it not only transitions Brooks's poetic style from traditional forms to forms that draw from vernacular and political sources, it also shifts women's flânerie out of Friedberg's shopping malls and back into the labyrinth of city buildings, broadening the arenas in which women participate in flânerie. Therefore, "In the Mecca" inhabits a transitional space between the mall/arcades and the street. Brooks's flâneuse, in being particular to black women's urban experience, acts as a poetic signifier of the inner-city. "In the Mecca" anticipates a style and perspective that is unique to black women's flânerie.

The title of the poem self-consciously positions the characters in relation to particular historical developments in Chicago. The Mecca was an actual building on the South Side of Chicago, but the name invokes the developing Nation of Islam as well, which was centered in Chicago. The speaker of "In the Mecca," who narrates the poem as a *flâneuse*, moving through the building in anonymous observation, is never explicitly identified as a black woman, but her attention to women and the correlation between her knowledge and Brooks's own experiences in the building strongly suggest her identity as

¹ *In the Mecca* is first copyrighted in 1964; Brooks attended the Fisk Writer's Conference in 1967.

a black woman. Her perspective reflects the ways that black women's roles in political, economic, and social expectations were in transition in the decades after WWII. As bell hooks explains in *Ain't I a Woman*, black women have a long history of social and political activism in America that became stymied by the overwhelming influence of consumer culture and pressure for suburban domesticity that typified American society as a whole.

The tradition of black women speaking out for women's rights took a back seat to Cold War fears and a rising call for support of black masculinity, exemplified by the Nation of Islam's demand for black women's subordinate/supportive role of black men's progress. According to hooks, "The 50s socialization of black women to assume a more subordinate role in relation to black men occurred as part of an overall effort in the U.S. to brainwash women so as to reverse the effects of World War II" (*Ain't I* 177). During the war, women were had to become independent and hardworking, but they were removed from their professional and occupational positions as soon as the men returned. The speaker of "In the Mecca" reflects both the tradition inherited from black female political activists such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells-Barnett, and Elise Johnson McDougald, but she does not yet quite anticipate the feminist rhetoric of Frances Beale's "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," which was not published until 1970. Brooks further complicates the speaker's positioning by placing her within a transitioning poetic context. Although the content of the poem embraces the political agenda characterized by the burgeoning Black Arts Movement, even mentioning Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti), it struggles to develop a poetic style that adheres to a

particular tradition. Brooks's black *flâneuse* in "In the Mecca" is forging new definitions of "black woman poet in the city" by creating an urban epic from a woman's perspective.

The history of the Mecca building that Brooks encapsulates the larger African-American urban history. By creating a narrative journey which pulls from both epic (historical poetry) and detective mystery (American form), Brooks inserts the Mecca into a historical form which could represent African-American urban culture. Brooks manipulates epic and *flânerie* to create the African-American urban epic. R. Baxter Miller explains that Brooks spent 23 years trying to "fulfill her hidden purpose: To write a Black Epic. Such a work would rank with the classics; it would portray a narrator's journey, her obstacles encountered, and her final vision of victory" (19). Her mock epic "The Anniad" and epic aspects of her novel, *Maud Martha*, then appear as experiments in narrative style that culminate in "In the Mecca's" attempt to insert the Mecca building into American legend as a symbol of black American urban life.

The poem is framed by the search for Mrs. Sallie's missing daughter, Pepita. At the beginning, Mrs. Sallie arrives home to the Mecca and discovers that Pepita is missing. Mrs. Sallie's other eight children help her search for their missing sibling, but eventually call the police for help. When the police, called "The Law," arrive, the narrative adjusts to focus on their search. In the end, Pepita's body is revealed under the bed of a resident named Jamaican Edward. The speaker narrates this story as a piece of the larger purpose of the poem, which, with more than 800 lines, is the culmination of Brooks's efforts to write a black urban epic. As Brooks explains in her notes about writing the poem, "To touch every note in the life of this block-long block-wide building would be to capsulize the gist of black humanity in general" (*Report* 190). Although Brooks's *The Anniad*,

which won a Pulitzer prize, is more famous for epic form, its success is as a mock epic. It is satire rather than history. “In the Mecca’s” movement through the Mecca building—movement through a symbolic city—is directed by the search, but this movement is primarily a device that allows the speaker to observe and record the Mecca’s community of residents, who represent urban “black humanity” to Brooks. Therefore, individual members of the crowd, particularly the teacher named Alfred, play an important role in the poem, despite not being a part of the search.

In this chapter, I examine connections between “In the Mecca” and Benjamin’s location of *flânerie* in both Parisian *physiologies* and Poe’s detective stories. These elements of *flânerie* frame the form and strategy of “In the Mecca.” By examining the long poem “In the Mecca” through the lens of *flânerie*, I raise questions about the nature of such a limited cultural construction of urban life. How is our understanding of the role of poetry in the cultural construction of the city changed by exploring the relationship between “In the Mecca” and *flânerie*? How does *flânerie* change our understanding of “In the Mecca”? Finally, what is the effect of considering *flânerie* as not only gendered—a *flâneuse*—but also raced—a black *flâneuse*? I examine ways that “In the Mecca” develops a poetic speaker who participates in a gender- and race-conscious *flânerie* that offers a corrective to Benjamin’s *flâneur* in order to answer these questions. If the narrator/speaker of “In the Mecca” appears to mimic the pattern and perspective of *flânerie*, she does so with a heightened awareness of both the advantages and limitations of such a position.

A “Mecca” of Inherited Cultural Forms

Much of the critical work on “In the Mecca” has focused on historicist interpretations that look back to the actual building (Cheryl Clarke, John Lowney). This chapter builds on that kind of work, pushing Brooks’s use of the building to comment on urban socio-political issues by complicating an urban poetic tradition. Sheila Hassell Hughes points out that many male critics “heralded Brooks’s political shift of the late 1960s as a necessary turn both inward, to her own community, and outward, beyond the confines of the feminine psyche.... These critics valued the strong sense of place and position in Brooks’s work” (257). I would like to explore this issue of place and position, its relationship to feminist issues, and demonstrate that Brooks never relinquished her focus on the particular difficulties of black womanhood in the inner-city.

Brooks always gave particular attention to black womanhood in her poetry. Poems such as “Kitchenette Building,” “A Song in the Front Yard,” and “The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie” from *A Street in Bronzeville* demonstrate her response to domesticity and racism—more specifically, intra-racial “colorism”—in the inner city (*Selected Poems*). Like the women of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, Brooks’s female characters, exemplified by the main character of *Maud Martha*, struggle with their allegiance to racial equality when it came into conflict with their allegiance to gender equality.

Brooks inherited an urban poetics that was defined primarily by men, beginning with her mother famously saying she would be a female Paul Laurence Dunbar. As well as being influenced by Langston Hughes—with whom she identified as a fellow urban black poet—she was also affected by Carl Sandburg, a fellow Chicago poet. Sandburg’s

Chicago was, like Brooks's, working class Chicago, and his poetics reflect his desire to write in common speech. Sandburg writes in long sentences (a goal Brooks similarly identified for "In the Mecca" in her notes) that employ a kind of realism typical in politically-motivated, socialist works in the early twentieth century.² He comfortably negotiates the paradox of his love of Chicago and his anguish at the pain, violence, and exploitation in which workers suffer in order to live in Chicago. Lines such as "They tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger," which acknowledge the problems of urban life in the poem "Chicago," are countered with claims such as, "Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning" (107). Despite apparent similarities in motivation, Brooks's line structure, length of sentence, and syntax bear little resemblance to Sandburg's.

Brooks does write in long sentences, but she maintains clearly poetic line endings to emphasize words, sounds, rhythms, or images (Sandburg allows sentences to determine line beginnings, rarely using enjambment.) The most explicit commentary directly about the Mecca appears from Alfred's perspective. These lines exemplify the way that Brooks's long lines are usually still suggest rhythmic unity and purposeful line structure.

No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith.
 But he (who might have been an architect)
 can speak of Mecca: firm arms surround
 disorders, bruising ruses and small hells,
 small semiheavens: hug barbarous rhetoric
 built of buzz, coma, and petite pell-mells. (ITM 19-20)

² In prose fiction, a parallel example would be Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.

Although not exact, each of these lines have around 10 syllables (some have a few more). The line endings emphasize multiple meanings: read out of context, the third line suggests that the Mecca “surrounds” the residents in a way that might be positive. By separating the word “disorders” from “firm arms surround,” Brooks suggests the irony of the residents’ simultaneous sense of safety and entrapment in the Mecca. Throughout much of the poem, the line structures are much more irregular, but they rarely are determined by the rhythms of colloquial speech as Sandburg’s are. Furthermore, her syntax clings to traditional styles, using words like “hies,” and lines like “A fragmentary attar and armed coma. / A fugitive attar and a district hymn” in the second stanza of the poem (*ITM* 5). Brooks’s Chicago participates in a complex negotiation of poetic forms as well as race and class injustices.

Both Brooks and Sandburg represented whole communities of people in their poems, but their approaches were different. Sandburg intended to speak *for* the crowd, projecting his voice as the representative voice a homogeneous group with similar needs, desires, and values. But Brooks was *of* the crowd without speaking *for* the crowd. By locating herself in the unique role of the *outsider-within*,³ Brooks identified with the crowd but spoke only for herself as outside observer. She recognized and valued the heterogeneous nature of the crowd, making their differences the subject matter of her poetic response. This subtle difference between “for” and “of” is the difference between Sandburg’s statement “I am the mob” and Brooks’s perspective of the city as a *flâneuse*. Sandburg is interacting with the crowd; Brooks is watching it.

³ I explain the concept of *outsider within* (from Patricia Hill Collins) in more depth later in the chapter.

The speaker of “In the Mecca” suggests the realism of Richard Wright’s prose rather than Sandburg’s poetics. Aligned by common experience and understanding of the racial conflict and segregation in Chicago, Brooks and Wright both look to the contradictory social expectations which can warp relationships between black and white people in the city. Ironically, one way that Brooks’s optimism about the future cultural potential of the South Side is evident in her formal poetic response. Although she is clearly exploring possible ways of representing the “authentic” language and experience poetically throughout “In the Mecca,” adjusting between folk forms like the ballad, more traditional forms like the sonnet, and exploring the benefits of free verse, the poem never settles into the flow of one style. Instead, the form is fragmented; patterns are repeatedly disrupted, so that the form of the poem itself symbolizes the fragmented cultural development of the inner-city. One of the few consistent forms throughout the poem is the speaker’s perspective.

Considering the speaker of “In the Mecca” through the motif of *flânerie* endows her with a privileged perspective of the city. Like the narrator of a mystery, the speaker’s identity is never revealed. Because the other residents of the Mecca never acknowledge this watcher, she appears to be an outsider without being an intruder. She retains her anonymity by going unnoticed. Because the speaker is directing the movement of the reader’s vision, she becomes a crucial participant in the cultural construction of the city by recording the Mecca in the poem. The speaker navigates the halls of the Mecca building as a *flâneuse* would navigate the streets of the city. Despite obstacles of gender, race, and class, this speaker adheres to the basic elements of *flânerie*: she wanders through urban spaces without a particular destination, following crowd activity,

spectacles, or criminal acts; she watches from an emotionally detached distance, retaining her anonymity in the crowd despite her observation; she demystifies the crowd through character vignettes that detail urban “types”; she insists on celebrating the city’s possibilities, even in the face of destruction and death; and finally, she makes the city legible through poetic response.

Brooks’s *flâneuse* is a transitional figure: she moves women’s urban strolling out of artificial urban shopping spaces and back into the actual city spaces, but she also is confined inside the Mecca’s walls, her movement limited by gender, race, and class. Anne Friedberg adroitly maneuvers the practice of *flânerie* out of Paris’s nineteenth century arcades, into the department stores of the early twentieth century, and, finally, into the post-modern suburban malls of the late twentieth century to demonstrate how women participate in a gendered gaze through consumer address (*Les Flâneurs* 420). In Friedberg’s analysis, the mall provides a sheltered urban area where women’s consumer-empowered gazes allow them to become *flâneuses*. The mall, however, is merely a replica of urban space without the inconvenience of very real urban problems caused by poverty, human congestion, or violence that affect the lives of women in places like the Mecca. Because women’s power of observation in the mall is limited to consumer choice, they are not witnessing the actual city, where they might view crime as well as pleasure. Therefore, although Friedberg makes a crucial connection between the arcades and enclosed areas like department stores and malls, for the *flâneuse* to achieve the ability to produce the city, she must be able to exit the protected mall and re-enter the actual city. The Mecca building, as an enclosed structure that mimics the larger city in a contained

space, provides the perfect stepping stone for the *flâneuse* to move back into an urban space that is not artificial, but which is not exposed to the entire city crowd.

“In the Mecca” suggests that race consciousness adds another dimension to *flânerie*. As domestic workers, black women like “In the Mecca’s” Mrs. Sallie had always moved through urban spaces between black and white neighborhoods on their way to and from work. Their presence—either as a danger or as being in danger—is rarely mentioned in discussions of women’s exclusion from *flânerie*. Deborah Parsons acknowledges the neglect of black women’s particular critical positions as *flâneuses* when she notes that by generalizing the experiences of socially diverse women writers into the character of “the woman of the crowd” in her analysis of women’s *flânerie* in the twentieth century, she has risked “overlooking the specific and particular influences of race and class, as well as the period in which they live” (227). The setting of “In the Mecca” locates it in a specifically poor, black, city community into which Benjamin’s *flâneur* could never obtain unnoticed access. The speaker’s observation of the Mecca residents, without disruption of their natural flow through the building’s crowded hallways, indicates her association with the community.

As representative of the larger inner-city, the Mecca may be a place where black women could move through the crowd unnoticed. In the context of both the city and the inner-city, black women have traditionally been silenced or ignored. Barbara Smith remarks on an unusual instance of the mainstream media exposing the city’s silencing of black women (xi). Smith describes a scene in the film *Kansas City* when a black cleaning woman is able to give information to a white fugitive woman. As Smith explains, the black woman states that although people were asking for information about the white

woman, no one bothered to ask her because no one ever asks her anything. By ignoring the black woman, the mainstream city can believe that she cannot witness or understand the crowd (or, in this case, recognize crime). She moved through the crowd completely unnoticed. On the other hand, Elise Johnson McDougald explains that, in the early twentieth century, the inner-city—Harlem, in her example—is also a space in which black women go unnoticed: “Here, more than anywhere else, the Negro woman is free from the cruder handicaps of primitive household hardships and the grosser forms of sex and race subjugation” (369). Brooks’s *flâneuse* employs these positions to go unnoticed within the Mecca’s crowded hallways and by the white police officers when they arrive.

As the writer, Gwendolyn Brooks is not necessarily synonymous with the speaker of the poem, but her personal experience in the Mecca building suggests her own assumption of the role of *flâneuse* in observing the Mecca and its residents. Brooks describes her actual experience in the Mecca building when she took a state job at nineteen: “They sent me to the Mecca building to a spiritual adviser, and he had a fantastic practice; lucrative. He had us bottling medicine as well as answering letters. Not real medicine, but love charms and stuff like that he called it, and delivered it through the building; that was my introduction to the Mecca building” (*Report* 162). Because Brooks was occupied in the Mecca, possibly aiding in the delivery of items throughout the building, she undoubtedly became familiar with the building and its inhabitants. Her understanding of the social, political, and economic causes of the Mecca’s poverty affected her poetic response to it.

The Mecca building provides the ideal transition from the protected mall to the city streets because it represents a microcosm of the inner-city. Until it was razed, the Mecca

building stood as an ironic reminder of both urban decadence and the devastation of inner-city ghettos. The building was constructed in 1891 as luxury apartments and was a tourist attraction because of its ostentatious grandeur. Yet, according to Cheryl Clarke, the building retained fascination for wealthy residents only briefly:

By 1912, the Mecca housed the black elite of Chicago. After World War I, the building began its decline. By the Great Depression the once elaborate showplace and tourist attraction had become a crowded slum for poor black people and a symbol of encroaching urban blight—a great hulk of modernity confining thousands of expendable people to the bowels of the city. (136)

As the South Side of Chicago rapidly became a segregated home to the black community in Chicago during the migration of southern black people to northern cities between the World Wars, the Mecca became the equivalent of a tenement house. By the time Gwendolyn Brooks was familiar with the building, as Kenny Williams explains, “the Mecca’s great hulk warned a city of its failure to come to terms with change and reminded a group of urban isolates that they had been consigned to the bowels of the city. Razed in 1952, the Mecca remains in memory as a symbol of absolute urban blight” (60). As a member of the South Side’s black community, but not a resident of the Mecca building, Brooks had the ability to observe the Mecca’s inhabitants and activities as an outsider, effectively becoming a black *flâneuse*.

By rescuing the Mecca from historical neglect, Brooks’s black *flâneuse* revises the inner-city’s aesthetic value in city poetry. In their influential study, *Black Metropolis*, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton recorded statistical, sociological, and historical information about the South Side that demonstrates the disparity of wealth and racial segregation between the it and the rest of Chicago by mid-century. Brooks’s black *flâneuse* corrects the idea that the Mecca housed only the dregs of the city. She explains that her poem “will not be a statistical report. I’m interested in a certain detachment, but

only as a means of reaching substance with some incisiveness. I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that even the *grimmiest* of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun” (*Report* 189). “In the Mecca,” then is a kind of critique of sociological reports which claim to define city communities. Just as Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s famous report on black families caused outrage and debate, Drake and Cayton’s sociological report provides only one perspective of the inner-city. Such sociological research becomes a tool of urban surveillance, imposing values and judgments from a perspective which demonstrates no real understanding of the people. Brooks asserts the need for *poetic* as well as social witness. Such a perspective, as any epic does, allows for the duality of urban life for African American people which Langston Hughes suggested: both the poverty and the cultural richness, the violence and the celebration, the hope and the despair.

Brooks’s desire to remain detached combined with her insistence on the possibility of hope in the city attaches the speaker of “In the Mecca” to *flânerie*. She recognizes a similar need to be able to observe objectively as an outsider, but she closes the gap between sociological observer and inner-city community by making the observer someone who can relate to the community’s circumstances. That way, the observer can demonstrate the aesthetic possibilities created by acknowledging the distinct culture that developed, despite or because of segregation and poverty, in the Mecca building. The particular role of the speaker of “In the Mecca” as an outsider in the Mecca, but as a possible insider, creates the unique perspective that defines the poem.

Inside the Mecca, Brooks was in the unique position of being what Patricia Hill Collins calls an *outsider-within*. Collins explains that she “chose the term *outsider within*

to describe the location of people who no longer belong to any one group.... [it] describe[s] social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power” (5). Collins is not the first to identify such a position, but the term *outsider within* usefully acknowledges the contradiction built into such a role. As an *outsider within*, Brooks had a better chance of becoming a *flâneuse* in her poetry because the *flâneuse* is supposed to be emotionally removed from the city scene to objectively observe it and record it. Because Brooks felt that she was an “organic Chicagoan,” she understood the motivations, experiences, and angers of the people who she saw on the street in her community. This very association and sympathy helps Brooks press the boundaries requiring *flânerie* to be emotionally detached. The poem exposes the ways that a race-conscious perspective—the ability to empathize with the residents’ struggles—is essential to capturing the events inside the Mecca.

Character Vignettes from an Unwilling Detective

Because the poem’s narrative focus is on a mother’s search for her missing daughter, Brooks pulls the reader into an emotional event, tapping into a common fear and setting up a detective mystery. Although Benjamin’s *flâneur* is considered specific to Paris, he actually identifies its foundation in American detective fiction. Benjamin notes that Baudelaire translated several of Poe’s detective stories and that they influenced his poetry (42). As the widely acknowledged creator of the detective story,⁴ Poe defined the detective as someone trying to give order to the chaos that the city presents (Bennett 265). “The Man of the Crowd” exemplifies the *flâneur* in the criminal character of the

⁴ Benjamin notes that the detective story is “the most momentous among Poe’s technical achievements” (43). Other critics of Poe’s detective stories, such as J. Gerald Kennedy, Maurice J. Bennett, and Shawn Rosenheim make similar statements about Poe’s stories establishing the form and formula for detective stories.

unknown man who the narrator (like a detective) follows through the city streets (Benjamin 48). Because Baudelaire was never able to become calculating enough to write from the perspective of the detective, he gave a voice to the *flâneur* in his poetry instead. According to Benjamin, “the original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city crowd” and is demonstrated by the random movement of the unknown man in “The Man of the Crowd” (43). But Baudelaire’s resistance to the total denial of individual identity in the crowd is evident in the poems of *Les Flâneurs du Mal*, which often notice and focus on one passing member of the crowd, identifying with and creating a whole imaginary story for that person. Like the detective, the *flâneur* makes assumptions about people based on “clues”: style of clothing, posture, facial expression. Poetry, on the other hand, gives the *flâneur* a point of view that is unavailable to the detective; it allows the observer to construct a city space that leaves questions unanswered. The detective is inherently a part of authority surveillance, and s/he must determine “right” from “wrong,” in order to locate the criminal. Without locating the criminal, the detective has failed. The poet, on the other hand, has the privilege of recognizing the complex web that connects the criminal, the victim, and the crowd. The poet does not have to choose sides, does not impose repercussions, and can maintain an anonymous role in the crowd which the detective cannot have.

The mystery of Pepita’s disappearance and the instant transformation of her mother, Mrs. Sallie, into a detective of sorts, lay the foundation for the detective story within “In the Mecca.” Although the poem presents Mrs. Sallie as its primary character at the beginning, the speaker’s narration and observation of her movement is dictated by—

and often disrupted by—other events in the building. Mrs. Sallie enters the Mecca and walks up the stairs to her apartment in the opening of the poem, but the speaker follows her only as a device to introduce the residents of the building and the mystery of Pepita’s disappearance. Mrs. Sallie is not an active observer. Unlike a detective, she has no resources to detect the crime against her daughter. The family’s search is chaotic, with none of the rational order necessary to the detective story paradigm. Benjamin identifies the detective story as having four basic parts: the victim and the scene of the crime, the murderer, the masses, and the detective who rationally calculates the cause of the crime. “In the Mecca” establishes all of these elements, but challenges the traditional form of the detective story by using its elements to expose the greater crime: the systemic racism and economic disenfranchisement that endangers the lives of black people in the Mecca. Pepita’s death is symbolic—it is the one that might get the city’s attention.

The women of the Mecca and of the poem are prevented from successfully navigating the literal and figurative spaces of the city, a subtle political statement from Brooks on the inequality between men and women that the larger city context lends to the inner-city. When “the Law” arrives, it usurps Mrs. Sallie’s movement through the building and the poem’s focus. The fate of Pepita is foreshadowed by this turn in the movement of the poem. Women are replaced by an impersonal entity that is dehumanized in the authoritative, and capitalized, label “The law.” Instead of individual, caring police officers—the kind children were taught to ask for help if they were lost or in danger—The Law intrudes in the private spaces of the Mecca, an alien force without empathy. The Law’s role in the poem comments on the ways that the outside city imposes restriction and surveillance on the inner-city black community to control its inhabitants. It is an

enforcer of inequality instead of a protector of peace. “South State Street is a Postulate”—a grand idea, a hope, and a dream—until the Law comes and makes it clear that the people are nothing but “paper dolls.” The Law assumes the right to navigate any space within the city labyrinth, even though they probably should not have access through the Mecca’s many apartments and certainly do not have insight into the lives of the inhabitants.

Mrs. Sallie’s failure as both detective and *flâneuse* establishes the poem’s speaker as its navigator and *flâneuse*. The speaker, as black *flâneuse*, identifies and records the Law’s relationship with the Mecca. The Law possesses the cold, calculating skills necessary for detective work. Although The Law leads the black *flâneuse* to Pepita’s location under Jamaican Edward’s bed, because he “denies and thrice denies a dealing / of any dimension with Mrs. Sallie’s daughter,” it is unclear whether they solve the murder (“ITM” 31). The speaker confirms the death of Pepita, becoming the true “unwilling detective” and reversing the role of *flâneur* as criminal to black *flâneuse* as witness.

Removed from the responsibility of detecting crime, the speaker of the poem is free to allow the various characters and spectacles in the Mecca’s hallways to direct her attention. The people on whom she chooses to focus are like commodity items on display. As a concept that originates in consumer participation—Baudelaire’s ideal site for *flânerie* was the arcades, a shopping area separated from the bustle of the street, and Friedberg locates women’s *flânerie* in shopping malls—*flânerie* is steeped in the complex exchange of producer and product in the city. The problem of commodity culture is compounded by race in black culture. In “I Shop Therefore I Am,” Susan Willis

asks the question, “Is there a place for Afro-American culture in commodity culture?” and concludes that there is no evidence from black literature or popular culture that it can. In each example she gives, black people must either assimilate into white commodity culture, be commodified by it, or perish outside of it because hegemonic consumer culture prevents black people from creating alternative commodities to represent them or their culture (or an alternate system of commodity valuation). Yet, contemporary urban culture has been largely defined by black cultural production. Although it is largely appropriated by white, suburban youth, the hip-hop movement—a culture steeped in commodity identification—is a specifically urban culture based in black and Latino urban styles, music, language, and art. In the 1950s and 1960s similar cultural movements based around urban blues and jazz abounded. The Mecca’s residents represent the problems that black people face in America’s hegemonic commodity culture.

Hyena bursts out of her apartment with hair dyed blonde “to the tune of hate,” implying her hatred of her own identity as a black woman. Hyena’s hair represents her purchase of the mainstream culture’s conflation of blonde hair with beauty. Hyena’s name symbolizes her position as an outsider (even in the realm of those excluded from the mainstream city) and scavenger. In an attempt to assimilate the dominant culture’s notion of beauty, she destroys her identity as a black woman. She is dangerous, but also comical; she is a “striking debutante.” She strikes, yet she is performing a “debutante” role that is out of time and place. Her “coming out” is to the hall of the Mecca building, rather than to society as a whole. Furthermore, if Hyena is read as a prostitute,⁵ then she

⁵ Although I am not necessarily comfortable concluding that Hyena is a prostitute, there are implications of this in her being the first in the building to dye her hair blonde, her use of oils and perfumes, and the allusions to her relations with Alfred. Sheila Hassell Hughes calls her a “striking debutante” or prostitute” but references Philip A. Greasley for this comment.

turns her body into a literal commodity item which can be sold and “consumed” repeatedly.

Alfred’s commodity “purchase” is intellectual knowledge, and because he is a teacher, he also “sells” that commodity to his students. He struggles to reconcile his living conditions with what he believes is intellectual (“Shakespeare, James or Horace, Huxley, Hemingway”) and how little that intellectualism incorporates or represents him. Alfred fractures and disrupts the movement of the poem the same way his developing ideas disrupt the hegemonic intellectualism that he is learning to question. His awareness of his role as both consumer and producer in the commodity exchange resists the self-hatred in which Hyena is trapped. Alfred’s character suggests the inadequacy of education for solving the socio-political problems that residents of the inner-city face, but he also implies the imminence of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement as correctives.

The poem’s speaker, as black *flâneuse*, presents a variety of character vignettes beyond those of Hyena and Alfred. These descriptions function like *physiologies* that distill and demystify the Mecca and its inhabitants. As Robert Ray describes the *physiologies* of nineteenth century Paris, they provided guides to the urban scene, making the city accessible to outsiders and city dwellers alike: “The first mass-market, paperback, pocket-sized books, the *physiologies* proved enormously appealing to readers wanting an immediately legible account, however misleadingly simplified, of the cosmopolitan crowd” (Ray 154). Although Benjamin identifies the practice of writing *physiologies* as going out of style in 1841, the standard it set for observation of individuals in the city through a portrait-like (or caricature-like) characterization

structures how the *flâneur* observed the city. Therefore, the appearance of a similar style further connects “In the Mecca” to the practice of *flânerie*. Although each of the characters of “In the Mecca” could be a particular person and not a stereotype, several of the characters correspond to well-known types such as the ultra-religious woman (St. Julia Jones) and the quack doctor (like the one Brooks herself worked for or Prophet Williams in the poem.)

Often these character vignettes make the characters more empathetic by showing their vulnerability. In the stanza that describes one of Mrs. Sallie’s daughters, Yvonne, the reader is shown a young woman who is in love (or at least in lust) trying to figure out how to hold her lover’s attention. She worries about his paying attention to or spending time with other people, consoling herself with the idea that even when he is doing other things, he will plan to touch her again (*ITM* 9). Yvonne’s concerns are common to all people in love, softening the tough exterior she has developed to survive in the Mecca (she is introduced in the poem as “the Undaunted (she who once / pushed her thumbs in the eyes of a Thief)”) (8). Her sister, Melodie Mary takes an understandable interest in protecting the lives of creatures whose treatment she recognizes as similar to the treatment of Mecca residents by the outside city. She cares for the roaches and rats of the building, recognizing the “privacy of pain” that these creature experience when they are killed.

Each of the residents the speaker observes receives sufficient detail and attention to have a poem of his/her own. Gayl Jones explains that, “Each character in ‘In the Mecca’ could create an individual poem, but the integration of portraits and voices provides the sense of the Mecca as a world. And the multivoiced poem has a long tradition in Afro-

American poetry” (193). Just as *physiologies* were designed to give readers a sense of understanding the overwhelming size and chaos of the city, the character vignettes of “In the Mecca” are attempts to give the reader an understanding of the Mecca’s microcosm of the inner-city.

Three sections of “In the Mecca” provide *physiologie*-reminiscent character vignettes. The first appear when the speaker is watching Mrs. Sallie enter the Mecca and walk up to her apartment. As Mrs. Sallie passes residents in the hall (some of whom are seen through the open doors of their apartments), the speaker describes each one. This is the first time that we see St. Julia Jones, Prophet Williams, Hyena, and Alfred, all of whom are characters who will appear again later in the poem. The next set of character vignettes are of Mrs. Sallie’s children. Each child copes with life in the Mecca differently, exhibiting the variety of responses to the poverty and violence of life in the inner-city. Finally, as Mrs. Sallie’s family searches for Pepita, the speaker continues the original set of character vignettes, exploring the original characters further and introducing new ones.

Through these character vignettes, Brooks builds a history of the black community in the Mecca and also develops a socio-political critique. Mrs. Sallie’s son, Briggs, foreshadows several poems that appear in the “After Mecca” section that follows “In the Mecca”: the poems that make up “The Blackstone Rangers” and which portend her most radical political poem, “Riot.” The speaker is asked to “please pity Briggs” who is trying to sort out the contradictions of gang life: “Gang / is health and mange. / Gang / is a bunch of ones and a singlicity” (*ITM* 11). The speaker depicts Briggs’s dilemma with sympathy; of the children he has the least hope—for him, “hope is heresy”—and he is

described as a “little hurt dog” who “descends to mass” (*ITM* 11). Unlike his brother, Tennessee, who fancies himself like a cat, keeping others at a safe distance for his own protection, or like Emmett, Cap, and Casey, who are driven by constant hunger, Briggs seeks the protection of the larger group even though he recognizes that the gang is “self-employed” and “concerned with Other, / not with Us” (*ITM* 11). As a character vignette, this portrayal of Briggs characterizes his plight with the most complexity. Briggs is not a stereotype: he is not a brutal, violent, or consciousnessless gang member, but a young man who has to cry alone and be “adult as stone” (*ITM* 10).

Other character vignettes serve to paint a historical context for the Mecca. As Mrs. Sallie’s family searches for Pepita, the other residents of the building interrupt with stories of their own losses. Great-great Gram is reminded of her sister, and recalls the destitute living quarters of her family’s cabin under slavery. Loam Norton is reminded of the horrors of the Holocaust, where so many lives were lost, despite their devout religious faith. These figures balance out the more stereotyped images of the characters presented earlier, but as the family’s search continues, their neighbors begin to exhibit more of the disfiguring effects of poverty in the Mecca. Some are insane (Insane Sophie screams) and others have become so self-absorbed and lost in dreaming of a different life that they cannot care for others (Darkara stares at *Vogue*, Way-out Morgan is preparing for revolution by stock-piling guns).

As Gayl Jones notes, Brooks not only participates in connecting city poetry to its literary roots in the *flâneur* in these character vignettes, but also to her own African-American literary roots. Brooks complicates the inheritance of European and African American literary forms in the ballad, a poetic form she returns to repeatedly. Maria K.

Mootry's understanding of Brooks's complex use of the ballad informs my understanding of the appearance of *flânerie* in her poetry. Mootry argues that "Brooks turned to folk forms—ballad, blues, and spirituals—not out of any sentimental attachment to a given tradition but to deepen her poetic structure" (137). The search narrative for Pepita is interrupted by "The ballad of Edie Barrow" at one point in "In the Mecca." This ballad provides not only a character vignette, but also a representative revision of the usual dichotomy between traditional and revisionist forms or between European and African American forms that "In the Mecca," as epic and Black Arts poem, attempts as a whole. As a form that originates in song, Brooks's ballads also participate in the kinds of "calligraphy of black chant" that Aldon Nielsen explains are a central part of black poetics. Brooks's ballad recovers and reiterates the traditional form from the Romantic poets⁶ and adapts it to meet her needs. Brooks understood that just as many of the residents of the Mecca negotiated labyrinthine figurative and physical spaces, so did her urban poetics.

The role of black writers in the city is vexed and precarious. Toni Morrison argues that the city cannot belong to black writers because "Black people are generally viewed as patients, victims, wards, and pathologies in urban settings, not as participants. And they could not share what even the poorest white factor worker or white welfare recipient could feel: that in some way the city belonged to him" (37). Supporting Morrison's perception, Drake and Cayton make it clear that "[t]he persistence of a Black Belt, whose inhabitants can neither scatter as individuals nor expand as a group, is no accident. It is primarily the result of white people's attitudes toward having Negroes as neighbors"

⁶ Mootry details the legacy of ballad as a form that resists classical poetic structure in the work of Coleridge and Wordsworth (127-8).

(174). The racial segregation of communities in Chicago resulted also in a class separation of people. Richard Wright explains that both white and black people resist looking at the problems of the black ghetto in Chicago because it is overwhelming to imagine the change required to fix it. Wright compares the experience of living in the poverty-stricken, racially oppressed South Side of Chicago to the conditions that fostered Hitler's mania in Vienna's slums, warning the American public that the black ghettos of America could create an equally destructive movement if the problems are not addressed (Drake & Cayton xx). Wright was not alone in voicing such a strong reaction to the effect of the inner-city on the black community. According to James Baldwin, people are "divorced" from reality and therefore "divorced" from each other in the city. For James Baldwin, the city was a place of mystery and horror because the buildings defy gravity and the congestion of human life creates chaos (Baldwin 134). While these writers correctly note the social, economic, and geographic disenfranchisement of many black city dwellers, they miss what "In the Mecca" attempts to acknowledge: that places like the Mecca also house a unique, although struggling, culture.

By choosing to write about the South Side of Chicago, Brooks made a conscious decision to construct a vision of the city from a position that is affected by race, class, and gender discrimination, but by rejecting a thoroughly and exclusively negative interpretation of the Mecca building, Brooks corrects the image of the inner-city as void of hope and value. Drake and Cayton explain that the "Black Belt" area that makes up "Black Metropolis" is a city with its own culture and way of life within the Chicago context. "Beneath the surface are patterns of life and thought, attitudes and customs, which make Black Metropolis a unique and distinctive city within a city" (Drake &

Cayton 12). As a black *flâneuse*, Brooks identified those patterns, and “In the Mecca’s” form demonstrates her aesthetic resistance to destroying inner-city culture along with the physical architecture. Because her perspective and poetic voice are defined by her identity as a black woman, “In the Mecca’s” black *flâneuse* offers a corrective to the hegemonic view of the American city as presented by white, male poets.

Although the foundations of the poem are in traditional city poetry, invoking Eliot’s despondency in the modern city and occasionally employing inflated, “poetic” (read: Romantic) language such as the “thrice” in Jamaican Edward’s denial, the poem as a whole resists traditional forms. All burgeoning rhyme schemes are restrained or cut off, as the opening couplet’s “face”-“grace” rhyme in “Sit where the light corrupts your face. / Miës Van der Rohe retires from grace” is undermined by the third unrhymed line: “And the fair fables fall” (*ITM* 5). This line implies the razing of the Mecca building, but it also foregrounds the poem’s pulling down of the traditional poetic forms suggested by the first two lines which not only rhyme, but which both have eight syllables, beginning a rhythm that is disrupted by the third line’s six syllables. Brooks repeats this pattern throughout the poem, for instance, the rhyme and rhythm of “Hush. / An agitation in the bush” are disrupted by the line that follows: “Occluded trees” (*ITM* 26). Even the use of the ballad is cut short, seems incomplete, and because it disrupts the flow of the poem, it ultimately gives way to the larger mission of the poem to create a new form of city poem that reflects the culture of the black inner-city.

In the sections about Alfred, the speaker identifies a person capable of constructing a race-conscious city poetry. When The Law meets Alfred in the second half of the poem, he is described as one “who might have been an architect.” Instead of literally

constructing the city, he instructs the minds of students as a teacher, another kind of “building.” As the poem indicates, he is a lackluster teacher when required to instruct the students in traditional literature: he “‘fails’ no one,” removing the grade-earning power from the students. Returning to a passage previously discussed in terms of form to look at the content and diction, we can see how Alfred’s interpretation of the Mecca demonstrates the conflict between the limitations presented by the outside city and the Mecca. As I showed earlier, they show the conflict between traditional poetic forms and burgeoning political poetics as well:

can speak of Mecca: firm arms surround
disorders, bruising ruses and small hells,
small semiheavens: hug barbarous rhetoric
built of buzz, coma and petite pell-mells. (*ITM* 20)

In Alfred’s perception, the building embraces “disorders” and “bruises,” “small hells” and “small semiheavens,” the diminutive adjectives identifying containment and lack of value. The hug from the “firm arms” is what “constrained” the Smith family when they realized Pepita was missing, although it should have been the act of welcoming Mrs. Sallie home. The hug is contaminated, it bruises and it does not actually offer renewal. Instead, it is made of “buzz”—which can be gossip or a lingering insect, “coma”—an unthinking and unresponsive state, and “petite pell-mells”—reminiscent of the cigarette brand, “Pall Malls,” which suggest burning and poisoning, and of course suggesting the literal meaning of minor chaos. Instead of constructing the city according to hegemonic educational standards, Alfred is destroying the system by learning to move through the city’s figurative labyrinths and out of the Mecca’s literal labyrinth.

Alfred’s intellectual crisis mimics the black *flâneuse*’s narration of the poem. Alfred does more than simply tear down hegemonic intellectual standards or search for

Don Lee figures to replace “Joyce / or James or Horace, Huxley, Hemingway” (*ITM* 7). He specifically targets the inability of the white writers who have set the standards of city poetry (Baudelaire), the long poem (Browning), and love poetry (Neruda) to speak for the Mecca’s black community. Alfred works himself up to a revision of these poetic forms:

Alfred’s Impression—his Apologie—
 his Invocation—and his Ecstasie:
 “Not Baudelaire, Bob Browning, not Neruda.
 Giants over Steeples
 are wanted in this Crazy-eyes, this Scar.
 A violent reverse.
 We part from all we thought we knew of love
 and of dismay-with-flags-on. What we know
 is that there are confusion and conclusion
 Rending.
 Even the hardest parting is a contribution. . . .
 What shall we say?
Farewell. And Hail! Until Farewell again.” (*ITM* 27-28)

Alfred specifically calls out Baudelaire in this sequence as one of the “Giants over Steeples”—the literary figures who are held in such esteem by intellectuals that they rise above the churches, creating a kind of religious following. Just as the works of art in MOMA cast a shadow over the artists in di Prima’s “Magick in Theory and Practice,” the canonized poets hover over Alfred—and the poem itself—superseding their aesthetic voices. As R. Baxter Miller reads the ending of this stanza, Alfred begins the “violent reversal” of such faithful following by revising Whitman’s “Goodbye and hail! my fancy” to “*Farewell. And Hail!* Until Farewell again” (24). The italics of the first two statements nod to Whitman, but Alfred’s voice closes the concept by saying “farewell” to it at the end of the line. The lines demonstrate Brooks’s simultaneous respect for such poetic forefathers and desire to move beyond their abilities. She recognizes their influence and then turns away to navigate the poetic, social, and urban labyrinths which define these standardized structures on her own.

The labyrinthine nature of the halls of the Mecca building and the social politics which the residents maintain between each other are central images to the poem. Harry Shaw explains that the “most central theme” to “In the Mecca” “is the labyrinth” (125). Shaw defines the labyrinth multiply: it is the American “system” which controls the black community, it is evoked by Brooks’s technique (bringing together “unrelated or incongruous vignettes in collage”), and it is an effect of the imagery of the physical building (125-6). To Shaw’s evaluation of labyrinths in “In the Mecca,” I add the social expectations of the larger city community. Although critics such as Sheila Hughes argue that “In the Mecca” identifies the urban labyrinth in order to provide a way out,⁷ the narrative of the poem remains contained within the walls of the Mecca. Brooks’s *flâneuse* achieves anonymous navigation of the labyrinth, but she does not successfully exit the Mecca’s labyrinthine halls or navigate the streets of the city. Yet, considering the speaker’s navigation of the labyrinthine spaces of the Mecca is crucial to understanding the poem’s potential impact, especially considering how many critics, Harry Shaw as a prominent example, attribute the privilege of navigation to Alfred only, going so far as to consider him the main character of the poem. I hope that by demonstrating the speaker’s understanding of the labyrinthine complexity of poetic tradition, social expectations, institutionalized systems of disenfranchisement, and physical spaces, it will be clear that Brooks privileges women’s perspectives—as *flâneuses*—in the city.

Designed to provide privacy, luxury, and exceptional space in the urban setting, the Mecca building corresponds to Hubert Damisch’s description of the Egyptian labyrinth: a maze created by sheer immensity of size and repetition of space (28). As Damisch notes,

⁷ See Hughes (258, 261).

Theseus's primary adversary in Daedalus's Greek labyrinth was not the Minotaur, but the labyrinth itself (26). The Mecca's labyrinth is constructed of hallways, staircases, enclosed apartments, and a vast population of inhabitants. Cheryl Clarke identified the Mecca as containing 176 units, some of which had as many as seven rooms (136). She states that, "After the Depression, no one ever knew how many people lived there at any one time. Estimates of three thousand to nine thousand people have been given" (137). Furthermore, the immense network of living quarters and hallways through the Mecca is identified repeatedly by critics as maze-like or labyrinthine.⁸ The Mecca building provides the perfect transition from *flânerie* in the suburban mall back into the actual city streets because it is an enclosed area that alludes to the labyrinths that Damisch identifies as the ancestors of city spaces.

"In the Mecca's" labyrinth is populated by human extensions of the walls, stairs, and doors so that the living becomes blurred with the inanimate. The doors speak and sometimes the people represent opaque barriers, creating a figurative social labyrinth. Mrs. Sallie's first movement through the building is as she "ascends the sick and influential stair" ("ITM" 5). This personification of the stair begins a motif throughout the poem of identifying the building as a living organism. The stair's "sickness" alludes to its dilapidated, worn state, but it also indicates that it is a carrier of disease that influences the residents, possibly by infection. The stair influences the residents' lives the way the building as a whole does: it imposes on them and restrains them because they have become an extension of the deteriorating architecture. As animate extensions of the

⁸ Joanne V. Gabbin explains that "In the Mecca" is about a "desperate search...through the chaotic maze of halls" of the Mecca ("Blooming" 264). William Hansell describes the building as a "labyrinthine structure" (200). Harry Shaw's chapter on "In the Mecca" is called "The Labyrinth."

building, the residents make the building a “pulsing urban organism” (Gabbin “Blooming” 265). The Mecca’s walls contain a living maze of space and people that is navigated in the poem’s narrative.

Together, the human residents of the Mecca and the actual physical structure are conflated to become one organism, just as the crowd is often conflated with the architecture of the city to represent an organism. Organic imagery—particularly the equation of women with nature—is a motif which Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde each develop in their urban poetry. The imagery is most powerful in Rich’s poetry, but for Brooks, personification of the building and imagery of the building as a living organism evoke a different kind of “natural setting” than one of foliage and open spaces. She anticipates the ecology of urban spaces by incorporating the interdependence of people and places in “In the Mecca.” The densely packed building develops a life of its own, characterized by the multiplicity of its human residents.

During the Smith family’s search for Pepita, the building plays an active role in their emotional response to Pepita’s absence. When they return home, the door accuses them of having lost Pepita, reminding them that they should not be returning without her: “S. and eight of her children reach their door. The / door says, “What are you doing here? and where / is Pepita the puny—the halted, glad-sad child?” (“ITM” 17-18). The family imagines that Pepita has wandered through the building, an activity that should be innocent (and which evokes *flânerie*), but in the Mecca is dangerous, a “blunder” rather than a “wander.” Moreover, the children are “knocking down the halls,” a phrase which invokes the idea of the children literally knocking the walls of the building down as well as of them knocking on their neighbor’s doors as they walk down the hallway. The

imminence of the children's ability and/or desire to knock the building down demonstrates their frustration with their confinement within the Mecca's labyrinth. They are aware of their inability to navigate a route that leads to Pepita, whose death symbolizes the only way to escape the building's figurative and literal mazes. The destruction of the literal walls also foreshadows the actual razing of the building that will occur. The doors, like the people, are "yelling" for release, and they will be "martyred" in 1952 when the building is torn down.

Poetic Reconstruction

"In the Mecca" reconstructs the building—and therefore the city it represents—after the Mecca's literal razing. According to John Lowney, the Illinois Institute of Technology purchased and used the space to expand their new campus and create a modernist city symbol on the site of the former symbol of urban blight. The campus was designed by "the renowned Modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe" (Lowney 3-4). It is remarkable that an institute of technology—a representative of the "ivory tower" of academia and source of technological "progress"—violently replaced the Mecca's poverty-stricken black community's home that was once a symbol of excess with the stripped-down, functional design of Mies van der Rohe. The Mecca and, more importantly, its inhabitants, have no place in the Modernist city. "In the Mecca" takes place at the threshold of "post-modernism" in the American city, the movement of urban design that returned to separated, segregated, areas that are monitored by surveillance (represented most commonly by Los Angeles). In the post-modern city, the black inhabitants of the South Side of Chicago are treated as a potential danger and barriers are created to remove them from the rest of the city. Neither the modern nor the post-modern city addresses the needs of black communities like the one in the Mecca.

Brooks opens “In the Mecca” with a specific reference to Mies van der Rohe, placing her poetic reconstruction of the Mecca in opposition to the modernist reconstruction for Illinois Institute of Technology. “Miës Van der Rohe retires from grace. / And the fair fables fall” (*ITM* 5). In addition to my previous comments on these lines, the alliteration of “fair fables fall” suggests that the destruction is a kind of fable of its own. The contrast between the destruction and the musical syntax and diction of these lines emphasize the contradiction between the notion of modernist construction and the destruction of the black community.

The poem’s black *flâneuse* allows Alfred to define the paradoxical conflict between construction and destruction that the residents of the Mecca felt. Alfred’s thoughts on the Mecca just before the discovery of Pepita carry the significance of a demand for rebuilding the city, although his architectural vision probably conflicts with Mies van der Rohe’s. Alfred identifies the building as not completely devoid of hope and his comments suggest that the death of Pepita can have positive political repercussions:

I hate it.
 Yet, murmurs Alfred—
 who is lean at the balcony, leaning—
 something, something in Mecca
 continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,
 like rivers and oceans too; and like trees
 with wind whistling through them. And steadily
 an essential sanity, black and electric,
 builds to a reportage and redemption.
 A hot estrangement.
 A material collapse
 that is Construction. (*ITM* 30-1)

The Mecca houses hope; it houses something poetic. And although the building “material” itself will collapse, there is something left that “continues to call!”—the exclamation point demanding action. The building houses the spirit of black culture that

is natural to the urban setting, but which in poetry is usually associated with nature: rivers, oceans, and trees. Brooks inserts those very images into the urban context. The “Construction” that comes out of the “material collapse” could be facetious for Alfred: it is capitalized like “the Law” and it is the institute’s “Construction,” not the community’s. But it is also a new beginning, suggesting that tearing down the old way of life in the Mecca could motivate the construction of a new city, one where the people of the Mecca have equal footing. Finally, the name “Mecca” alludes to the developing movement of Black Islam at the time that offered a new way of life for black Americans, a new cultural center.

Through such historical context and revision of traditional poetic standards, Brooks uses the perspective provided by *flânerie* to suggest the necessity of a black urban poetics. But does “In the Mecca” present examples of such poetics, like the “languages of post-modern poetics” that Aldon Nielsen describes? Much of the more formal diction of the lines may be satirical, but they also never develop into patterns or diction that indicate a distinctly new form. Their strength is in resistance and revision. The remarkably packed syntax of each line, the multivalent symbolism of the diction, the teasing out and then disruption of rhyme schemes and rhythms, and the social commentary implied in the imagery and character descriptions all anticipate a more dramatic poetic shift that never comes to fruition in “In the Mecca.” Instead, it calls the reader to action: “To create! To create!” as Alfred wishes to (*ITM* 6).

The poem opens by directing the reader to “sit where the light corrupts your face,” acknowledging that the “light” of knowledge about the Mecca will cause the reader to feel a “corruption” (*ITM* 5). Throughout the poem, the speaker returns to this kind of

invocation, drawing the reader in to experience the injustices that the residents face. After describing Prophet Williams's wife's death, the speaker calls to the reader through parenthetical aside: "(Kinswomen! / Kinswomen!) / Ida died alone" (*ITM* 6). The speaker expects a kind of call-and-response effect to begin, moving *flânerie* beyond simple observation and into action, a move that Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde make as well in their *flânerie*.

Brooks's choice of the Mecca building as the site of this reconstruction highlights a variety of intersecting political events after WWII. The building was razed in 1952, at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was nascent, but not yet what it would be by 1955's bus boycott. Although Brooks mentions Don Lee in the poem, anticipating the Black Arts Movement that was burgeoning in the early 1960s when she was writing the poem and which was exploding by the late 1960s when "In the Mecca" was published, the African American literary figures to whom Alfred could have looked for inspiration were still Harlem Renaissance figures who had not yet embraced the kind of rage or political focus to which the Black Arts poets turned. "In the Mecca" negotiates these in-between spaces and establishes the Mecca as a symbolic historical site. Like Homer's Troy, Brooks's Bronzeville helps define a culture. Because Mecca was already gone by the time the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement were underway, it represented a time past.

Despite evidence of hope in reconstructing the Mecca including the poem's refusal to paint the residents as victims, showing both predatory characters and characters that are preyed upon, the poem still ends with the image of the murdered Pepita. The search culminates at Jamaican Edward's apartment where Pepita lies "beneath his cot" in the

dust with the roaches (31). The speaker reminds us of Pepita's innocence: "She never learned that black is not beloved" and was not yet old enough to attend kindergarten (31). Remarkably little is revealed about Jamaican Edward, the Mecca's Minotaur figure. Instead of receiving a character sketch like the other individuals in the Mecca's crowd, he is a symbol. Like the Minotaur in Greek mythology, Jamaican Edward is the product of the controlling system's indiscretions and perversions. Trapped within the Mecca, without resources for productive creation, he chooses the opposite path of Alfred; he turns on his own community. By making Pepita the victim, Brooks emphasizes the necessity of having the proper tools to navigate the urban labyrinth. Pepita was not only a "little woman," she was one who did not understand racism and who did not recognize the poverty of her neighborhood.

Pepita's inability to navigate the urban labyrinths is balanced by the speaker's successful navigation of the halls of the building. Her observations combine to create a map of the Mecca that will last beyond the physical structure's existence. B.J. Bolden credits Brooks with "paint[ing] poetic portraits of her community—blueprints of urban Black life in America" in the Bronzeville poems (11). The term "blueprints" places Brooks's poetry in relation to architecture. Her poems outline physical spaces, defining the South Side of Chicago in a representational, poetic construction. "In the Mecca's" building is a metonym for the entire neighborhood, its characters for the black inner-city community. Through this representation, Brooks can make the observer *flâneuse* into a political activist.

Although connecting the narrator/speaker of "In the Mecca" to *flânerie* opens critical pathways and historical contexts, it also presents some problems. The

simplification of individual people that occurs through the character vignettes replicates a pattern of stereotyping that may elide a variety of complications involved in inner-city life. Although Brooks may have known people who corresponded to some of the fictional characters in the poem, they may appear to fit too neatly into “types.” Furthermore, I have identified the speaker of the poem as specifically, and necessarily, female throughout my analysis as well, when there are no direct statements in the poem to corroborate this interpretation. My interpretation relies heavily on connecting Brooks to the speaker of the poem. Finally, I claim that the narrator successfully becomes a black *flâneuse*, but there are still significant limitations to her *flânerie*. She appears to be trapped within the labyrinth of the Mecca, incapable of exiting the building. The poem begins from inside the building as Mrs. Sallie returns home and ends in Jamaican Edward’s apartment with Pepita. Like the suburban shopper who can only participate in *flânerie* within the confines of the mall, Brooks’s black *flâneuse* is limited to witnessing the events that occur within the walls of the Mecca building.

Brooks’s black *flâneuse* is a product of the particular time period just after WWII which was affected both by burgeoning Civil Rights Movement activity and by the hegemonic American commodity culture push for suburban domesticity. The two cultural movements come into conflict in the inner-city setting of Chicago’s Mecca building. Brooks’s sophisticated poetic style—even when inconsistent—incorporates political positions that are hallmarks of Black Arts Movement poetics. Certainly the racing of *flânerie* changes the content of what the *flâneuse* is watching, but it also suggests the responsibility of the observer to use her emotional response to create something constructive. “In the Mecca” reconstructs a historical monument for cultural memory,

one that embracing contradiction and paradox created by urban location, and more specifically, by black womanhood in the urban setting.

Overall, I am suggesting that the speaker as black *flâneuse* in “In the Mecca” demonstrates the possibility of such a figure in the rest of the city rather than implies that this black *flâneuse* embodies a direct and exact replication of Baudelaire’s *flânerie*. By demonstrating how the motif of *flânerie* appears in Brooks’s work, I show how it can be not only gendered but also raced to establish a more encompassing vision of the city in poetry. The foundation of literary respect that Gwendolyn Brooks established paved the way for other women poets to write about the city. According to Joanne Gabbin, “...Brooks anticipates black writers like Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde who have also successfully explored the triple consciousness of women confronting race, gender, and caste” (“Blooming” 252). A black *flâneuse* figure empowers city poetry to reflect the inner-city and black cultural aesthetics. A black *flâneuse* can be an activist—a revolutionary, even—by demanding change, forcing readers to acknowledge injustice, and reconstructing a city from a perspective that is otherwise considered entirely separate from mainstream literary practices.

Just as Brooks engages forms and figures from the urban poetry canon, Adrienne Rich refers to poems which have shaped urban poetic forms. Rich does not as comfortably adopt those forms as Brooks. “In the Mecca” positions African American urban poetry as an *outsider-within* poetic tradition: it is epic which employs *flânerie*, but it is also outside those forms, resisting their limitations. Brooks employs forms and styles as a poetic nod to tradition, but then attempts to move beyond them (even if unsuccessfully). The pre-second wave feminist optimism that Brooks’s style appears to

have is unavailable to Rich, who associates the traditional forms so strongly with patriarchy. Rich's urban poetry takes *flânerie* to task, challenging its ability to represent women's urban voices.

CHAPTER 3
ADRIENNE RICH: RESISTING ARIADNE

Adrienne Rich is not commonly considered a “city poet”—or even her poetry in terms of an urban context—the way Gwendolyn Brooks, Diane di Prima or Audre Lorde are. Rich positions her integration of traditional urban poetry forms or styles—such as *flânerie*—as an outsider. She does not identify with the crowd or become comfortable in the city. Her poems’ speakers are cognizant of the city’s dangers, and they demand recognition from the crowd. Whereas Brooks’s *flâneuse* inserts “In the Mecca” into the tradition of *flânerie*, replicating some of the same problems which the *flâneur* faces, Rich’s *flâneuse* recognizes the restrictions which the city presents to women’s *flânerie* and resists them. She particularly resists the tendency for women in city labyrinths to become like Ariadne, trapped by their dependence upon men (or their poetic forms). The prevalence of city spaces in Rich’s poetry indicates the impact of the city on her work.

Rich’s poetry focuses directly on the city as early as 1961 in the poem “End of an Era” when the speaker addresses the city through apostrophe and invokes Charles Baudelaire. “End of an Era” suggests the presence of a *flâneuse* in Rich’s poetry, a gendered form of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, who attempts to redefine traditionally male-centered spaces, specifically, the city and city poetry. In poems such as “End of an Era,” “Shooting Script,” “Frame,” “The Blue Ghazals,” and “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Rich engages the city’s limitations, demonstrating her double entrapment in and between the architecture of urban spaces and patriarchal literary tradition. Rich’s desire to understand and capture the “real” city in poetry allows her to address issues of gender, race, and class

through flânerie, but also traps her in the conflicted identity of a flâneuse who is caught between public and private space, between male- and female-defined space, and between a poetic style that adheres to tradition and one that rejects it. By attempting to revise flânerie for women, Rich's city poems articulate her struggle to transition from what Paula Bennett calls a "dutiful daughter" poet to a specifically "woman poet" (9).

The city is a vexed place for a feminist poet trying to construct an identity outside the confines of patriarchal expectations. Rich confronts city spaces that have traditionally been designed, constructed, and controlled by men to implicitly exclude women, or at least to control their movement with surveillance. Lucy Collins explains that in *Twenty-One Love Poems*, "the city exemplifies civilization—growing from man's achievements in industry and commerce, it is a dynamic space within which relations of power and identity are contested. Urban space is marked, even defined, by the masculine" (146).¹ Furthermore, by virtually eliminating private space, the city imposes on the lives of its inhabitants, who engage in all the activities of relationships, careers, and families while rarely being out of sight or ear-shot of other people. Therefore, while city spaces offer the possibility of public recognition that the private spaces of suburbia are designed to deny, women's ability to access that recognition is still defined by men.

At a time when Rich was rejecting the American ideal that placed women in the private, suburban, domestic sphere, the city offered an enticingly public alternative. She lived primarily in three major east-coast cities until the mid-1970s: Baltimore, where she was born and raised; Boston—specifically, Cambridge—where she attended Radcliffe College and later lived with her husband and children; and New York City, to which she

¹ Adrian Oktenberg supports Collins's interpretation by referring to the city as the apex of the "civilization" because it is the center of industry, commerce, law, and culture that men have created.

and her family moved in 1966. In New York, Rich explored the liberating possibilities of stepping into the human and cultural congestion of the city crowd. She describes her motivation for taking a job in City College's SEEK program as coming partly from "a need to involve myself with the real life of the city, which had arrested me from the first weeks I began living here" (*On Lies* 53). She identifies this "real" city in the City College students, whose comfort in the public spaces of the city must have seemed foreign to Rich. The students provide a connection to city life that enables Rich to move her poetic and personal voice out of the private, suburban sphere of marriage and motherhood and into the public sphere of the city streets as a *flâneuse*.

Rich's notion of the "real life of the city" has problematic implications for her work. First, it implies a version of urban authenticity that her black and Puerto Rican students² embody and to which she is an outsider. Such a position allows her to observe as *flâneuse*, but it implies assumptions about the racial and cultural markers of urban life and, moreover, elides the multivalent versions of city life from the perspectives of the heterogeneous crowd members. Similar notions of the "real city" persist today in claims of "ghetto authenticity" in rap and hip-hop. Such a "real city" implies, for Rich, not only a connection to the poetic urban tradition, but to cultural experiences outside the boundaries defined by her gender, race, and ethnicity. Although Rich describes coming to terms with her own ethnic roots in the essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), her explicit identification of the "real" city in black and Puerto Rican students rather than Jewish students—of whom there were many at City College in the 1960s, if not in the SEEK program—maintains her status as outsider (*Blood, Bread* 100).

² Rich identifies the students as black and Puerto Rican in her description (*On Lies* 53).

All of the hope and possibility that Rich sees in the city gets filtered through her outsider identity, and especially through a poetic lens and form that is defined by male poets. She describes her relationship with the city as a sort of love/hate relationship:

The city as object of love, a love not unmixed with horror and anger, the city as Baudelaire and Rilke had provisioned it, or William Blake for that matter, death in life, but a death emblematic of the death that is epidemic in modern society, and a life more edged, more costly, more charged with knowledge, than life elsewhere.... Here was this damaged, self-destructive organism, preying and preyed upon. The streets were rich with human possibility and vicious with human denial (*On Lies* 54)

Aligning her interpretation of the city with Baudelaire, Rilke, and Blake, Rich defines the “real” city in opposition to Eliot’s “unreal city.” For Rich, the gritty chaos, congestion, and confrontation of different cultures in the crowd exemplify what is “real.” The city paradoxically nurtures creativity and production and destroys it at the same time.

Grappling with the contradictions of a city whose streets teem with “possibility” but also with “denial,” Rich looks to her poetic forefathers to provide methods for translating the complexities of city life into poetry. Echoes of their urban poetry reverberate through her city poetry, enabling her *flânerie*, but also undermining her attempts to create a specifically woman *flâneuse*.

In order for Rich to insert women’s perspectives and contributions into the city space, its map must be rewritten to include their lives. In “The Blue Ghazal” dated “5/4/69,” Rich writes: “City of accidents, your true map / is the tangling of all our lifelines” (*Fact* 123). Rich’s “true map” of the city incorporates the “lifelines” of all its inhabitants, including women. The assonance of the short “a” vowel sound in these lines, all of which fall on stressed syllables, indicates the beginning of a new map of the city. The short “a” sound—as opposed to the strong, long “ā” vowel sound as it is pronounced in the naming of the letter—is secondary, as women’s contributions to the city space have

been secondary. By naming the map of the city with an emphasis on the short “a” sounds, these lines recognize the omission or neglect of women’s perspectives in the city. But the assonance of the lines builds to suggest change. The long vowel sounds in the last word, “lifelines,” acknowledge the emergence of a new voice. These lines suggest Rich’s desire to revise the city’s cultural construction by writing a new map of the city in her poetry.

Mapping is a prominent motif in Rich’s poetry that develops over the course of her oeuvre, building to a climax in her volume *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (published in 1991). For Rich, the cartography of women’s lives symbolizes their connection to written geographies of lives: women’s ability to embody spaces, to identify with spaces, to define and be defined by places and environments. She routinely uses natural images as metonyms for women, especially in the later poems, but in her early poems, such symbolic language creates conflict between women and urban settings that raises important questions about how women’s identities are shaped by the discourse and geography of the spaces in which they live. Rich’s poetic lines create an alternative cartography of women in the city, adding another dimension to the already existing urban map.

Like Ariadne helping Theseus navigate Daedalus’s labyrinth, Rich seeks to provide a thread for women to follow through the urban labyrinth as it is literally constructed by architects and figuratively constructed by poets. In *Skyline: The Narcissistic City*, Hubert Damisch connects cities to the ancient labyrinths of Greece and Egypt: city streets create maze-like spaces. By considering the city a labyrinth, Ariadne—as the provider of the “map” in the thread—becomes a precursor to the *flâneuse*. Because she fails to navigate the labyrinth herself, Ariadne represents women’s inability to move through literal and

figurative labyrinths: the literal city (public space) and the figurative maze of social standards and expectations (private space). Ariadne's legacy clouds Rich's ability to articulate a *flâneuse* in her poetry. Like Ariadne, left stranded on an island by Theseus, Rich finds that depending on men to rescue her from patriarchal control backfires. Rich is abandoned by her poetic forefathers, whose tools she thinks she needs to escape the labyrinths. Rich's poetry suggests, hints at, and almost articulates women's *flânerie*, always on the brink of realizing a twentieth-century *flâneuse*, and yet it is repeatedly obstructed by poetic history.

Flânerie is a problematic motif for Rich to adopt because it often contributes to the exclusion of women from the cultural construction of the city. According to Walter Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's urban poetry, *flânerie* was the exclusive domain of men in the nineteenth century. In Benjamin's description, *flânerie* is defined by a variety of factors including the *flâneur's* alienation in the crowd, his emotionally distanced gaze, his ability to be directed by the movement of the crowd, his role as an "unwilling detective" who stumbles upon crime in the crowd, and his intoxication in the city and crowd. The *flâneur* is a distinctly private person who observes and records public spaces precisely because he is able to retain anonymity and invisibility in public spaces. For women to participate in *flânerie*, they have to be able to blend into the crowd and go unnoticed as well. Rich's desire for recognition in the crowd distorts Benjamin's understanding of alienation, distance, and anonymity, exposing the aspects of authorial identity construction that these elements elide.

Although speaking in broader metaphorical terms than just about city life, the eighth poem of Rich's series called "North American Time" (1983) summarizes her

concern about allowing herself to use a position of invisibility for speech. Worse than invisibility, for Rich, is the danger of silence, which invisibility may cause:

Sometimes, gliding at night
 in a plane over New York City
 I have felt like some messenger
 called to enter, called to engage
 this field of light and darkness.
 A grandiose idea, born of flying.
 But underneath the grandiose idea
 is the thought that what I must engage
 after the plane has raged onto the tarmac
 after climbing my old stairs, sitting down
 at my old window
 is meant to break my heart and reduce me to silence. (*Fact* 327)

White, male poets such as Baudelaire may assume the right to speak from positions of invisibility (assuming they can choose when to be invisible and when not to), but Rich, possibly a product of the recent legacy of Ralph Ellison’s observations about invisibility, recognizes the dangerous silence that invisibility imposes. In the poem, rather than feeling desire to observe, Rich feels compelled to be heard by the city, which at night appears to be a field of lights and darkneses from her plane window. She feels called to “enter” the public spaces of the city and “engage” the metaphorical “light and darkness” of knowledge there. But she sees herself, like Ariadne, alone with a broken heart in the end. This may be why Rich’s more recent poetic maps—such as her 1991 volume *An Atlas of the Difficult World*—turn to rural areas or why so many of her poems conflate images of women with images of nature.

Rich builds off of the traditional mode of *flânerie* for writing city poetry, making it the scaffolding of her urban (poetic) construction; but, like the use of her roots in formal poetic style in order to resist its very limitations, she resists the *flâneur*’s exclusive rights over how *flânerie* functions. Rich insists that the actual city recognize women’s

perspectives, setting her city poetry in spaces such as the public street rather than consumer-driven malls. By writing the city, Rich is producing a version of it that provides a map to make the city space familiar for readers. Repetition of the words “map” and “atlas” throughout Rich’s oeuvre³ indicates her desire to make the material spaces around her more legible. This kind of remapping intends to change the urban spaces, negotiating the overlap of public and private space by “engaging” the urban scene. As *flânerie* is primarily a passive activity in Benjamin’s descriptions, Rich’s refusal to accept invisibility, her demand for recognition, possibly pushes *flânerie* beyond its functional abilities. Every time Rich employs the *flâneuse*’s perspective in her poetry, she undermines it by demonstrating the ways that the urban labyrinth prohibits women’s identity construction.

The poem “End of an Era” (1961) implies that Rich struggled early in her career to connect with city life and develop her own urban poetic voice.⁴ Rich inadvertently creates an unsustainable position for her *flâneuse* by attempting to appropriate the poetic power of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* despite her latent awareness of the politics of the position that prohibit her gendered voice. The speaker of “End of an Era” first addresses the city directly, alluding to Eliot’s “Unreal City” of *The Wasteland* in the capitalization of the word “city,” itself a nod to Baudelaire:

...City,
 dumb as a pack of thumbed cards, you
 once had snap and glare
 and secret life; now, trembling

³ These terms are most prominent in the title and poems of *Atlas of a Difficult World*, where Rich attempts to create a map of her identity and of America.

⁴ This poem is probably set in the Boston area as it was written in 1961, when Rich was living in Cambridge.

under my five grey senses' weight,
 you flatten
 onto the table. (*Collected Early 174*)

The city once had “snap and glare” for the speaker, but now it is “dumb” to her: incapable of speech. Despite her persistence (the metaphoric cards are “thumbed”), the city turns out to be “flat,” nothing more than an illusion. Alternately, the lines could comment on the fact that the city had snap and glare for earlier male poet *flâneurs* that is inaccessible to the female speaker of the poem.

The lines are rhythmically choppy, disrupting the flow both of her understanding of the city and of her communication with the reader. The emphasis on the word “you” at the end of the second quoted line, separated out between a comma and the end of the line, leaves it hanging and accusatory. Similarly, the line “you flatten” suggests a double meaning: the city is flattened, but it also flattens. Like Eliot’s “etherised” “patient” in the opening of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, the speaker cannot feel. The speaker realizes that she cannot see herself in the city map, nor can she contribute to that map because it is not capable of sustaining life. Rich refers, self-consciously, another time to *The Wasteland* in the metaphoric cards, which allude to the Tarot cards that Eliot uses to demonstrate his foreboding response to the modern city, then disable her physical and poetic response.

Yet, the paradoxical city causes the speaker of “End of an Era” to achieve her goal of connecting to Baudelaire’s city for the very reasons that she feels excluded from it. When her apostrophe to the city, and possibly to Eliot, fails, the speaker of “End of an Era” then calls, through apostrophe, directly to Baudelaire, trying to renew what made the city seem special before: “Baudelaire, I think of you . . . Nothing changes” (*Collected Early 174*). Baudelaire has no impact on the city that she is in: “rude and self-absorbed

the current / dashes past, reflecting nothing” (*Collected Early* 174). The double meaning of “current” as the flow of the crowd on the city streets and as the marker of present time demonstrates the dual aspects of the speaker’s alienation in the city space. This alienation provides her, like Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, with the tools to observe the city as a *flâneuse*, but the speaker finds this position to be disillusioning rather than empowering.

The city is in a constant state of movement (buildings are raised and torn down, the crowd, trains, and cars move through spaces), keeping up an illusion of progress that only further distances the speaker of “End of an Era” from identifying with the space in which she lives. “The neighborhood is changing / even the neighbors are grown, methinks, peculiar” (*Collected Early* 174). The speaker is an outsider because of her knowledge of the city’s patriarchal construction. Even the people she knows, her neighbors, are changed by this knowledge and appear “peculiar.” This sense of alienation is essential to *flânerie*, according to Benjamin, making the speaker of “End of an Era” closer to the forefathers of city poetry than she thinks. Despite this connection, she does not move out in to the city spaces. She allows the alienation to prohibit her movement rather than using it as a moment of intoxication, preventing “End of an Era” from pursuing an example of women’s *flânerie*. The poem indicates that Rich feels that turning off one’s senses (they are grey) in order to observe prohibits women’s ability to respond to the city. The title suggests that this realization is the “end” of an “era” of trusting poetic forefathers to help her find her urban voice.

Flâneuse as Witness: “Frame”

The poem “Frame” (1980) exemplifies Rich’s struggle to connect her emotional response to the urban setting to *flânerie*. Like Brooks’s “In the Mecca,” “Frame” connects to the literary roots of *flânerie* in Edgar Allan Poe’s detective stories by

employing the perspective of a *flâneuse* who has stumbled upon crime in the city space (Benjamin 42). Like the narrator of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," who watches the *flâneur* pass his window in the crowd, the speaker of "Frame" watches a crime occur from a protected distance. She observes an incident between a woman and the police that exemplifies, for her, the nature of the city's effect on women. The poem is located in a specific time and place—"This is Boston 1979"—providing a clue to the historical context of the poem (and the city).

In the narrative of the poem, the speaker watches a woman emerge from a university building and wait for a bus in the shelter of a doorway. The woman is apparently a student who is waiting for a bus, but she is forcibly arrested while waiting, for reasons which the poem's *flâneuse* can only presume to know. The speaker of "Frame" writes from a specifically gendered perspective, challenging the assumption that women are in danger primarily from random criminal attacks on the city streets since the abuse she witnesses is committed by the academic elite and the police.

The woman whom the speaker of "Frame" watches is trapped between the spaces on the city streets that present dangers from weather and the academic space of the science laboratory that presents dangers from intellectual rejection, mimicking the ongoing struggle in Rich's city poems between her identity in the city and poetic spaces. The speaker notices the woman coming "out of the lab- / oratory" at the beginning of the poem. The word "laboratory" is broken by enjambment so that it makes the two words "lab" and "oratory," an overt comment on the implied connotation of the word in contrast with the denotation of its parts. "Lab" is probably how the students refer to the space casually, an identification of comfort with the space, but also the common term that most

people know for a space of scientific research. By separating “lab” from “oratory,” Rich gives the space a more complex definition since “oratory” might refer to this poem’s speaking out about the following events, but more importantly, it suggests the word’s meaning as a place of prayer. The contradiction between scientific reason and faith is highlighted by the elevation of a “lab” to a site of implied holiness in an “oratory.” As a public facility, the “lab” is also made private in this connection. By entering this male-defined space and exposing its contradictions, the female student disrupts the male power structure of the laboratory.

As a *flâneuse* watching from a distance, the speaker takes the liberty of projecting an identity onto the woman in “Frame” that may or may not be based in fact. The speaker is far enough away to be out of auditory range, so she narrates based on assumptions about the woman, the academic, the officer, and the verbal exchanges between them. Therefore, the speaker tells us that the woman is thinking about organic chemistry, how to pay her rent, and how she can convince professors to write recommendations for her. Being a woman in the sciences makes her invisible to professors who assume that scientists are, and should be, men. The implication that the woman may be black further isolates her in the academic setting. The speaker of the poem identifies all of the other characters in the poem specifically as “white,” reversing the usual expectation of whiteness as invisible (part of the majority) and blackness as hyper-visible. The speaker’s emphasis on whiteness draws the reader’s attention to the privilege provided by whiteness in Boston: the authority figure (police), academic, and invisible observer are all white. Finally, the violence that occurs to her in this poem is caused by the assumption

that she has no right to be in this place of science and knowledge. Her success would undermine the professors' faith in man's superiority in the academy.

The speaker of "Frame" disrupts her observation to insert herself into the events, speaking as an aside in italics: "*I don't know her. I am / standing though somewhere just outside the frame / of all this, trying to see.*" As a *flâneuse*, she stands outside the frame of events, safe from the danger that will occur, observing the action between the woman, an academic, and the police. In the narrative of the poem, a white man (presumably a university employee) approaches the woman, accosts her, and then brings a police officer to aid in the removal of the woman from the doorway of the building. The policeman arrests the woman (presumably for trespassing) and violently shoves her into the police car (her head "bangs" on the car, "he twists the flesh of her thigh / with his nails"). The speaker identifies her role in witnessing the events several times: she is standing at the edge of the frame; she cannot hear what is said but sees it all. The city space between the two women silences the victim's protests. Recognizing the woman's innocence, the speaker resists the silent, observer role that she has assumed as the *flâneuse* by saying: "*What I am telling you / is told by a white woman who they will say / was never there. I say I am there*" (305). The declaration of her presence resists the limitations of the role of *flânerie* as pure observation without emotional implication. She bridges class, race, and spatial divisions to demand recognition of women's voices. Such recognition breaks the boundary of invisibility: Rich's *flâneuse* demands visibility. Although a *flâneuse* should be silent in her observations, and therefore invisible, the speaker of this poem resolves that she must become a recognized witness to crime against women in the city.

The events of “Frame” force the speaker, as *flâneuse*, to recognize the emotional implications of witnessing violence and the bonds between women in the crowd, but also to recognize that she has been forced to become a *flâneuse* in this situation—removed, detached, recording rather than interacting, remaining an observer rather than trying to help the woman—because no one will believe her anyway. The *flâneuse* witnesses the violence as through a “frame,” around which she cannot see or move. Unlike the window frame through which the narrator of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” watches the crowd, Rich’s *flâneuse* is incapable of moving closer without endangering herself (or breaking the invisible boundaries between members of the crowd). The *flânerie* is limited by this frame which may be literal, but certainly has more than one figurative level: the doorway that frames the woman as she waits for the bus, the frame that captures this moment, like a picture, or even the boundaries that define how far the speaker is willing to interact with the events she witnesses.

Most importantly, the speaker of “Frame” recognizes that the woman she watched was framed in the criminal sense as well. She was set up by academia, the police, and society in general. In fact, the speaker implies that the city has framed all women this way. The poem does not achieve *flânerie* because the speaker gets stuck between the role of detective and a *flâneuse* who can remain emotionally detached. Unlike “In the Mecca’s” *flâneuse*, “Frame’s” *flâneuse* feels trapped by her invisibility because it prevents her from rescuing the woman. She is trapped by an invisible racial boundary that separates her from the woman, by the power of whiteness and gender to render her invisible, and by her role as a city poet *flâneuse* that requires invisibility. Although the

poem suggests elements of *flânerie*, its socio-political conscience resists allowing the speaker to remain an *flâneuse*, pushing her to become a witness instead.

Rich's *flâneuse* cannot help but recognize the effect that race, gender, and class had on the woman in "Frame." As a (possibly) black woman who had to take the bus to school, she did not fit the model of "scientist" for similar reasons that Rich's speaker does not neatly fit into the definition of "*flâneuse*." Both women are appropriating roles that have been defined to exclude them in spaces that are designed to limit their access. Rich's *flâneuse* has returned to the city streets only to discover that her privilege of sight empowers her to witness the "urban reality" but that it does not provide her with a means of changing that reality. All she can do is state her presence, even if it is denied. Rich wants more from the city. She wants not only the ability to walk and witness the city streets as the speaker of "Frame" does (she is entirely unnoticed, to the point that any knowledge of her presence will be denied by men), but the ability to actively change that scene as well.

In "Frame," the *flâneuse* rages against the immovable structures of urban and poetic tradition, but especially against the ways women's lives can be changed by the urban scene. The victim in "Frame" is violently affected by the urban scene. In "The Blue Ghazals," Rich works through this impotent position, but too often concludes that women are simply victims of patriarchy in the urban context. If women are not restricted literally by the city, then they are restricted by poetic forms or by symbolic male figures within her poems or poetic history. Such a *flâneuse*, then, is not empowered by vision, but silenced by the very forms that earned Rich's poetry critical acclaim.

Visibility/Invisibility: Ghazal Poems

Although both “End of an Era” and “Frame” are written in free verse, they do not challenge traditional poetic forms as much as Rich’s ghazal poems do. By far her most experimental form, Rich’s ghazals are series of couplets, held loosely together by association. Although the associations within the two-line couplets are usually clear, the associations between the couplets can sometimes be elusive.⁵ The ghazal form is actually quite traditional and Rich’s are influenced by the ghazals of Mirza Ghalib,⁶ a classical Urdu poet, indebting her yet again to a patriarchal poetic order. Certainly it is an alternative one from the European male traditions, and it pulls from non-metropolitan subject matter which develops Rich’s movement away from urban poetic forms. Traditionally, ghazals are love songs, but Rich follows Ghalib’s break from restricting the theme of ghazals to love. In fact, love develops as a motif in Rich’s ghazals that symbolizes the city’s disruption of relations between people.

Rich’s broadest interpretation of the ghazal form appears in the long poem “Shooting Script” (1969–1970), which includes a poem that is “adapted from Mirza Ghalib,” and which comes together like the fragmented images of a film, cut up on the editing room floor. The poems of “Shooting Script” create a surreal labyrinth through which Rich’s *flâneuse* moves, searching for connections to her personal and cultural history. By the end of the poem, the speaker is seeing her life as a series of movie images projected up on a wall, which she breaks out of to see the reality, which is similarly

⁵ Paula Bennett accuses “Shooting Script” of being “arbitrary” and “random,” with no available meaning for readers (206).

⁶ Rich’s first series of ghazal poems are titled, “Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib” (*Fact* 104).

fragmented. Although “Shooting Script” suggests *flânerie* sporadically, the poem as a whole does not necessarily observe or move solely through city spaces.

The twelfth poem of part two⁷ of “Shooting Script” depicts the speaker’s movement through Manhattan. The speaker is walking through the “wholesale district” with a friend (possibly a lover, the other person is identified only as “you,” and no particulars are provided to further define the relationship), observing the sunset over the buildings and the fabrics in the windows of the stores. The movement past the store windows suggests a kind of resistant *flânerie*. Unlike the commodity items at which the *flâneur* would be looking, the speaker of this poem looks at fabrics which have “lain in the window a long time,” and which were, in fact, “not intended to be sold” (*Fact* 144). The cloths are so old that the speaker calls them “mummies’ cloths” and says “they have lain in graves” (*Fact* 144). These commodity items take on a different kind of value than consumer culture items in a mall: they help excavate a history of commodity culture in the city.

The buildings themselves obscure the speaker’s personal history, her natural setting, and her ability to articulate her identity. She needs to “give up being paraphrased” (*Fact* 144). The setting sun is blocked by the buildings, disorienting the speaker’s sense of location: “When the skeletons of the projects shut off the sunset, when the sense of the Hudson leaves us, when only by loss of light in the east do I know that I am living in the west” (*Fact* 144). The buildings are described both as “projects” and “skeletons,” which alerts the reader to the poverty of the city that the speaker is observing. These buildings represent urban decay, denial, and neglect, so that the people they house are like the

⁷ “Shooting Script” is comprised of two parts, both labeled with dates. Altogether there are fourteen numbered poems, excluding seven and eight, which have been omitted.

fabrics in the store windows. At the end of the poem, the buildings are called “Vacillant needles of Manhattan, describing hour & weather; buying these descriptions at the cost of missing every other point” (*Fact* 144). The city obscures the “points” that this speaker needs to understand. The buildings do not help her write the map of her history.

Maps are of particular importance to “Shooting Script.” The speaker of the poems is piecing together a cultural history (through archaeological references) and, simultaneously, piecing together fragments of memory that represent her life. In the fifth poem of the first part, the speaker of the poem is an outsider in a village where she is involved in an excavation process, poking a spade into the ground, “hoarding” the artifacts that she finds. Her body is the map she’s following, and her language: “The sole of the foot is a map, the palm of the hand a letter, / learned by heart and worn close to the body” (*Fact* 140). By the fourteenth poem, the image of a map on the speaker’s body merges with the map of images provided by the poem (represented by the projector) and, finally, with the physical structure onto which the images have been projected:

Now to give up the temptations of this projector; to see instead the web of cracks filtering across the plaster.

To read there the map of the future, the roads radiating from the initial split, the filaments thrown out from that impasse.

To reread the instructions on your palm; to find there how the lifeline, broken keeps its direction.

To read the etched rays of the bullet-hole left years ago in the glass; to know in every distortion of the light what fracture is.

To put the prism in your pocket, the thin glass lens, the map of the inner city, the little book with the gridded pages.

To pull yourself up by your own roots; to eat the last meal in your old neighborhood. (*Fact* 145–46)

This final connection conflates the speaker's body, life, and, metaphorically, through images of building walls and windows, the city. The speaker recognizes in the lifelines on her lover's hand, in the cracks of the walls and in the broken glass, the map to the city—as literal physical space and as metaphor of civilization. Her movement through the spaces of the poem—as through a strip of film stills—and through the city is guided by observation and memory. This *flâneuse* shatters the literal spaces of the city with the image of film, exposes the performance of movement through space, and interrogates the history which these memories and images conjure.

Complex issues of visibility that are raised by the image of the film projector in “Shooting Script” allude to Rich's evaluation of the possibility of personal identity construction and love outside the restrictions of heteronormativity in urban spaces. The concern with projected images, commodity items in the city, and the function of love in “Shooting Script” all anticipate Rich's later claims about “compulsory heterosexuality.” Rich identifies “Shooting Script” as having been written at the beginning of 1970, by all accounts a year that signifies a crucial turning point in her personal life. Rich's husband committed suicide in the year 1970 after their separation, and this is presumably a time when she was exploring her lesbian identity. Under such extreme life changes, Rich chose to write about the fragmented identity of urban identity as it is projected onto a cracked wall. As Rosemary Hennessy asserts in “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture” (1994), “the queer critique of heteronormativity is intensely and aggressively concerned with issues of visibility” (723–4). “Shooting Script” anticipates both Rich's investigation of “compulsory heterosexuality” and queer theory, but it alludes to issues that are central to both theories.

“Shooting Script” interrogates the gap between projected identity—a sort of performance of an identity narrative—and experienced identity. The speaker of “Shooting Script” moves through urban spaces from which she feels disconnected. Her attention to architecture and commodities highlights her sense of dislocation and fragmentation. The fractured images of the “film” created a fragmented narrative. This speaker is incapable of piecing together an identity in a space where buildings and projectors obscure individual awareness of location. Her identification of only having the knowledge of “living in the west” because of the light coming from the east pulls the speaker out of the projected narrative and image that make New York City the center of culture and heterosexual love as the only possibility there. As the speaker says, “I was looking for a way out of a lifetime’s consolations” (*Fact* 144). By piecing together the fragments of her history, the speaker can correct the script, following a map that will lead to an identity narrative that is not a projected performance.

Although the poetics of “Shooting Script” destabilize *flânerie*, allowing it to reflect Rich’s own voice, the ghazal is also a form that is necessarily tied to looking into the self and, traditionally, to considering love as a primary theme. One of the problems that Rich faces in employing the perspective of a *flâneuse* is that it forces her to look beyond introspection, which is the heart of her development as a feminist, lesbian poet. As Bennett explains of Rich’s *The Will to Change* poems, “no matter how specific and real the biographical circumstances behind what she writes, we are once again in her interior world...overhearing a monologue in which neither we nor the actors in the poem seem to have a concrete part” (203). Bennett’s criticism exposes the problem Rich faces in writing city poetry: it is not, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson claimed the problem for

women's *flânerie* would be, that she desires what she sees, but that she desires a personal connection with what she sees, which implies that she will have an effect on the things she observes. But can a *flâneuse* reach out and touch another member of the crowd?

Turning to the staple theme of lyric poetry, love, Rich explores the emotional relationships between people and spaces in the city that challenge the perception of *flânerie* as necessarily removed from emotional entanglements with the crowd. Like Ariadne, Rich looks to love to lead her out of the patriarchal city that represses her and discovers that using love as a map still leads to silencing or abandonment. "The Blue Ghazal" from 9/28/68 addresses the city as an "object of love."⁸ The triangular relationship between a man, a woman, and the city provide a motif for the series of couplets, which follow the ghazal form much more traditionally than did the lines of "Shooting Script." Although the speaker of the ghazal achieves the distance and scope of *flânerie*, the fate of the woman in the poem undermines the poem's success:

A man, a woman, a city.
The city as object of love.

Anger and filth in the basement.
The furnace stoked and blazing.

A sexual heat on the pavements.
Trees erected like statues.

Eyes at the ends of avenues.
Yellow for hesitation.

I'm tired of walking your streets
he says, unable to leave her.

Air of dust and rising sparks,
the city burning her letters. (*Fact* 121)

⁸ Interestingly, this line of the poem also appears in the "Teaching in Open Admissions" essay that I already discussed, and which was written after this poem chronologically.

The lovers are conflated with the city, unable to separate their love for each other from their love of the city. Although the city is identified as the “object of love” in the first couplet, it is followed immediately by “anger and filth in the basement,” suggesting not affection, but rage and destruction brewing under the surface of the city streets.

Moreover, the city is described as distinctly masculine: the “sexual heat” of the pavements is emphasized by “erected” trees like “statues,” suggesting the kinds of phallic monuments to patriarchal construction that herald city spaces. Although skyscrapers make more obvious symbols of patriarchy in the city, suggesting that the trees have been “erected” the way buildings are conveys Rich’s sense that they are artificial replacements for nature, which she often identifies with womanhood. The traffic lights—“eyes at the ends of avenues”—provide surveillance of the city streets by controlling the speed and timing of crowd’s movement through the city.

By the end of the poem, the woman has been erased by the city. The male character in “The Blue Ghazal” first erases her by conflating her with the city. He becomes tired of walking the city streets—which could also be the woman’s streets, like a part of her body, in the couplet’s phrasing—but he is unable to leave “her,” which could either be the female lover or the city. The city completes the erasure by destroying the evidence of the woman’s love, evidence of her voice and evidence of her ability to produce anything that would contribute to the city scene or the relationship by burning her letters. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz explains that the poem “records the relationship between a man, a woman, and a city: the city is filth and chaos, all caused by man The city will continue to be more and more a space of violation, anger, corruption” (12). The love that

is portrayed in this ghazal is not of love *for* the city but of how love in the city can destroy the woman.

Ironically, and despite the anger that Diaz-Diocaretz identifies in Rich's poetry, observing the dangers of the city is part of the intrigue of *flânerie*. The images are reminiscent of Baudelaire's "O filthy grandeur! o sublime disgrace!" (Baudelaire 55). The risk that women take in attempting to connect to the city is that they will become similarly sullied by the environment. But Rich has no way of articulating a woman's independent identity in such a role. Because the woman's body (and her implied sexuality through the love relationship with the man) is either erased or contaminated in the city, the poem fails to allow her to move freely through the city space or to define herself within that space.

Transitioning to lesbian love does not alter the impact of the patriarchal city on women or improve their chances at embodying a *flâneuse* in Rich's poetry. "Twenty-One Love Poems" demonstrates the conflict between Rich's desire to employ poetic traditions such as *flânerie* and her need to establish a voice and form that breaks out of the traditional mode so that it can prioritize individual experience that includes recognition of the effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the city. The speaker's relationship with her lover is obstructed by the city's literal and figurative labyrinths. The city imposes on their love as the limits of public acceptability obstruct their happiness. Yet, as Audre Lorde describes in *Zami*, the city space housed (maybe without sheltering) a lesbian community in New York in 1950s,⁹ so it would appear that Rich's implication of the lovers being alone in a city that denies their existence is an observation about the

⁹ According to George Chauncey, there were certainly male gay communities in New York City much earlier than the 1950s.

separation of public and private space through issues of social acceptability. In “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Rich demands recognition beyond that of the lesbian community in the city. Her *flâneuse* moves between public spaces where she is simply woman and private spaces where she is lesbian uneasily.

Love in the Urban Labyrinth: *Twenty-One Love Poems*

Evidence of *flânerie* appears at the very beginning of “Twenty-One Love Poems.” The first poem opens as the speaker is walking through the city, noticing urban “blight”: “pornography,” “science-fiction vampires,” and “victimized hirelings” (*Fact* 236). The speaker interprets these images as manifestations of patriarchal power that warps women’s sexuality. The act of walking and observing alone suggest *flânerie*, but what this *flâneuse* observes proves that the only spaces in which women can exist in the city are pornographic. She sees a “red begonia perilously flashing / from a tenement sill six stories high,” evoking traditional femininity—the flower—conflated with the prostitute’s red light. Baudelaire’s *flâneur* focused often on prostitutes in the crowd. As women who turned their bodies into commodity items, they drew not only the *flâneur*’s gaze, but also his attention to their similar situation. Rich’s *flâneuse* does not see the prostitutes in this image, she only sees images that alert her to their hidden presence. Although the invitation to pornography and/or sex surrounds Rich’s *flâneuse*, the women themselves are invisible.

The speaker is trying to imagine a city where she and her lover can exist, where women have not been defined solely as sexual commodities. “No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees, / . . . our animal passion rooted in the city” (*Fact* 236). Their love is rooted in the city, but they want to be connected with nature like trees, which the city has made phallic in “The Blue Ghazals.” Because no one has “imagined” the women,

they should be free to leave, but the word “rooted” implies that they are incapable of moving or of removing their love from the city streets. This speaker’s movement through the city replicates *flânerie* but it only reinforces her sense that the city does not belong to her, and worse, that it will destroy her.

Rich’s correlation of women to nature and trees marks a motif that recurs throughout her poetry—and to some degree, Brooks’s, di Prima’s, and Lorde’s poetry as well—of connecting women with organic imagery. Alfred notes the allure of mountains, rivers, and oceans in “In the Mecca,” relating their ability to “call” to people to the pull that the Mecca had on him. Furthermore, Brooks turns the whole Mecca building into an organic image, bringing it to life through personification. As members of a location that is often described as a living organism, the urban women in Rich’s poems confront the dichotomy of natural imagery and “man-made” imagery predisposed to feel violated by the non-organic images. By connecting herself with nature, Rich’s *flâneuse* turns herself into an organic outsider in the urban environment. As such, she either has no place in the city. Just as trees are planted as part of the urban architecture or planning, women are constructed by the urban spaces. Therefore, love between two women in this context is impossible, as the speaker of *Twenty-One Love Poems* discovers.

The first poem’s despair foreshadows the fate of the lovers, but the speaker valiantly tries to define a nurturing space for her love in the city, exploring the tension between public and private space in the city. In the second poem, the speaker wakes in her lover’s apartment, exploring the emotional developments of their love and her discoveries about herself from that emotional state. This poem conflates the lover with poetry, and the third poem builds on the connection by conflating the speaker’s love of

the city with her love for her lover. She compares the feeling of joy one experiences as a youth in the city to her feelings for her lover:

Did I ever walk the morning streets at twenty,
my limbs streaming with a purer joy?
did I lean from any window over the city
listening for the future
as I listen here with nerves tuned for your ring? (*Fact* 237)

The speaker's excitement in anticipation of her lover's arrival surpasses the excitement that she felt the city held when she was younger. The lines imply that prior to this relationship, the experience of being young in the city was the strongest feeling of love that the speaker had experienced. Between the second and third poems, the speaker has conflated her feelings of love for poetry, the city, and her lover so that they overlap, lost in a private emotional state.

As the relationship progresses through the poems, the speaker's awareness of the public city space returns. Moving back onto the streets of the city in Poem IV, the speaker walks home from being with her lover. Although she has a destination, there is no urgency about getting home. The leisure allows her to return her attention to the city and to *flânerie*. She notes images of the city along her way: "I come home from you through the early light of spring / flashing off ordinary walls, the Pez Dorado, / the Discount Wares, the shoe-store" (*Fact* 238). Once at her building, she calls for a man to hold the elevator and he calls her "hysterical"—instantly returning her to the stereotyped public image of women.

Although she is carrying grocery bags, giving the appearance of domesticity, in her walk down the street the speaker had become an anonymous member of the crowd, neither significant nor insignificant for participating in a domestic act. The speaker does not dwell on the man's comment, but it weighs on the poem, triggering the reader's

awareness of the speaker's struggle to be acknowledged in the city space. The man's comment returned the speaker, who had been lost in her thoughts of love—a specifically lesbian love in these poems—in which her identity as a woman was able to function outside of the man's chauvinistic definition. The inability of that identity to be visible to the man in the elevator creates a rupture in the speaker's understanding of her ability to exist in the urban space. At home, the speaker opens a letter from a man in jail who has been physically and sexually tortured which causes her to break down. The distance of the lover (and, therefore, the implied distance of her lesbian identity) is crucial as the speaker is confronted with patriarchal oppressions in the city scene. Her lover is removed from her literally, but also symbolically by the city: the city which represents the horrors of patriarchal control (“men” who “love wars” “still control the world”).

In *Twenty-One Love Poems*, Rich begins to explore the issues of projected identity performance that “Shooting Script” suggested. The speaker of the poem was visible to the man in the elevator, but the image that he projected onto her was a violation of her identity. Visibility is as dangerous to this speaker as invisibility was to the speaker of “Frame.” As a *flâneuse*, the speaker attempts to negotiate between the performance of either visibility or invisibility to gain control of her own vision. The man in jail is confined by bars and guards, but the speaker's emotional response indicates her empathy with his situation. She is shocked out of her intoxication of life and love in the city by the violence of one man's assumptions and by the system against another man's physical body.

The city further imposes on the women's relationship in Poem XVI, but the speaker does not yet recognize its insidious influence. “Across a city from you, I'm with you”:

the lovers are divided by the city, but the speaker believes that they are still connected (*Fact 244*). She says, “This island of Manhattan is wide enough / for both of us, and narrow,” imagining that the city is both wide enough to give them their own space and narrow enough to keep them emotionally attached, but the phrasing of the lines separates out “narrow” from “wide enough,” creating a space between the terms that emphasizes their contradiction (*Fact 244*). For instance, the city’s crowd is “narrow”-minded even if there is enough space for them all to live. The women’s love has to be separate because it cannot be open and known to the city crowd. This *flâneuse*’s intoxication in the city—a characteristic aspect of *flânerie* according to Benjamin—is driven by love, not by the city. Rich’s sequence of poems dismantles the euphoric illusion, positioning *flânerie* as a critical position for women rather than an inspirational position.

The optimism of poem “XVI” is immediately tempered by the acknowledgement that lesbian love has no public place in the city. Sure that their love will survive public recognition, the speaker abandons her observant *flânerie* and examines the meaning of love in poem XVII, only to be jolted out of her reverie by the realization that there are “forces” that are “within us and against us, against us and within us” (*Fact 244*). The inability of the lovers’ relationship to function in public spaces prevents them from being able to function in private spaces. The city reflects the speaker’s disillusionment with love and her thwarted return to *flânerie* in Poem XVIII:

Rain on the West Side Highway,
red light at Riverside:
the more I live the more I think
two people together is a miracle” (*Fact 245*).

Unlike the colon which connects these four lines, once again conflating the city and love, the speaker discovers that she cannot connect the public spaces of the city with the

private spaces of her love. In this moment, the highway represents the speed of traffic moving through the city. Instead of seeing a connected crowd, the speaker realizes that the city is made up of individuals whose movement is stopped at the light, but no connection can be made between them. Like the traffic on the highway, the speaker no longer moves through the city because she is not motivated to be moving between her home and her lover's home any longer. With the city literally coming between the lovers now, the speaker and her lover's individual private spaces are separated by public space.

Although the speaker of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" struggles between private anonymity in *flânerie* and public recognition of her lesbian love, her retaliation against the city's silencing positions her as a new kind of *flâneuse*. She recognizes and claims her role as part of the city despite her inability to demand recognition from the crowd. In the end, the speaker claims a space within the city, defining her new role as woman articulating the city:

I choose to be a figure in that light,
 half-blotted by darkness, something moving
 across that space, the color of stone
 greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
 a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle. (*Fact* 246)

Here at the end, the woman realizes that she is the city: she is the color of stone, but because she is also woman, she is something more. She "chooses" to "walk" in the city—she chooses to traverse the city map, to make it her own, and to become the city by writing the city. This is a woman who can move as a *flâneuse* through the city, but she appears only at the very end of the sequence and is never successfully articulated in a poem. Ultimately, "End of an Era," "Frame," "The Blue Ghazals," "Shooting Script," and "Twenty-One Love Poems" fail to articulate a *flâneuse* or to emblemize the city the way other city poets have because Rich is unwilling to meddle with poetic tradition. Rich's

achievement of *flânerie* is, therefore, mixed. She rejects it and adopts it simultaneously, allowing it to draw out connections to the city, but then resisting the things that restrict her access.

Rich does claim a space for herself in the city, legitimizing the perspective of a city poet who is conscious of gender, race, class, and sexuality and demanding public recognition. Her discomfort with the distance *flânerie* requires for objective observation limited her contribution to a feminist urban poetics, but it did not prevent her from contributing to existing urban poetic forms. In the series of short lyric poems called “Like This Together,” the speaker observes that “They’re tearing down, tearing up / this city, block by block,” simultaneously tearing apart the location of her memories with her husband, to whom the series is dedicated (*Fact* 62). The buildings are described as split open “like flayed carcasses,” exposing their inner skeletal structures. Like Brooks’s personification of the Mecca, Rich turns the Manhattan buildings into dead bodies. The poem continues: “They’re tearing down the houses / we met and lived in, / soon our two bodies will be all / left standing from that era” (*Fact* 62). Rich connects her body to the buildings because her memory of the space is a location in her identity.

In her personal life, Rich chose not to continue to live in New York City. Like di Prima and Lorde, Rich chose to leave the space that restricted both her personal and poetic development. As the poems of *An Atlas of the Difficult World* indicates, she locates her personal identity as affiliated more strongly with natural spaces than with urban spaces. The speaker of the first poem in the series says: “I fix on the land. I am stuck to earth” (5). The human-made edifices of urban spaces are limited by patriarchal definition, but in the naturally changing rural landscape she sees offers possibility for

womanhood. The first poem from *An Atlas of the Difficult World* concludes: “These are not the roads / you knew me by. But the woman driving, walking, watching / for life and death, is the same” (5). Having developed a poetic sensibility based in the observation of *flânerie*, Rich applies a similar model of poetic process to rural areas. The roads we knew her by were urban, but on these roads, she feels she can drive, walk, and watch without restriction.

Rich talks about the issue of space as something more than physical setting in her critical work. In “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Rich identifies specific “locations” from which she works. She challenges the notion of “location” as a physical landscape and suggests that the first “location” she must work from is her own body. As a feminist woman, her body is the first location that identifies her and constructs her understanding of the world. Other “locations” that she identifies include race locations—she locates herself as a white, Jewish woman—and sexual locations—she identifies her location as lesbian.

Therefore, in the physical city, she locates herself in relation to socio-political problems to articulate the figurative labyrinths that she must navigate just to enter the physical labyrinth of streets. Wendy Martin notes that “Rich uses the details of daily urban life to state her political message” about disenfranchised and exploited people and to “convey a sense of the cultural fragmentation and urban dislocation and destruction” (186–87). Furthermore, Margaret Dickie explains that, “*As she describes them, the political positions of her life have been tied to the many locations in which she has lived or, rather, they have been tied to coming out of particular locations.* She has had to come out of the South, out of Cambridge, out of New York, in order to see the differences

within herself” (183, italics Dickie’s). The city spaces of Cambridge and New York became symbols of patriarchal containment and limitation that Rich resisted as a feminist, lesbian woman.

In her city poems, Rich spins stories of women’s lives which wind, like Ariadne’s thread, through the urban labyrinths. Together, these threads find their way through the labyrinth, but no one woman’s journey completely navigates the urban spaces. What these poems fail to do is create a new urban labyrinth, one defined and constructed by women. The speaker of “Like This Together” becomes a building; the speaker of “End of an Era” resists the forms of male city poetic forefathers; the speaker of “Frame” resists the distance of *flânerie*, proclaiming herself a witness instead; the speaker of “Shooting Script” attempts to piece together the city’s role in her history; the speaker of *Twenty-One Love Poems* tries to make her love work in the city. Each of these women navigate a piece of the labyrinth, but they ultimately get trapped in dead ends.

By deeming the city devoid of possibility for women, Rich fails to write a map of the city that makes women’s perspectives a priority. Instead she turns inward, writing a map of herself that can extend out to the natural world in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. Rich’s later work, particularly *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, undertakes the kind of remapping to which her city poems allude but never accomplish. The poems create a map of America through the lens of Rich’s life: the overlap of personal experience and American landscape create a new kind of feminist atlas. Of the thirteen poems that comprise the “atlas,” only one is located in an urban setting: the seventh poem of the series is titled “(The Dream-Site)” —it is one of only two poems to receive a title.

In “(The Dream-Site),” the speaker moves through New York City—she watches the stars from the rooftops, she “went striding the avenues,” and she rides the subways—finally showing confident movement through the city spaces. The speaker feels her “own blood / streaming” as she moves through the city on the subway. She is aware of the “living city overhead / coherently webbed and knotted.” The speaker is recalling life in the city, the poem is told in past tense, but in the memory, the labyrinth seems “coherent” for the first time in Rich’s poetry. In the atlas of her life, New York City finally attains a space for a *flâneuse*, but the one poem just teases out the idea without allowing it to come to fruition as the rest of the series are poems about rural America, or which are not focused so specifically on one city. Certainly, “(The Dream-Site)” indicates the significant status that the city has on Rich’s new atlas, though.

Although “End of an Era,” “Frame,” “The Blue Ghazals,” “Shooting Script,” and “Twenty-One Love Poems” do not realize a “woman poet” voice with which Rich is fully comfortable, they outline the possibility of women’s *flânerie* in twentieth-century American poetry. The problem of conforming to a male-centered form and attempting to make it incorporate the perspectives of women eventually suppresses Rich’s potential revision of both the city and city poetry, but it anticipates voices of other poets who refuse to give up on the city. Rich retaliates, resists, and struggles against the confines of *flânerie*, trying to make it her own, but the restrictions of the form consistently disappoint the poems’ speakers. They try to make public statements, to motivate the crowd to action, but *flânerie* is an intentionally anonymous position that prevents interaction with the crowd. Adherence to poetic tradition betrays Rich by restricting her ability to construct a vision of a city that empowers women.

CHAPTER 4
DIANE DI PRIMA: PIRATING *FLÂNERIE*

Unlike Brooks's and Rich's city poems, which self-consciously acknowledge and resist the influence of poetic tradition, Diane di Prima's urban poems confidently appropriate, destroy, or ignore forms inherited from such urban poetic forefathers as Whitman or Pound. When successful, di Prima's *flâneuse* emphasizes the tensions raised by appropriation, celebrating the paradoxes of urban life. When unsuccessful, her *flânerie* elides the limitations of appropriation and contradiction. Di Prima's *flâneuse* assumes equal access to city observation and poetic construction as the *flâneur*; and although her autobiographical writing does not concede failure, this illusion is gradually shattered in her poetry. By the end of *Loba*, in the poem "Ariadne as Starmaker," di Prima's *flâneuse* finds herself in the same labyrinthine bind as Rich's.

Of the four poets I consider in this work, di Prima has received the least academic, critical attention. Beat poetry studies that include women often focus on them as a marginalized group, and these studies rarely include much attention to di Prima because she defied the lover/muse/mother/wife status of most of the other women. Within the Beat poetic movement, di Prima was respected as a fellow poet by the men. Yet her poetry has since received little critical attention while the men's poetry, especially Allen Ginsberg's, has received much attention. Recent scholarly work on di Prima has focused on identity issues in her work: emphasizing the influence of her Italian-American roots,

discussing her sexual politics, or focusing on her relationship to other Beat writers.¹ By focusing on the influence of *flânerie* and the city on di Prima's poetry, I hope to better explore her urban poetics than other critics have done, turning deserved attention to a woman whose experimental poetics have had a lasting influence in poetry—if not yet in critical—circles beyond the Beat movement.

Long before meeting the definitive male members of the Beat movement, di Prima was participating in uniquely urban poetic practices. By donning the costume and persona of a pirate in her early development as a poet, di Prima explored city spaces and made urban life central to her poetry. As teenagers, di Prima and her friends would dress up in “wide belts and jeans. Blouses with wide, flowing sleeves” to appear to be pirates (*Recollections* 82). In this garb, they watched the city from the far end of Brooklyn—“Sheepshead Bay”—to the northern end of Manhattan—“the Cloisters.” The costumes and moniker “pirates” signify di Prima's awareness of her participation in an activity that was both radical and impossible. Being pirates allows the girls to steal what they otherwise do not have access to—the city—and to appropriate the privileged male gaze. The costumes mark their performance of the anonymity that masculine appearance provides, of the privileged gaze, and of the right to “learn” and “define” the city by “marking” it in their notebooks (*Recollections* 83). Although the pirate image is primarily biographical, it establishes di Prima's poetic focus in urban streets.

¹ *MELUS* has printed two essays on di Prima that emphasize her Italian heritage: in 2003, Roseanne Giannini Quinn's article “‘The Willingness to Speak’: Diane di Prima and Italian American Feminist Body Politics” and Blossom S. Kirschenbaum's 1987 article “Diane di Prima: Extending La Famiglia.” Joseph Bathant's article “Bloodtrope: The Italian American Beat” includes di Prima as well. There is little critical work on di Prima beyond this work, what appears about her in *Girls Who Wore Black*, and Timothy Gray's 2003 article about her in the American west.

Piracy also allowed di Prima access to urban poetic forms. Just as “piracy” today is often used to refer to the stealing or illegal copying of copyrighted materials such as movies or music, di Prima’s use of *flânerie* was an illicit act of using a form from which she was restricted access as a woman. *Flânerie* became part of her anti-establishment agenda, along with her refusal to work a 9-to-5 job or live up to the 1950s expectation that she marry, settle in the suburbs and have children. Just as Rich defined the “real” city according to her poor students of color at City College, di Prima located “authentic” urban experiences in the kinds of “stolen” moments and observations that she made as a pirate.

Combining the strategies of identifying a *flâneuse* in the narrative of Brooks’s long poem with identifying a *flâneuse* in the specifically city-centered poems of Rich’s oeuvre, in this chapter I examine di Prima’s conscientious use of inherited urban poetic methods—including *flânerie*—in several shorter poems to establish evidence for her use of a *flâneuse* in the long poem *Loba*. As with Brooks, Rich, and Lorde, I must negotiate the risky correlation between poet’s *flânerie* and poetic voice in di Prima’s work because she blurs the boundaries of biography and fiction in her work. Throughout di Prima’s autobiographical writing, she repeatedly describes poetic practices that are reminiscent of *flânerie*—such as being a pirate to move through and observe the city—or which are related to *flânerie*—such as watching from doorways or windows. In fact, di Prima’s prose writing is much more explicitly descriptive of the city. In *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, the narrator describes the sights, sounds, and smells of walking down the city streets, she watches a group of Italian men beat up a young gay man in the street, and she lives on the streets for a summer, sleeping in the park with the other homeless people. The urban

experiences di Prima describes in her prose establish a foundation for understanding her use of *flânerie* in her poetry.

The scene in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* when the narrator describes watching a group of young Italian men beat up three gay men is reminiscent of Rich's "Frame." Di Prima's narrator, who is comfortable in her role as *flâneuse*, watches without the sense of guilt or desire to become involved that Rich's narrator exhibits. The scene is established by a description of the changing Village neighborhood one summer in the 1950s: a "new Bohemian" community was beginning to rent the inexpensive apartments that were in the heart of the Italian neighborhood. The Italian community had begun to "retaliate" against the openly gay Bohemians, the interracial couples, and the young women who lived with men. The narrator explains: "On this particular evening, I stood on the steps of my new store and watched three young faggots get beaten up by their dago brothers. A not unusual evening's entertainment" (*Memoirs* 119). The narrator's nonchalant, detached tone establishes her relationship to the urban situation. She is part of the "new Bohemian" community (friends with the artists and gay and lesbian community which the neighborhood was rejecting), but she is also Italian. Although she often knows the people getting beaten up and not the Italian men, she observes the scene with fairness, presenting both sides of the issue.

Although the narrator of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* watches the incident without any impulse to interfere, she does not fail to recognize the irony of the situation. The satirical tone in which the narrator uses the terms "faggots" and "dago" in her observation of the violent scene connect the two clashing communities: both are outsider groups, derided by and separated from the larger urban context. What the narrator is observing, then, as a

flâneuse, is ebb and flow of urban life. She watches it much as someone might watch a bear killing a salmon in a stream in nature. The collision of cultures on the streets is the “authentic” development of urban culture for this *flâneuse*. Urban culture is not paintings on museum walls or poems printed by mainstream publishers, but the popular beliefs and language of the crowd on the streets, which is divided up into cultural neighborhoods.

One way in which the narrator of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* connects to the city is by living on the streets. After living in the country for much of the summer, she describes the draw of the city that makes her return:

slowly, imperceptibly, the days began to shorten, the grass turned brown, and with the first crickets, a restlessness stirred in me for the quick combat and hard living of the city, for the play and the strife and the inexhaustible human interchange that was New York to me then. I would catch myself listening for the traffic or the background sound of “Bird” being played on a cheap phonograph in the next apartment, and I knew it was time for me to be on my way. (*Memoirs* 110)

The narrator’s desire for the city is dominated by images and sounds of the crowd. In an environment where people are so densely packed into small spaces, living is a challenge. She returns from a stay in the country to find that “the city was really crowded; there were, simply, no pads to be had, and rather than hassle I took to sleeping in the park” (*Memoirs* 114). The narrator’s time living on the streets and sleeping in parks is directed by a “code of coolness” that is the mark of urban emotional detachment. She shares the park space at night with other homeless people, but they never get to know each other because “it would have been intrusion, filling each other’s turf and head with rattling chatter and conversation, and the inevitable unfolding of our emotional lives would have destroyed the space that the indifference of the city gave each and every one as her most precious gift” (*Memoirs* 115). In stark contrast to Rich’s speaker’s desire to emotionally

connect with other members of the crowd in “Frame,” di Prima’s Bohemian city woman interprets the emotional detachment of city life as a “gift.”

Di Prima’s comfort with maintaining distance from the crowd is defined by the “code of coolness” of the Bohemian community, which required her to take all experiences in stride, never being shocked by anything because every new experience, even the dangerous and outrageous (or maybe especially) were worthy. Living on the streets was just another way that di Prima could experience urban life and her understanding of the crowd demonstrates her status as an insider. She knows the city so well that no event there can surprise her. These beliefs and experiences are corroborated in di Prima’s autobiographical prose writing, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*. She describes having similar values and experiencing similar things, providing detailed accounts of actual *flânerie* that was a part not only of her life in New York, but of her life as an urban poet. Di Prima’s poetry employs a perspective of the city that is much more akin to Baudelaire’s. Rather than describing specific urban settings, she absorbs and responds to urban life as a member of the crowd.

Beatniking Poetry Traditions

Di Prima’s early poetry, like that of some of her fellow Beat contemporaries, made vernacular diction a priority. She described how radical her interest in slang was in the early 1950s, even among her artist friends, to David Meltzer: “I had been writing all this slang from ’53 on. I loved the street language. My friends who I lived with and other serious artists were saying, no, you can’t do that. Nobody’s going to understand it in ten years” (Meltzer 8). For di Prima, using street slang was part of her interest in making her poetics as “sparse” as possible, an idea that came from Hemingway and Matisse’s line drawings (Meltzer 7). But it also helped her capture an elusive aspect of city life:

both the slang and the sparing lines reflect the fleeting nature of the crowd. Instead of taking to the road like Jack Kerouac, di Prima locates the constant change and the variety of people and experiences that would help her find meaning in the city crowd.

Ironically, many of the poems in which di Prima makes the most use of street slang are also written in traditional poetics. Just as “In the Mecca” exemplifies Brooks’s transition to a black urban poetics, di Prima’s city poems often use rhyme schemes or meter in a way that may be satiric, but which also suggest her struggle to shed the influences of such Romantic poets as Keats.² In “The Passionate Hipster to His Chick” (1957-59) street slang fills out the rhyme scheme and rhythm of regular rhyming couplets. As the title indicates, it looks back even further than the Romantic poets to sixteenth century poetry in Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”:

And we will sit upon the floor
 And watch the junkies bolt the door
 By one cool trumpeter whose beat
 Tells real bad tales for the elite.

And I will make a bed of coats
 And dig with you the gonest notes.
 You’ll get a leather cap and jacket
 I know a cat that’s in the racket. (*Earthsong*)

The tension between the form and diction of these stanzas rebels against both high modernist poetic standards and Romantic themes. Styled as either a satire of or tribute to Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” the poem employs the same iambic tetrameter and rhyming couplet form.³ But in the feminine rhyme jacket/racket, which

² In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima describes the early influence of Keats on her interest in poetry and writing (77-78).

³ Di Prima’s poem adopts enough of Marlowe’s poem to look like an imitation. Few poets publish their imitations, so I have considered this poem instead as a satire or tribute poem.

adds an extra syllable in the last couplet here (not the last couplet of the poem), di Prima alludes to the woman's response to the man's offer. In Sir Walter Raleigh's response to Marlowe's poem, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," the woman rejects the shepherd's offer because she says that love is too fleeting to depend on. By disrupting the flow of the lines with a feminine rhyme, di Prima implies the woman's ability to disrupt both the masculine poetics and the macho figure of the hipster. She also emphasizes the fleeting nature of love and life, contradictorily accepting it in her poetics (the use of slang) and rejecting it in love.

From the crowd di Prima's poems pluck the marginalized individuals—the artists, the homeless, the junkies, the gays and lesbians—to watch. Her *flâneuse*, as a member of these outsider groups, identifies counter-culture individuals within the crowd, fracturing the image of a homogeneous mass. These people were fellow pirates, escaping from hegemonic consumer culture, but using it as fodder for artistic production. The "passionate hipster" wants to dress his "chick" in a "leather cap and jacket," items that are not feminine, but which also are expensive. He subverts consumer culture by saying that he knows "a cat that's in the racket," meaning that he can obtain the items through some illicit means. The hedonistic lifestyle raised by the image of junkies and of musicians who experience "bad" life and then "tell" it to the elite defines the crowd through which di Prima moves. Di Prima's *flâneuse*, therefore, participates in undermining the notion of a dominant 1950s consumer culture by observing and recording an alternate crowd.⁴

⁴ This resistance to dominant consumer culture reflects a similar rejection by di Prima's fellow Beat poets, e.g. Allen Ginsberg's "The Supermarket."

Whereas Rich uses an outsider status to establish distance as a *flâneuse* and Brooks balances her insider understanding of the Mecca with her outsider residency as an “outsider within” to achieve *flânerie*, di Prima diminishes the importance of insider/outsider status by following the code of cool. According to the representation of city life in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, outsider status often draws as much attention as insider status (outsiders are recognizable by difference, insiders by familiarity). The code of cool demands that insiders and outsiders alike are unfazed by any awareness of difference. New Yorkers today still maintain a similar tacit agreement that makes gawking at celebrities or calling someone out of the crowd infinitely gauche. The code of cool, in di Prima’s interpretation, is essentially a free pass for *flânerie*.

Di Prima’s appropriation of Marlowe’s style—she pirates it away from him to make it something twentieth century and urban—is repeated in the poem “For Manhattan,” where she appropriates the style of Ezra Pound and makes it her own. Although the title “For Manhattan” suggests Whitman’s “Mannahatta,” di Prima’s urban response invokes Pound’s “N.Y.” instead:

FOR MANHATTAN

Leanfingered
slenderhipped
ah hubris, hubris

what does the wind do to you
lot you care
and the night, bedding down
slipping into you easy

lady when there are stars
does it help? (*Earthsong*)

Otherwise a rather opaque poem in its brevity, a comparative reading with Pound’s “N.Y.” elicits surprising play with language and form. Di Prima’s “slenderhipped” city

replies to Pound's "beloved" city that is "slender as a silver reed" (58). Pound refers to the city as "a maid with no breasts" even though he knows she cannot be one since "*here are a million people surly with traffic*" (Pound's italics, 58). The removal of breasts makes the city androgynous—it is female because Pound feels he can possess it as he would a woman. Similarly, di Prima's city—a "lady"—has been made androgynous: she is "slenderhipped" (masculine) and "leanfingered" (feminine). But the third line of this opening stanza repudiates this image of the city—so reminiscent of Pound's. The repetition of "hubris" is like the speaker's disappointed shaking of her head or wagging of her finger, shaming Pound for assuming he could personify the city this way. Di Prima appropriates Pound's image of the city, but then shatters it so that she can rebuild her own.

The most important turn away from Pound in "For Manhattan" responds to his claim that he "will breathe into thee a soul" (a comment he repeats twice in the thirteen-line poem) (58). Pound's breath becomes a "wind" in di Prima's poem and the speaker notes that it would have little effect: "lot you care." Instead of a man possessing the city, the "night" does, replacing Pound's heterosexual image of sex with an androgynous one. If Pound's city is "white"—the opening line of "N.Y." exclaims "My city, my beloved, my white!"—then the darkness of night in di Prima's "For Manhattan" could suggest interracial sex. The final two lines ask whether there is any need of light at all in the city. Di Prima's New York is one of darkness, whereas Pound's is one of lightness. She revels in this opposition, allowing the sexual image to be one of mutual pleasure instead of possession.

Di Prima's urban poems struggle with the problem of possession which male poets, such as Pound, take for granted. Di Prima's *flâneuse* cannot develop until she moves out from under the weight of control that is implied in this poetic possession. "The Passionate Hipster to His Chick" and "For Manhattan" are both derivative poems, suggestive of *flânerie* in observation, theme, and diction, but not yet demonstrating feminist urban poetics. She can appropriate men's poetics, but she cannot possess them, nor does she desire to. Possession implies control, which di Prima associates with her restricted childhood. At a time when consumerism was becoming the dominant culture in America, and an especially powerful factor in defining domestic expectations for women, di Prima rejected the desire for possession implied in the purchase of commodities. Thus, her *flâneuse* attempts to transcend consumer culture.

1950s Cultural Contexts

The background of two movements in 1950s American culture lays the foundation for di Prima's *flâneuse*: consumerism, with its corresponding shift to suburbanization in private home ownership and purchase of domestic appliances; and the modernist ordering of space in the International Style of architecture. Both of these movements aimed to give structure and order to an otherwise chaotic world by separating private and public life. *Flânerie* provides a means of investigating and subverting such controls because it depends on the chaotic movement of the crowd, but it can also make the *flâneur/flâneuse* into a commodity item. The contradiction of order and chaos or of self-identification and commodity-identification that *flânerie* negotiates makes it an ideal form through which di Prima can negotiate her restrictive, Italian-American family background and the chaotic anonymity of street life.

Di Prima recognized at a young age that the kind of repression, fear, and containment that dominated 1950s American culture—and which her home life reflected—were concepts which had not always been valued and caused a denial of knowledge and freedom to women to which she could not adhere. Although popular culture creates an image of an idyllic, suburban domestic, family-oriented 1950s culture, these images were a myth of safety in homogeneity. Whereas magazine advertisements and television shows as *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* make it seem like women were happily creating self-contained worlds to tend to their families, critics such as Elaine Tyler May, Stephanie Coontz, and historians such as Lizbeth Cohen and Susan Lynn show that Rich, di Prima, and Lorde were not alone in venturing beyond such confines.⁵ Other women were social activists, forming outreach organizations through such groups as the YWCA. In accounts of di Prima's family history, it is often noted that she was influenced by her grandfather, a self-proclaimed anarchist. Such political influence is presented as explanation for her radical behaviors, and may in fact be partially responsible for her inclinations. But this family relation should not obscure her contribution to and participation in a form of social rebellion that chose the rules of urban life over the hegemonic rules of suburban life rather than choosing a life without rules altogether.

In the di Prima's Brooklyn home after WWII, family lessons from anarchist grandparents competed with her mother's attempts to create safety through control. The influence of di Prima's maternal grandparents, Antoinette and Domenico Mallozzi, taught

⁵ I have excluded Gwendolyn Brooks from this reference because, although she never left the South Side of Chicago, she maintained the social expectations of marrying, having children, and raising them in a single-family home. Brooks did not separate from her husband until after their children were grown.

her to see through the veneer of consumer culture and suburban domesticity. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima describes her grandfather as an outspoken atheist and anarchist and her grandmother as a rebellious daughter of an aristocratic family who eloped to marry below her family's expectations. These grandparents exposed the myth of 1950s repression as the cultural norm. May confirms that:

The legendary family of the 1950s, complete with appliances, station wagons, backyard barbecues, and tricycles scattered on the sidewalks, represented something new. It was not, as common wisdom tells us, the last gasp of 'traditional' family life with roots deep in the past. Rather, it was the first wholehearted effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life. (11)

This new family structured valued individualism in the guise of group unity. Despite the appearance of providing outlets for individual to "express" their "personal" creativity or thoughts, it in fact provided a set of rules that controlled those personal expressions. Di Prima's parents, affected by the poverty of the Depression and fear of WWII, sought comfort in this new concept of home life and restricted their daughter's movement outside the home. Di Prima says that her only freedom outside was to go to the library (Meltzer 2, Knight 140). But at home, her mother's desire for domestic and psychic order repressed di Prima's life.

Di Prima emphasizes her need for disorder, to be allowed randomness and chaos. Her one happy memory of playing with her mother is marked by this need. In the memory, she and her mother are playing outside with a kitten: "There is something about the randomness of the play that stays with me. The randomness of the kitten, its furry warmth" (*Recollections* 19). Her mother ends the playtime, di Prima is sad, recognizing that the "poignant" moment of pleasure and connection with her mother is over. She concludes: "Soon after, the kitten was gone; no pet we had was tolerated more than two

weeks. No furry, warm-blooded moving pet, at any rate. They were, I was told, ‘too messy’” (*Recollections* 19). In the messiness, the chaos, and the softness of the kitten di Prima finds love. The order, neatness, and control of the rest of her relationship with her mother is cold, unaffectionate, and restricted. Like Brooks and Rich, di Prima sought organic forms in the city, but she chose animal life over plant life.

Just as the *flâneur* followed the chaotic movement of the crowd, di Prima sought out unpredictable experiences in the city. Her mother turned her home life and family into what Stephanie Coontz describes as “a medium of expression for... femininity and individuality,” but di Prima required a broader scope for defining her womanhood than housekeeping. Other women were negotiating similar breaks with narrowly-defined roles for women in American society. Cohen describes how women (black and white) used their power as “citizen consumers” (as opposed to “purchasing consumers”) to protest corporate monopoly control through boycotts. Lynn explains that progressive, activist women working in organizations such as the YWCA and the AFSC (American Friends Service Committee) fought McCarthyism, fought for civil rights, and continued the struggle for women’s rights that began in the early twentieth century with women’s suffrage and exploded into feminism in the 1960s. These women’s work disrupts the myth of the complacent 1950s suburban housewife, but such activists worked within the order of mainstream culture, which was not radical enough for di Prima.

Instead, di Prima sought an alternative community in the heterogeneous city crowd which would reflect her disavowal of mainstream consumer culture. In the city, avant-garde artists were similarly rebelling against the organization of modernist architecture, much as Benjamin describes the *flâneur* resisting the ordering of urban space under

Hausman's reform (numbering of houses and introduction of street signs). The International Style of modernist architecture designed urban spaces that would structure the city's chaotic disorder. Sleek, functional skyscrapers create spaces so repetitive that they appear to be identical replications. Robert Bennett notes that some buildings looked so alike that residents would mistakenly walk into the wrong building and, because residents trusted the safety implied by the design and left their doors open, would actually walk into the wrong apartment before discovering their mistake (6). These spaces, although designed to create order, actually create disorientation reminiscent of the effect of Egyptian labyrinths by repetition and vastness of space.

Di Prima invokes the repetition of space in her revision of Baudelaire's city poetry. The image of Baudelaire "fading in a long hall of mirrors" in "Magick in Theory & Practice" creates a similar repetition of order, but of poetic order (*Pieces* 75). Although poems such as "The Passionate Hipster to His Chick" and "For Manhattan" are derivative, they explore such implications of repetition. Modernist poetry specifically avoided the kinds of repetition which di Prima employs in these poems. As Frederic Jameson explains, the kinds of repetition which poets such as Gertrude Stein used "can be seen as a kind of homeopathic strategy whereby the scandalous and intolerable external irritant is drawn into the aesthetic process itself and thereby systematically worked over, 'acted out' and symbolically neutralized" (136). Di Prima spins such modernist use of repetition into conversation with commodity repetition, characterized by Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum. Images of Baudelaire repeating in a hall of mirrors suggest the impossibility of locating the original city poem or *flâneur*.

Constantly playing with the appropriation of inherited forms, theories, and spaces, di Prima's poems acknowledge the past and push to construct new poetics. As Robert Bennett explains, "many writers, artists, and intellectuals contested this spatial restructuring of their city. Using paradoxical logic similar to Wallace Stevens's 'Connoisseur of Chaos,' they represented post-WWII New York urbanism as an 'order' so 'violent' that it produced more 'disorder' than order" (6). Di Prima's rejection to her mother's ordered home supports this notion of "violent order." Di Prima was a part of the avant-garde movement to privilege disorder over order, resisting modernist architectural conventions. In the Beat poets, di Prima found fellow artists who were devised aesthetic practices to disrupt such modernist comfort zones. Bennett continues to explain that the Beats:

self-consciously attempt to document, defend, or produce eccentric urban experiences that exist beneath the surface, on the margins, or along the interstices of the city's more homogeneous urban center. They explore aberrant spatio-temporal dimensions, heterogeneous urban topographies, and deviant urban paradigms, but they explicitly associate these anomalous urban spaces with some kind of alternative, counter-hegemonic city-within-the-city or some marginalized urban space that is dominated, opposed, stalked, haunted, or repressed by the corporate city that surrounds it. (9)

The spaces that Bennett describes resemble the kinds of inner-city spaces described by Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. The Beats were tapped into the multi-valent possibilities of urban experience, without the emphasis on race that is in Hughes's and Brooks's experiences. Di Prima's urban spaces are specifically inner-city spaces. She depicts Hell's Kitchen, the Lower East Side, and Greenwich Village as counter-cultural pockets within the larger urban scene. The streets offered a paradoxical safety for her from her home which "flickered from haven to war zone" (*Recollections* 85). Just as the speaker of Rich's *Twenty-One Love Poems* returns home from the violent and chaotic

streets only to encounter war and violence in her mail, di Prima's home housed violence and conflict. The neighborhoods in which she found refuge are important to her restructuring of city spaces.

Di Prima's use of repetition, her sense of humanity and warmth in chaotic spaces, and her appropriation of past forms anticipate post-modern poetics in post-modern city spaces. Keith J. Hayward describes how post-modernism disengages from singular definitions:

In recent decades, we have witnessed the demise of the modernist project of 'reason and progress', and with it the erosion of a set of 'established' modernist assumptions, norms, and sensibilities Even previously stable and seemingly inexorable social components—gender, sexuality, the individual subject, the family unit, the human body, etc—have in recent times been rendered mutable. (13)

Di Prima certainly experimented with different definitions of herself, of family, of sexuality, gender, and especially art, constantly resisting prescribed definitions. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, di Prima notes that when she was young, she “didn't recognize 'good taste' for what it was: cultural oppression—a kind of racism, in fact—but simply knew [she] was 'too much' for the general climate, and tried more or less unsuccessfully to tone down” (81). As di Prima matured and gained more experience, including the stifling academic environment of college,⁶ she decided that she must redefine what “taste” was.⁷ The first places she located were the everyday and the street.

⁶ Di Prima attended Swarthmore for a year and a half, but left when she discovered that there were women around her who were making choices to leave college, to live their lives differently than their parents had planned for them, and di Prima realizes that she can too (*Recollections* 95).

⁷ See Mike Featherstone's explanation of the role academics play in consumer culture by controlling “cultural capital” and defining what counts as “taste” (89).

By privileging the marginalized crowd, di Prima's poetry creates alternate urban centers within the city space, fracturing the modernist city structure around a single center. As a *flâneuse*, di Prima similarly engages both the emotional and the erotic connection between watcher and crowd. In poems which move through city spaces, di Prima's speakers develop an awareness of their commodity status. The insertion of explicitly biographical connections between di Prima and her *flâneuse* dissolve the distance between observer and crowd, poet and poem. For instance, the commodification of art hovers over the artists in "Magick in Theory & Practice." The "shadow" that MOMA casts on young artists in this poem attests to the ways some art is provided exchange value by consumer culture: the pieces in the museum have commodity value. Even a museum of "modern" art participates in defining the aesthetic value of artistic products, privileging some experiments over others.

Because di Prima identifies so closely with her poetry, the distance between art object (poem, painting, novel, sculpture) and artist disappear so that her body takes on as much artistic commodity value as the art object does. The explicitly erotic depiction of the city and di Prima's descriptions in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* of working as a nude model for wealthy painters expose this conflation of self and art as commodities. The speaker of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* implies that her sexual escapades—experiences which revel in the kind of unpredictability and warmth which she identified with in the kitten as a child—are a part of her understanding her role as commodity (as a prostitute uses her body's exchange value).

By acknowledging her commodity value, di Prima tries to privilege an alternative, counter-cultural consumer system. By creating her own presses, specifically Poets Press,

to publish her poetry and the work of fellow poets (including Audre Lorde), and by collaborating with such fellow Beat poets as LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) on *The Floating Bear* to publish experimental works, di Prima circumvented the politics of consumer culture in publishing. She describes the 1950s and 1960s as years when she absolutely denied the value of the prevailing consumer culture. Poverty was the price that artists paid for refusing to pander to consumer whims or corporate demands. The alternate consumer culture that poverty allowed di Prima access to was one that depended on the exchange of ideas and art.

When di Prima employs her own poetic voice, moving beyond derivative satire or experiment, she resists elite aesthetics of art by privileging the everyday in her poetry. More than just a focus on street slang, di Prima's urban scenes depict hunger, poverty, and basic necessity. In the series of poems "Thirteen Nightmares" that opens di Prima's selected poems, *Pieces of a Song*, the everyday mingles with the surreal to emphasize the extreme circumstances of inner-city poverty. Such juxtaposition successfully undermines the impact of the surreal and elevates the impact of the everyday. The image in "Nightmare 12" of a doctor taking out the speaker's eyeball and washing it in a basin (after she asked to have her foot checked) is less shocking after reading of people who are arrested, sent into psychiatric observation, and given shock treatment for refusing to leave a park after curfew in "Nightmare 9" (*Pieces* 6-7).

The "nightmares" in the sequence appear as hyperbolic versions of the speaker's daily experiences, mocking the terrifying reality as a means of coping with it. Written primarily in long lines of stream-of-consciousness, the poems each tell a brief tale of inner-city poverty, often resulting in an absurd situation which would be humorous if it

was not so awful. For example, in “Nightmare 2,” the speaker watches a “line of sleek roaches” carry off a piece of spaghetti, singing “Onward Christian Roaches” as they go. As the speaker watches, the largest of the roaches nudges her, “to see if I too could be carried off” (*Pieces 2*). The pathos of the poverty implied in the appearance of multiple cockroaches, in the speaker’s killing of her cat for trying to sneak food, and in the final poem’s one line “It hurts to be murdered” are all lightened by the speaker’s acceptance of the situation (*Pieces 7*).

Although the poems are told in first person, the humor which the speaker of “Thirteen Nightmares” employs suggests her ability to observe her own situation. The poems move through inner-city urban spaces: inside an apartment, at the local drugstore, standing in the unemployment line, walking to see a movie on 42nd Street, and in a city park. The speaker observes the police surveillance in the park and she listens as the bored unemployment clerk tells a man, “Here are your twenty reasons for living sir” (*Pieces 5*). Just as Rich’s poem “Frame” witnesses crime against women in the city, di Prima’s “Thirteen Nightmares” sequence observes injustice and poverty in the inner-city, but her speaker is not moved to political action because she is too busy trying to survive. In “Nightmare 5,” the gas in the speaker’s apartment is shut off, but if she can get the lock off, she can turn it back on to make some soup:

he left, I found a chair. And tried saw hammer chisel tried
slipped bruised nails tried tried saw tried. Soup to cook.

Twelve hours later went to druggist. Sam I said I have a charge account
for bennies give me some hydrofluoric acid.

Mac he said I don’t know. Bennies is one thing Mac he said this acid jazz
is something else.

Sam I said I gotta cook they locked the meter soup you know food you know.

OK Mac he said but take it easy.

Drip

Hole also in table, floor, maybe downstairs dont know but hole in lock too soup open great. Wow.

But ha no matches jokes on me the gas on and no matches let it go. Plenty of gas guess I wont eat. (*Pieces* 3-4).

The speaker is just as nonchalant about destroying the lock as she is about not getting to eat: it is all part of the life of poverty. But the “joke” at the end of the poem is based in pathos rather than humor. The speaker laughs as if from a distance, recognizing her own pathetic circumstance.

The *flâneuse* in “Thirteen Nightmares” has crossed boundaries into a part of the city where the rules in the crowd are different. The speaker has a charge account for bennies, but cannot afford to pay her gas bill. She also meets a man on 42nd Street and goes home with a man who thought she was a prostitute. As a “nightmare,” the speaker suggests that this was an unexpected assumption, despite the fact that he picked her up on the street. The scene returns the speaker to the modernist *flâneur’s* relationship to the prostitute on the street. The man assumes both that the woman is a prostitute and that he was watching her rather than the reverse. What makes the scene a nightmare is that it responds to an all too common assumption about women in the city that was true even into the 1950s. Although the speaker had redefined her role in the streets, because men had not, it is possible that nothing had actually changed. Di Prima insists on pressing past these boundaries. She complicates the issue of watching by also insisting on experiencing. By ignoring the rules of *flânerie* and crossing the boundary from anonymity into contact with other members of the crowd, di Prima appropriates *flânerie* much as she appropriates Marlowe and Pound in these early poems. Rather than creating

her own *flâneuse*, di Prima complicates the possibilities of a *flâneuse*, using humor to mock tradition.

In some regards, the prevalence of urban imagery in di Prima's poems and her speakers' familiarity with the city, imagist focus on moments, objects or people, and her own pirate-like movement through the city imply *flânerie*. Di Prima certainly achieves the "deviant" status that Ferguson notes was the rest of the crowd's interpretation of the *flâneur* (24–5). Just as the *flâneur's* wealth affords him the luxury to stroll aimlessly through the city, leisurely watching the rest of the crowd's activity, di Prima's choice to live in poverty rather than work a steady (and time-restricting) job allows her to spend her days watching the city crowd as well (although, as *Memoirs of a Beatnik* indicates, she just as often chooses quiet corners or the company of her small crowd of artists over the city masses) (90, 116). Di Prima calls her freedom to "pass [her] days as [she] pleased, exploring...walking Manhattan from end to end" a "luxury" that she purchased with "dire poverty" (*Recollections* 127). The condition of di Prima's *flânerie* is different, but the rejection by mainstream culture is similar, as is the ultimate poetic product.

Limitations of Appropriation

Part of the problem for di Prima's *flâneuse* is the appropriation implied by observing the city as pirates. Instead of achieving anonymity, the pirate persona becomes a sort of spectacle, especially because of the costumes di Prima and her friends put on prior to traversing the city. The costume and the performance of "pirate" roles align di Prima more closely with the dandy than the *flâneur*. The necessity of the *flâneur's* anonymity or invisibility—a central factor in the poetics of Brooks, Rich, and Lorde as well—is undermined by the posturing of dandyism. A figure on the streets of the modern city who exploited consumer culture, the dandy made an effort to stand out from the

crowd as superior because of his material status symbols. Mike Featherstone explains that, “Dandyism...stressed the quest for special superiority through the construction of an uncompromising exemplary lifestyle in which an aristocracy of spirit manifested itself in a contempt for the masses and the heroic concern with the achievement of originality and superiority in dress, demeanour, personal habits and even furnishings—what we now call lifestyle” (67). The superiority that di Prima and her friends felt when dressed as pirates mimics the privilege of the dandy, but it reverses it. As a pirate, di Prima celebrated her ability to reject commodity culture’s regulation of women’s appearance.

Although the *flâneur* and the dandy are often noted as similar members of the crowd—both are members of the upper class, both spend leisure time in the city streets—the dandy seeks the attention of the crowd whereas the *flâneur* eschews it. The dandy’s interaction with the public was a performance of prestige and glamour that required an audience. Both character roles are performances of visibility or invisibility which plays with the power of the gaze. The dandy intends to attract the gaze while the *flâneur* intends to employ the gaze. By “playing dress up” as a pirate, di Prima blurs the distinctions between the two roles. She dons a costume in order to change the effect that others’ gazes have upon her—she distorts their vision with a disguise—and to simultaneously empower her own gaze.

Later, di Prima’s Beat style turns her dandyism into a negative, wearing men’s clothing or Bohemian styles, making the reversal complete. By discarding the pirate costume and choosing to adopt masculine clothing, she removes the performance aspect of the outfit. She moves more fluidly into the role of *flâneuse* by choosing a personal

style that will make her invisible. She describes her realization of women's inherent and profound visibility in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*:

I had watched the burden that beauty was for the women and girls around me. Watched how they watched themselves, caught in a hall of mirrors where it was hard to get to the heart of things, to own their passion. Caught by a kind of self-love. Watched how they *were* watched, both by friends and lovers, so that they were not *seen*, not truly presences, but the painting, movie, statue of someone's dreams. A piece of the furnishings. (114–15)

For di Prima, the contradiction between women's physical visibility and the inability of others to see beyond the physical, becomes the difference between being an artist (finding one's "own passion") and a commodity ("a piece of the furnishings"). In this description, all women are dandies, proudly displaying their commodity items, even if those are physical features (surely enhanced with the purchase of material commodities such as girdles, bras, high heels, and make-up). In order to resist this kind of superficial visibility, di Prima appropriates masculine attire, completing her reversal of the dandy image with a crew cut.

By adopting specifically working class men's clothing, di Prima extricated herself from the performance of wearing a costume like a dandy and from the performance of heteronormative beauty. The men's clothing she wore was commonplace, not anything designed to attract attention. It seems impossible that a bald woman in men's clothing could go entirely unnoticed in the crowd, but the physical change was another step in the process toward her finding a comfortable position as a *flâneuse*. Each costume brought her closer to performing *flânerie*.

Di Prima had always felt comfortably anonymous in the city crowd, but as she develops this heightened awareness of the visibility of women, she recognizes the limitations of it, just as Buck-Morss, Wolff, and Ferguson have explained. She

acknowledges that her denial of her image as a woman required the adoption of a masculine “costume” (*Recollections* 115). But the disguise did provide her with a feeling of anonymity and privileged perspective. Di Prima notes that the costume allowed her to adopt the distanced observation of the city which she had sought as a pirate: “Walked the Village, stalking, looking. The East Side streets. Walked the halls of my heart” (*Recollections* 116). But a friend comments to her that her writing her writing and her “adventures” in the city seemed “so *masculine*,” prompting di Prima to note that, “This would have been no problem if I were a boy, the pirate I had always longed to be. Most natural thing in the world. But somehow reprehensible—my friend seems to say—somehow *wrong* in a woman, this lack of feeling” (*Recollections* 116). The friend’s remark does not dissuade di Prima, who is always spurred on by the promise of going against the grain, but her comment reminds di Prima of the complexity of appropriation: she is not actually male, and therefore, probably not actually invisible.

And yet, when the invisibility of di Prima’s masculine disguise is shattered, she finds comfort in it. Di Prima’s identity is not called out specifically as female, but as a member of her Italian, Brooklyn neighborhood. Di Prima explains that she was “striding through the Village alone, feeling very much my own person, out in the twilight, watching the street. The weekend crowds. Feeling anonymous. A writer. Invisible and free observer of the world” when a “large Italian man”—a Mafia bouncer at a lesbian bar—intercepted her. He recognized her as “the Di Prima kid” and told her that she should come to him if she ever got in any trouble. At first, di Prima felt disillusioned: “All my much-loved and hard-won anonymity, New York invisibility was shattered—gone. The long arm of the ancestral tribe had reached out and touched me” (*Recollections*

117). It was not di Prima's womanhood that prevented her uninterrupted invisibility in the crowd, but her affiliation with the Italian community, an affiliation equally unearned as the male *flâneur's* invisibility.

The moment is crucial in di Prima's development of a particularly woman-identified urban poetics. The bouncer's mafia affiliations locate him outside the mainstream culture as well, so she was called out by a fellow outsider, by the margin, rather than by the masses. As a member of a group that required a level of invisibility themselves, the bouncer was not "outing" di Prima so much as drawing her in. Her invisibility was not necessarily lost, but she was reminded that her efforts to shed her ethnic identity were in vain. She decides that it actually felt good to have "a secret dubious protection" in the city, even though she never asked for help (*Recollections* 117). Di Prima's acceptance of the necessary contradiction between visibility and invisibility—it is both an empowering position and a disabling position—in the crowd enables her to begin to develop a feminist urban poetics which negotiates other contradictions between men and women in the crowd, between public and private, between city and nature, between gods and goddesses, and between male poets and herself as well.

Although di Prima does not necessarily give up her pirate *flânerie* after acknowledging the contradictory nature of her ability to observe or write from the perspective of a *flâneuse*, her perspective begins to resemble the vexed *flâneuses* of Brooks's and Rich's city poems. In *Loba*, di Prima creates an urban wolf goddess who challenges the limitations of the city and its cultural history. She attempts to define a space that has room for women, suggesting that the only way for such a change to occur is through the destruction of the city. The volume-length poem is constructed of two

“books” totaling sixteen interrelated “parts,” each of which is made up of a series of poems. Some of the poems are given separate titles, but many are not, and are separated only by a flame-like symbol. Although the poem has epic qualities, it does not follow a narrative structure. The only consistent character is “the Loba,” and a significant portion of the poem, especially in the first half, is dedicated to defining her multi-faceted character. In “The Loba Dances,” she is called “mother wolf & mistress,” three defining aspects of her which are returned to repeatedly. Although the poem moves less through the physical spaces of the city than Brooks’s “In the Mecca” does, the city appears as a prominent motif throughout the poem, setting an imposing backdrop for the Loba’s reconstruction of women’s history.

Little critical work has been written about *Loba* despite the fact that di Prima first published sections of the long poem in 1978. Comprised of experimental syntax, diction, and subject, the poem makes no attempt to adhere to traditional methods of narrative or focus. Most of the poem develops through short poems, which often develop individual metaphors or concepts that require other of the short poems for clarity. Emphasis on colors (red and white and particular) and motifs of gemstones and water connect otherwise disparate moments in the poem. The poem is inaccessible, words combining like thorns to ward off intruders. In typical di Prima fashion, its radical feminist agenda is frequently contradicted by images of female sexuality as violence. In one description of the Loba, the reader is warned that “her arms / are vines around you, her tongue / is growing in your mouth. She / thrusts a finger deep into your cunt” (15). In all of her works, di Prima embraces the contradictory nature of sexuality—its ability to be both sensual and violent. The tone of *Loba* implies the natural order of violence in power, the

Loba is violent because of her power, defying the myth of the passive woman. The mythological women that the poem hold in highest esteem are ones who have been heralded primarily as beauties—Aphrodite, Helen, Ariadne—but whom the Loba exposes as having violent and rebellious journeys which actually define them.

Loba constructs a new mythology for all women, not just of city women. But the prevalence of the city as the site of the Loba's destruction—a site representative of man's "civilization"—makes it crucial to the poem. My reading of the poem will necessarily be incomplete as I am focusing only on the sections of the poem that speak directly to urban issues, and specifically, to demonstrating di Prima's struggle to articulate a perspective that reflects women's *flânerie*. With that in mind, I am concerned largely with two framing aspects of the poem: 1) the opening, prefatory poem, "Ave," and the subsequent descriptions of the Loba which are marked by references to the city; 2) the last two poems, "Ariadne as Starmaker" and "Persephone: Reprise" and the corresponding labyrinth motif throughout the volume. I will also discuss evidence of a *flâneuse* in the observations of some of the other poems and the reference to the city in several epigraphs to the numbered "parts" of the poem, but the basic framework of the volume will sufficiently demonstrate my concerns about *flânerie*.

Di Prima shifts the speaker of the poem back and forth from the Loba's first-person "I" to a third-person observer throughout the volume. Although I am primarily concerned with the latter as a possible *flâneuse*, the poems in which the Loba speaks lay essential groundwork in urban imagery. The volume opens with the poem "Ave," a song which calls to "O lost moon sisters," whose voices are never heard, but whom the Loba calls to her as they "wander" throughout the world. This gathering of women establishes the

poem's focus on telling the Loba's feminist mythologies. The images of women's movement begin in the city in the first stanza of the poem:

O lost moon sisters
 crescent in hair, sea underfoot do you wander
 in blue veil, in green leaf, in tattered shawl do you wander
 with goldleaf skin, with flaming hair do you wander
 on Avenue A, on Bleecker Street do you wander
 on Rampart Street, on Fillmore Street do you wander (*Loba 3*)

“Ave” opens by locating women in cities that span the country—Avenue A and Bleecker Street in Manhattan, Rampart Street and Fillmore Street in San Francisco—connecting urban women across the country who are wandering or walking, with the implication of searching and waiting.⁸ The speaker (Loba) describes the women involved in every aspect of life, depicting women's endurance—“pregnant you wander / barefoot you wander / battered by drunk men you wander”—and beauty—“you are coral / you are lapis and turquoise” (*Loba 4-5*). The Loba hears the women and walks to them, crossing sea and prairie. This collection of women will threaten to overthrow the cities. The women appear in all forms of womanhood, defying stereotypes, on a journey to dismantle the systems that confine them.

Although the women are located in urban spaces, the speaker of “Ave” defines them with Earth imagery. Like Rich's *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, di Prima's *Loba* uses nature imagery to define women. The organic again imposes on women's urban existence. The contradiction between these images is evident in the shift between two stanzas near the end of the poem:

⁸ These four streets do more than simply link major bi-coastal cities; as streets that are famous parts of artistic areas of New York and San Francisco, they are also markers of urban gay communities. “Rampart Street” has another, possibly unrelated connection, as a street in New Orleans which has been memorialized in Dixieland songs such as “South Rampart Street Parade.”

Hard-substance-woman you whirl
 you dance on subways
 you sprawl in tenements
 children lick at your tits

you are the hills, the shape and color of mesa
 you are the tent, the lodge of skins, the Hogan
 the buffalo robes, the quilt, the knitted afghan
 you are the cauldron and the evening star
 you rise over the sea, you ride the dark (*Loba 5*)

Although the woman is “hard-substance,” like urban concrete or stone and is located in subways and tenements, when defined, she “is” land and material items that suggest old west, certainly rural. The reference to “buffalo robes” and the “tent” suggest a connection to a Native American community, organically connected with the earth in a way in which city communities are not. These images suggest that despite women’s location in urban spaces, they are not identified with those spaces. The repetitive phrasing of the stanzas, unlike her repetition of male forms in earlier poems, now function as both the memorable lyricism of the Loba’s song and as Stein’s modernist repetition described previously. Throughout the volume, the Loba attempts to replace those urban locations and images with spaces in which can empower women.

The title “Ave” recalls Rich’s use of the word “laboratory” in “Frame.” Just as the breaking of the word highlights the oxymoronic relationship between science and religion in Rich’s poem, di Prima uses “Ave” as a prayer to the Loba which defies Judeo-Christian tradition. The poem looks back to Greek and Egyptian mythology (not coincidentally, connecting back to the sources of the labyrinths, another image which recurs throughout *Loba*), returning to religious practices which raise women up as gods as well as men. The Loba tears down these male gods—and their edifices of worship—to

raise her own tower of worship. The city is the central emblem of the success of male-centered religion in this poem, so the Loba must destroy it.

“Ave” establishes the city’s problematic influence on women’s lives. After this preface, the epigraphs at the beginning of two sections of the volume link the images of the city to the Loba’s mission. Book I is introduced with two epigraphs, one of which is attributed to “Shi Ching” and states “A clever man builds a city / A clever woman lays one low” (*Loba* 7). Di Prima participates in a recurring motif in urban women’s poetry: the razing and raising of the city. Brooks metaphorically reconstructs the city as a cultural emblem after the Mecca building had been razed and Lorde calls for revolution in the city, the complete destruction of the cultural and architectural center which maintained men’s control. The epigraph to “Part 5” adds to this image, quoting from Plato: “He who listens to her fearing for the safety of the city which is within him should be on guard against her seductions” (*Loba* 77). The “he” here has control of the city, it is “within him,” and although the woman (“she”) fears for the safety of the city, the quote implies that she is the actual destroyer since it warns “him” to be wary of her. If the city is the temple of “his” culture, the height of civilization, then di Prima’s use of vernacular “cd,” “wd,” and “thru,” begins the tearing down of that city by dismantling its language. Although di Prima is not participating in the kind of semiotic discussion of feminist scholars since Kristeva, her privileging of such slang forms acknowledges the problematic role of her women speaking “his” language.

Throughout *Loba*, di Prima shortens particular words to appear visually as slang (although the spelling changes rarely affect the phonetic pronunciation of the words). Often dropping the middle vowels out of words such as “would” and “could,” resulting in

“wd” and “cd,” the visual presentation of the words are condensed. Di Prima presses the length of the vowel sounds out of the words, keeping only the hard and sharp consonant sounds when possible. This compression gives words that otherwise are connectors or markers of something indefinite power and finality. Other words, such as “your” which are reduced to “yr” effectively create a hierarchical relationship between the Loba and the reader. The compressed “yr” is a reduction, made secondary and smaller to the capital “I” of the Loba’s voice. “Ave” establishes this dynamic at the beginning of the poem through tone and by arranging a relationship between the Loba as speaker and director of action and the “you”/reader as follower.

Following through on the implications of “Ave,” the speaker of the next poems emphasize the Loba’s desire to destroy the city. This speaker, who defines the Loba and follows her through the poem, watches the Loba and observes the women the Loba calls to in their various states. She questions and describes as a *flâneuse*, although the crowd through which she moves is entirely women, mythic, and often surreal. She follows the Loba initially as an unwilling detective—like the narrator of “In the Mecca”—identifying the Loba. This speaker of the poem adopts a form and tone similar to the narrator of “In the Mecca.” She maintains distance and describes the Loba’s movement without emotional involvement. When the Loba speaks in the poem, the tone and form resemble Rich’s *flâneuse*, a more personal and emotionally involved position which requires action and change.

In the opening sequence of poems, the speaker *flâneuse* describes the Loba, following her movements and actions. She describes the Loba physically (her “tit drags

on the ground”), through action (eating, laughing, baring her teeth), and metaphor (she is an “old-young woman,” a “gate,” and possibly a “city”). In the fourth poem, she asks:

Is she city? Gate she is we know
& has been, but the road
paved w/ white stones? her paws
are cut by it, the lights
blind her, yet she knows, she comes
to it, white porcelain lining (*Loba* 12)

The city here is “white porcelain” which appears to be in shards, cutting the paws of the

Loba. The city’s lights, its “whiteness,” and its “stone” are foreign to the *Loba*; she

comes because of the women who are there, but it is clearly unnatural and harmful to her.

For a poet who reveled in the city crowd, di Prima’s wolf goddess completes a change of opinion. She rejects the city, coming to it as if to rescue women from it.

The city becomes a cage which confines the both the *Loba* and the women to whom she calls. Like a mouse who will chew off its own paw to escape a trap, part of the *Loba*’s escape from the confines of urban poetic tradition is self-destructive. Women must sacrifice to dispel the power of male tradition. In one poem, the speaker directs the reader’s attention to a battle scene that alludes to black women’s struggle to develop an poetic voice:

See the young, black, naked woman riding
a dead white man. Her hair
greasy, she whips him & he flies
thru the smoky air. Her hand
is in her mouth, she is eating
flesh, it stinks, snakes wind
around her ankles. Her hand
touches the (wet) earth. Her hand
shakes a gourd rattle, she laughs, her fangs
flash white & red, they are set
with rubies. (*Loba* 14)

The opening image in this poem suggests the success of a poet like Audre Lorde: the black woman poet rides the “dead white” forefathers of poetry. Because the black woman

“rides” the man in these lines, she uses his body—suggesting his poetic forms—as a vehicle through which she develops her own voice and statement. She takes control of the forms, “whipping” him and causing him to fly into smoke. Her use of his “corpus” destroys him. The image that immediately follows is of her eating her own hand—chewing off the writing utensil—and the “stink” suggests that she does not put her hand in her mouth at this moment, but that she has been eating it in an effort to turn herself into something she is not: a dead white poet. Once she is free of the traditional influence, she touches earth and is restored. The hand now shakes a gourd rattle (an organic celebratory symbol).

This first section culminates in the poem “The Loba Dances” in which the speaker conflates the Loba’s “raising” of the city with her “razing” of it. The jagged lines of the poem, descending across the page, visually replicate the rise and fall of flames and the tearing down of the architectural pinnacles:

She raises
 in flames
 the
 city
 it glows about her (*Loba* 18)

The city actually “melts” in the poem as the crowd (“they”) sings “ashes & the ashes” in allusion to the “ashes, ashes, we all fall down” of children’s play. As the Loba “raises” the city, the crowd crowd “chants” “a new / creation myth” (*Loba* 18). Di Prima’s *flâneuse* is defined by the contradiction between the spelling of “raises” and the flames (implying the homonym “razes”). Desiring both celebration of the city and destruction of it, the speaker’s description of the Loba in the city repeats urban paradoxes, situating the Loba between creation and destruction.

Di Prima's *flâneuse* traps herself inside the contradictions. By desiring to experience everything, she looks outward to discover inward. Di Prima recognizes that her paradoxical desires, knowledges, beliefs, and sympathies create a labyrinth within the already complicated urban labyrinth. According to her description of why she experimented with so many different ways of seeing, thinking, and experiencing (specifically preceded by an explanation to her daughter about her extensive drug use):

Consciousness itself was a good. And anything that took us *outside*—that gave us the dimensions of the box we were caught in, an aerial view, as it were—showed us the exact arrangement of the maze we were walking, was a blessing Because we knew we were caught, knew beyond a doubt we were at an impasse But we had yet to take measure, find out all we could about what held us, kept us 'fascinated' How to circumvent, bypass, or take on the monster. (*Recollections* 203)

In this passage, the “maze” or “box” which di Prima feels she is “caught in” is metaphoric. As I demonstrated in the chapters on Brooks and Rich, these kinds of metaphoric mazes replicate the physical urban labyrinth which the urban crowd must navigate. From an “aerial view,” di Prima can show the maze to her readers, just as the speaker of Rich's poem in “North American Time” recognizes her urban role as she watches the city from an airplane. In this description, di Prima's *flâneuse* has moved into both the physical urban labyrinth and the figurate labyrinth of social expectations—specifically for her, the demands of consumer culture—and must find a way to do Theseus's job.

Unlike Rich, for whom the Ariadne figure becomes a limiting role, di Prima heralds Ariadne as the key to women's urban survival. She takes on the role which Ariadne passed on to Theseus, realizing that she must navigate the urban labyrinth and slay the Minotaur herself in order to regain control. Although the labyrinth is a kind of cage, the

speaker of *Loba* recognizes that there are ways to escape it: out over the top like Dedalus and Icarus, or by learning to find ones way out.

After razing the city, the Loba “builds” woman. The Loba has constructed a labyrinth of her own which will house womanhood. More like a creation myth than an epic, the poem constructs womanhood anew in the form and pattern of the Loba’s power. And yet, in the poem “The Loba Continues to Sing,” the Loba connects the reader to the image of the “black, naked woman riding / a dead white man” as a means of reconstructing man:

I will make you flesh again
 (have you slipped away)
 think you to elude, become past
 & black & white
 as photographs,
 O I will
 lure you into being till you stand
 flesh solid against my own
 I will spread my hair
 over yr feet
 my tongue
 shall give you shape, I will
 make you flesh & carry you
 away, O bright
 black lord you are, & I
 your sister
 & magic carpet
 Will you ride? (*Loba* 37)

This poem follows immediately after the poem “Love Song of the Loba” in the sequence, a poem in which the speaker calls to a male lover, a “blue beast” (*Loba* 35). The syntax of this passage leaves it unclear whether she is reconstructing the male lover (the “black lord”) or a woman. She has destroyed the physical body of the lover, turned him into the technology of his past (photography capturing and holding the black/white dichotomy), and rebuilds him with her “tongue”—her words.

The labyrinth which the Loba constructs now contains man the way that his labyrinth formerly contained women. Part 2 of the poem is dominated by the repeated phrase (quoted from Ovid, according to the epigraph): “Her power is to open what is shut / Shut what is open” (*Loba* 39, 43). This power to control the entrance and exit of movement through the labyrinth is crucial. Whereas Rich’s poems intend only to open up doors, di Prima’s acknowledge the power in being able to shut doors that were once open. By closing doors, she creates new pathways and directs movement of the crowd differently than men did. The Loba exploits this power throughout the poem.

To the literal and figurative labyrinths, di Prima adds another. In “Part 9,” a title follows a quote from an “imaginary Jungian scholar.” The title states, “Loba as Kore in the Labyrinth of Her Beauty,” and it accompanies a second title, “The Loba Seeks the Mother in the Infinite Reaches of Night” (*Loba* 165). This poem locates the Loba in relation to the Egyptian labyrinth:

This is a journey to Egypt
 Secret, prolonged, & varied as the paths
 of planet out of orbit, brushed aside
 by demon Chance
 This is the internal labyrinth of Nuit⁹
 her bowels
 thru which stars fall to birth. (*Loba* 165)

The labyrinth becomes an “internal” one here, and although it is located in a woman’s “bowels,” it produces “stars.” Like the “coal” of Lorde’s poetic imagery, the stars here represent an inescapable aspect of women’s identity. They are born from and into the labyrinth, they are points of light within the darkness, but they will have to battle monsters (the “demon Chance” here) to escape such confines. The overlapping of

⁹ Nuit, also sometimes spelled “Nut,” was the Egyptian sky goddess.

labyrinths, journeying, monsters, and stars repeats in the second to last poem of the volume.

Although di Prima closes her feminist, mythological epic with the image of women connected in “Persephone: Reprise,” the second to last poem of the volume, “Ariadne as Starmaker” culminates the speaker’s journey through and struggle with the city as a *flâneuse*. Repeating images of webs in the poem allude to the labyrinth’s entrapment of women. The title of the poem indicates that, like the Nuit figure in the last poem, Ariadne is the maker of “stars.” Just as Rich resists Ariadne, di Prima contradictorily hails Ariadne as one of the most important goddess figures¹⁰ and then identifies her figure as the representation of women’s limitations. The poem concludes:

She pleasures herself
in the binding
& the loosing

We give her the slip
to fly to an infinite
sadness
clear as cold water

Is she also
There? (*Loba* 313)

Di Prima looks to an earlier story of Ariadne in which she is primarily seen as a goddess who represents the tangled issues that define the meaning of life, like a ball of thread, which lie at the center of the maze, waiting to be brought out into the light. In this goddess form, Ariadne is associated with labyrinths and spiraling motion (Took website). Di Prima’s *flâneuse* tries to escape the confines of Ariadne’s “static web,” which catches women like an “intangible & / inescapable” “net,” but in this last question, she

¹⁰ Di Prima lists important goddess figures on p. 54 of *Loba* and Ariadne’s name is followed by “(most holy).”

acknowledges that because she cannot see Ariadne, the dead end may become visible only later (*Loba* 312–13). Di Prima spent her entire poetic career in New York watching from the crowd, moving through the city, claiming that her *flâneuse* is able to appropriate the male power of *flânerie* and to move beyond the limitations which Ariadne represents. Yet such an appropriation has built-in limitations based on the debt to the original.

Di Prima's *flâneuse* joins Rich's *flâneuse* as a possibility, a desire even, never fully achieved. As the speaker of her poem "Montezuma" concludes, di Prima discovers that "no city is ever built again" (Waldman 125). Di Prima pushes the boundaries of *flânerie*, testing out the tension between its ability to empower urban poets and the limitations of its definition inherited from Benjamin. Although *Loba* demonstrates the kind of feminist urban poetics to which the *flâneuse* can lead, she does so by departing from her reliance on urban imagery. Di Prima discovers that just as appropriating a pirate's costume was limited by the very tensions which it allowed her to explore, appropriating *flânerie* requires too much attention to the past.

CHAPTER 5
AUDRE LORDE: ACTIVATING THE *FLÂNEUSE*

Although city imagery is a staple of Lorde's poetry, I have chosen to narrow my focus in this chapter to the volume of poems, *New York Head Shop and Museum*, which was published in 1974. The volume represents a time in Lorde's poetic development when, as she explained to Charles H. Rowell, she "felt committed to the city...for a period of time" (56). For Lorde, the racial segregation of city neighborhoods, the economic disenfranchisement of the urban—and predominantly African American—poor, the insidious drug use which was marked by the appearance of crack in black communities, and the general despair of urban youth required response. As a self-proclaimed voice from the margin, Lorde's *flâneuse* uses the empowering observation to expose such socio-political inequalities. She confronts the limitations of *flânerie*, redefining it to meet her needs without sacrificing the basic elements of the poetic practice that make it function.

Like her friend, and fellow member of a group who called themselves "The Branded" at Hunter High School in Manhattan, Di Prima, Lorde embraced multiplicity, heterogeneity, and difference even when it resulted in contradiction. Lorde and di Prima recognize how the city, by condensing the array of human differences into a crowd, exposes conflict and paradox as inescapable. The title *New York Head Shop and Museum* reflects this interest in privileging the conflation of opposition in the city. The poems of the volume are artifacts of both "head shops" and "museums." Head shops, stores which trade in tobacco products, smoking paraphernalia, and alternative texts

(often comic books and graphic novels), represent the margin: they provide escape through mind-altering substances and art which meets different aesthetic standards than those defined by the critical elite. Museums house elite art which has exceeded commodity exchange value and been removed from the market. Just as di Prima resists the aesthetic control of museums in “Magick in Theory & Practice,” Lorde usurps that control and reassigns it to the “lowbrow” culture of head shops. Lorde bridges the divide between the head shop and museum by joining them, disrupting the apparent contradiction by conflating them, which both values and devalues each.

By claiming that Lorde’s poetry employs the perspective of a *flâneuse*, I negotiate a similar contradiction: she is a black, lesbian woman in 1970s New York City revising a perspective defined as the exclusive domain of white, upper-class gentlemen in nineteenth century Paris. Lorde’s *flâneuse* does more than demonstrate women’s participation in urban observation, she deconstructs *flânerie* to expose the invalid assumptions of simple dichotomies in the city. She problematizes the visibility/invisibility binary, complicates the separation of poet biography and poetic speaker (refusing to see “Truth” and fiction as oppositional), denies the necessity of leisure for investigative observation of the crowd, and interrogates the value of alienation for objective observation in order to push her feminist urban poetics to change the city. Employing the rage and revolt of Black Arts poetics, Lorde builds from the literary foundation of Hughes and McKay, revises restrictive poetic traditions, and articulates a complex, but successful black *flâneuse* in *New York Head Shop and Museum*.

The poems of *New York Head Shop and Museum* are linked thematically by the movement of Lorde’s *flâneuse* through the city. Lorde’s *flâneuse* is liberated from the

confining structures of buildings or artificial urban spaces. Instead, she adds the symbolic labyrinth of the economic and socio-political system which establishes the disenfranchisement of the poor to the physical and figurative labyrinths that Brooks, Rich, and di Prima negotiate (represented by the architectural spaces and the social expectations such as those of consumer culture). Lorde's *flâneuse* moves through and observes the crowd from such varied urban spaces as the subway and subway stations, the highways that run the perimeter of Manhattan (both east and west sides), streets in the East Village, Wall Street, Brighton Beach, Harlem, and the Staten Island Ferry. Together, they capture the specific culture of 1970s New York just as Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* capture 1850s Paris.

Razing the City as Revolution

The journey begins with a general view of and response to the city in "New York City 1970," which establishes the incendiary ulterior motives of the activist *flâneuse*'s poetic response. "New York City 1970" suggests Lorde's intent to use her poetry as social protest, to expect her audience to be moved to revolt, and for poetry to bring about change in the city. The poem is written in two parts, each separated into three stanzas of irregular length which appear as mirror images: in the first part, the stanzas begin short and increase in size (5 lines, 11 lines, 19 lines), in the second part they decrease in size (20 lines, 12 lines, 4 lines).

The development of action in the poems reflects the formal construction. The speaker begins by asking "how do you spell change," moves to declaring that "there is nothing beautiful left in the streets of this city," and builds to a crescendo of "submitting" her children to the violence of the city:

I submit them
 loving them above all others save myself
 to the fire to the rage to the ritual scarifications
 to be tried as new steel is tried;
 and in its wasting the city shall try them
 as the blood-splash of a royal victim
 tries the hand of the destroyer. (*Collected* 101)

The shocking “blood-splash” of the children’s sacrifice is the culmination of the gradual building of desperate desire for revolution. The speaker’s quiet claim at the beginning of the second stanza that she has “come to believe in death and renewal by fire” reinforces the first stanza’s question, “And what does the we-bird see with / who has lost its I’s?” The lines suggest that, like a phoenix, the city can be reborn. The speaker includes herself in the corrupted state of the city: the bird is a “we-bird,” inclusive and yet suggesting the insignificance of “wee,” and no longer possessing the singular “I.” The homonym “eye” also suggests the bird’s loss of sight; the city cannot see what its future will be. The speaker’s observation of the “grim city” gathers speed as she builds a call for revolution, not seeing what changes may happen, but knowing that “it is time for fruit and all the agonies are barren— / only the children are growing” (*Collected* 101). The image of the city as “barren” implies the total destruction of natural life. Just as Brooks and Rich employed organic images in the city to suggest its intolerance of plant life (representative of women), Lorde suggests that it decimates all life because these growing children will also be sacrificed.

Despite the violence, the first half of “New York City 1970” is marked by the hope of feminist urban renewal. The speaker accedes to the city because she is “past questioning the necessities of blood / or why it must be mine or my children’s time / that will see the grim city quake to be reborn perhaps” (*Collected* 101). Although the hope for rebirth is qualified by the “perhaps,” the speaker recognizes that the destruction must

happen even if reconstruction cannot occur. The speaker indicates that destruction of the urban system—a Minotaur-like monster—is something worth hoping for even if the beginning that comes from its ending is unforeseeable. Di Prima’s black woman (urban poet) has to “ride” the tradition in order to stop chewing off her own hand, and Lorde’s, similarly, has to destroy the city in order to stop sacrificing her children to it.

The poetics reflects the complexity of the speaker’s response to the city, reinforcing her ability to be “bound like an old lover” to the city, but simultaneously call for its destruction. Lexi Rudnitsky identifies Lorde’s frequent use of a poetic form called *apo koinou*, a poetic strategy which allows for multiple meanings of words and/or lines. According to Rudnitsky, *apo koinou* is “a particular kind of enjambment, in which the meaning of a line is altered by the line adjacent to it” (475). Although not the best example of *apo koinou*, the first three lines of the long quote above suggest it.¹ The line “loving them above all others save myself” disrupts the continuous thought which connects the previous and following lines, “I submit them” / “to the fire to the rage to the ritual scarifications” (*Collected* 101). By qualifying the violent act, the middle line emphasizes the speaker’s desire for redemption from destruction.

Part II of “New York City 1970” picks up where Part I left off and then winds down to the quiet pessimism of the concluding lines. The first stanza opens with accusations against New York as the “empire’s altar,” the emblem of “a continent’s insanity” which was “conceived in the psychic twilight of murderers and pilgrims”

¹ *Apo koinou* should result in the changed meaning of a word or phrase when considered on its own or in context with a previous or following line. In the example I give here, the middle line functions more like a parenthetical phrase. Therefore, I say it is suggestive of *apo koinou* rather than an actual example of it. I will come to more profound examples later in the chapter. I should note as well that I am referring to a second meaning of *apo koinou* to which Rudnitsky refers; she defines the first as “from the Greek ‘in common,’ *apo koinou* is a device in which a single word or phrase is shared by two independent syntactic units” (475).

(*Collected* 102). The speaker watches as “flames”—metonyms for people whose fury moves them to revolt—walk through the streets. But her optimistic prophecy of revolution against the established authorities (the “murderers and pilgrims”) dwindles as she observes the crowd of “useless people” who “cannot bend,” who are descendents of the murderers and pilgrims, refusing to question or change the inherited system. The active verbs of this first stanza maintain the speaker’s anger, marking the grotesque activities of the authority figures: “raging,” “smeared,” “rank,” “bomb,” “shit.” Lorde’s *flâneuse* asserts her political agenda for the volume *New York Head Shop and Museum* in this opening poem. She watches the crowd in order to highlight the inequalities, the privileges, and the violence.

By the second stanza, the speaker begins to give up hope, despairing that she cannot change people who “bomb” children and “shit” replicas of their parents’ elitism. In the end, the speaker walks “down the withering limbs of my last discarded house / and there is nothing worth salvage left in this city / but the faint reedy voices like echoes / of once beautiful children” (*Collected* 102). The children she sees have lost the beauty—i.e. innocence and purity—which should be allowed them in their youth. These last lines of “New York City 1970” parallel the end of “In the Mecca,” which ends with Pepita’s “chopped chirpings oddly rising,” her voice saying “petals of a rose. / A silky feeling through me goes!” replaced with the echo of her dying sounds (*ITM* 31). The children, which Lorde’s poem insists still are worth “salvage,” their sacrifice not worthless, are the last voices of the city’s necessary destruction and they hold the “faint” hope of renewal. If the effects of urban poverty and disenfranchisement on adults cannot move the crowd to action, this speaker hopes that the stories of children might. It is the supposedly

innocent children who may finally motivate the crowd (or in this case, the readers) to make changes.

The narration of “New York City 1970” suggests *flânerie*. The speaker’s perspective, movement, and insight lay the groundwork for a *flâneuse* whose position as empowered observer will develop throughout the volume. Although the speaker identifies with those locked in the economic margin of the urban crowd, her confident tone assures the reader that her outsider status has provided her with a power that the mainstream crowd lacks. She has the ability to expose the inequality, the confidence to raise her voice above the din and force those who have considered her invisible to acknowledge her. The poems suggest that Lorde’s *flâneuse* observed from the margins of the crowd and then wrote into her poems the calls to action that one might expect from a street corner soapbox orator.

The images in “New York City 1970” imply that the speaker moves through city spaces, watching the crowd and assessing its revolutionary possibility. In the individuals who make up the masses she sees remnants of history, extrapolating life stories from appearances, as Baudelaire does. The opening of the second part shows the strongest correlation to *flânerie*: “I hide behind tenements and subways in fluorescent alleys / watching as flames walk the streets of an empire’s altar” (*Collected* 102). The need to “hide” assures her invisibility as a *flâneuse*, but as the locations indicate, she is watching a marginalized “crowd” here: those who are “flames” are probably disenfranchised, suggesting people in the gay community or people who are consumed by rage. The speaker’s observation suggests that they are also hidden in inner-city areas marked by tenements and alleys. “New York City 1970,” then, corroborates di Prima’s suggestion

that the city has multiple “crowds” which move through different urban spaces. The speaker “hides” from the hegemonic crowd of city centers, not from the crowd which has the ability to revolt and change the city.

As a declaration of war on the city as a symbol of American corruption, “New York City 1970” represents Lorde’s belief in the power of poetry for social activism and establishes her revolutionary intent for *New York Head Shop and Museum*. Peter Robinson suggests that there is a working relationship between poetry, poets, and readers that can “make things happen,” a concept that Lorde clearly believed as well (1). According to Robinson, literary texts invite and establish promissory relationships with readers, making poems informal or formal institutional acts. He reminds us that “poetry making things happen is...a result of our using poems to mean something” and “people wouldn’t read poetry if it didn’t do *something* for them” (Robinson 2, 28, italics his). As Lorde explains to Rowell, what she expects her poems to *do* is build bridges between people and communities so that they can understand their differences (54).

And yet the tone of her poems indicates that she seeks something other than simple bridges. In fact, images of bridges in her other poems often offer up a very different meaning than the one Lorde suggested to Rowell. In the poem “Generation,” she speaks of children:

who came back from the latched cities of falsehood
Warning—the road to Nowhere is slippery with our blood
Warning—You need not drink the river to get home
For we purchased bridges with our mothers’ bloody gold (*Collected* 17)

The bridges in this poem are covered in the blood of young women who tried to break down the city gates that maintain inequality. These bridges are tainted with the sacrifice of others and are therefore a “failure.” They cannot actually connect people. Lorde’s own

personal history alludes to her frustration with bridge building. Although she certainly put great effort into helping break down the barriers between people with different ideological affiliations, recording interviews with Adrienne Rich and raising her children with a white partner, she also expresses understandable exasperation at spending a lifetime educating the mainstream about race and homosexuality. As Alexis de Veaux explains, she spent much of her time isolated from black communities because of her sexuality and, furthermore, “understood herself as a woman harboring tremendous anger” (87). De Veaux’s difficulty finding people who were willing to discuss Lorde with her is just an inkling of how difficult a person Lorde was socially.

Because politics were such a priority in her personal life and to her perspective on urban lifestyles, Lorde’s poetry was necessarily “activist,” meaning that it could incite readers into becoming actively involved in changing politics, economics, and social standards. She corroborates June Jordan’s belief that the function of a poet is “to make revolution irresistible” (Rowell 62). The values of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement become infused in Lorde’s notion of art’s value.

Lorde’s political knowledge began at an early age. According to de Veaux, her father “identified himself as a ‘race man’,” a supporter of Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement (20). The only black student in her Catholic elementary school, Lorde confronted racism from teachers and fellow students at an early age; and within her own home she experienced the “colorism” of intra-racial discrimination that favored light skin, straight hair, and thin bodies. As a developing writer, she attended both the Countee Cullen Writers’ Workshop and the Harlem Writers Guild, although she quickly

discovered that her identity politics often clashed with the ideals of the black community.

De Veaux explains that:

The weekly meetings of the Harlem Writers Guild put Audre in touch with an organized black consciousness, afforded her an opportunity to have her poems heard, and was where the writer and scholar of African studies, John Henrik Clarke, mentored her But Audre felt that an ‘uneasy dialogue’ existed between herself, Clarke, and the largely black male, heterosexual group, whom she suspected ‘tolerated but never really accepted’ her” (39).

The values of the Black Arts Movement leaders in particular rubbed Lorde the wrong way. The success of such Black Arts Movement writers as Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni demonstrate the difference between their politics and Lorde’s. Rich’s insistence on defining herself as a feminist and living as a lesbian estranged her from a movement which, although not as stringently as the Black Power Movement, assumed that the political agenda was to obtain political equality for men first, often by pushing their art/literature before women’s. As de Veaux continues, the women whose writings were accepted by Black Arts Movement men “reflected an ‘acceptable’ kinship with black men and suppressed gendered perspectives inconsistent with a monolithic, ‘authentic’ blackness. In contrast, Lorde’s more lyric, understated poetry was out of sync with these raced designs” (92). Lorde’s style did become less understated and more overtly political over time, but she never subsumed her lyric interests to the politics.

Although Lorde did decide to become involved in Civil Rights Movement activities, excited by the prospect that racism could be brought to an end, her enthusiasm was thwarted by her intense focus on her personal life. She intended to participate in the Freedom Rides, but when her friend was talked out of it by her mother—worrying about the safety of two young women—she dropped the issue (de Veaux 69–72). Instead, she focused her attention on her developing relationship with the man she eventually married

and had children with. Lorde used her poetic voice as her political activism rather than participating in many of the typical Civil Rights movement protest activities.

Furthermore, Lorde faced class differences with many of the political movements. Although she spent much of her life in poverty, she valued education and never considered herself working class. Much of her rage stemmed from being treated as—or having to live as—working class. De Veaux remarks that “Lorde’s attitude echoed her parents’ practice of disallowing certain cultural practices associated with ‘common’ black life in their home” (88). The sense of cultural superiority that Lorde felt, especially over the ignorance of racial and sexual hatred that she faced, is a motivating factor in her ability to achieve *flânerie*. She sought control over her relationships with other people and the situations in her life, including her observation of the urban crowd. *Flânerie* provided her a method for exerting control on the chaotic crowd. Her observations locate, extricate, and respond to the people and circumstances which she considers criminal, unacceptable, remarkable, and exemplary of urban life.

Lorde’s aesthetic standards are defined as much by a poem’s ability to cause revolution as by form, syntax, diction, or image. Her *flânerie* combines an aesthetic practice with a political practice. She explains this position in the essay “My Words Will Be There”:

[T]he question of social protest and art is inseparable for me. I can’t say it is an either/or proposition. Art for art’s sake doesn’t really exist for me... What I saw was wrong, and I had to speak up. I loved poetry and I loved words. But what was beautiful had to serve the purpose of changing my life, or I would have died. If I cannot air this pain and alter it, I will surely die of it. That’s the beginning of social protest. (264)

Lorde’s dismissal of “art for art’s sake” and insistence on “the power of the pen” echoes the efforts of Brooks and Rich to provide alternate maps of urban spaces. The poetic

construction of the Mecca building in “In the Mecca” protects it from historical oblivion. Rich’s “(The Dream-Site)” provides an alternate “atlas” of New York City from a woman’s perspective. Lorde’s *New York Head Shop and Museum* records the map of a city at the brink of revolution: a new map is possible and imminent if the crowd will heed her call to revolt.

Lorde’s insistence on poetry as social activism does not necessarily prohibit the possibility of *flânerie*. Lorde’s speakers are typically moving through the city crowd in the *New York Head Shop and Museum* poems, watching just as a *flâneuse* would. The incidents of “crime” upon which they stumble are often of deviant figures in the crowd, just as Baudelaire’s *flâneur* writes about prostitutes. Lorde’s *flâneuse* is not enchanted by these figures as the *flâneur* is, reveling in their grotesque difference, but sympathetic to their plight. In “To My Daughter The Junkie On A Train,” the speaker watches a young drug addict nodding to sleep on the train. The speaker, as *flâneuse* observes the relationship between the junkie—a girl—and the women on the subway:

Children we have not borne
bedevil us by becoming
themselves
painfully sharp and unavoidable
like a needle in our flesh. (*Collected* 103)

Aligning herself with the women on the train, the speaker notes how the girl could be a daughter to any one of them. The lines employ *apo koinou* to establish the girl’s symbolic presence. By separating “themselves” onto a line of its own, Lorde emphasizes the double meaning of the “daughter’s” unnatural birth—she has “become” without being “borne”—and her ability to “become” herself—develop into a person totally unlike the mothers’ desires for their daughters. The girl’s addiction is then projected onto the women—her presence is the “needle” in their flesh. Although the speaker feels

symbolically connected to the girl, she maintains a distanced observation through the first two stanzas.

The girl is an example of the kind of systemic economic crime that Lorde's *flâneuse* cannot help but stumble upon in the crowd as well. Not necessarily a criminal in the sense of a thief or murderer, the junkie's crime is economic (the purchase of an illegal commodity item—or one that is at least highly regulated and controlled by the government) and self-destructive. The *flâneuse* paints the real crime as the indifference of the crowd to the girl's plight. Their neglect of the symbolic "daughters" contributes to the cycle of neglect of people in need. The crowd has learned to turn away rather than solve the problem, which allows the system to continue to abuse the poor, the incapacitated, the disabled, and the different. Whereas Benjamin's description of the *flâneur's* "intoxication" is one that contributes to his artistic value, Lorde's portrayal of intoxication in the crowd is a symbol of economic disenfranchisement, social neglect, and the seedy underbelly of the commodity market.

When the speaker breaks the boundaries of *flânerie* by reaching out to the girl, the illusion of her connection is shattered. The boundaries of *flânerie's* distanced observation cannot be crossed, and the speaker is punished for her attempt to put her social activism into effect on the train rather than in a poem. When the speaker rouses the girl, it disrupts not only the speaker's reverie, but her poetics as well: "your costly dream explodes / into a terrible technicoloured laughter / at my failure" (*Collected* 103–04). Suddenly the lines invoke Langston Hughes's "Harlem," alluding to the question "What happens to a dream deferred?" at the beginning of the poem and the final question "*Or does it explode?*" (Hughes). The explosion is both of the drug-induced dream and of the laughter, which

combine to answer Hughes's question and shame the *flâneuse* for drawing attention to herself. By emerging from the crowd, disrupting her invisibility and drawing the attention of both the girl and the rest of the crowd, the speaker loses her empowered observation. It is at this point that the other women look away, not only from the girl, but from the speaker as well.

As both "New York City 1970" and "My Daughter The Junkie On A Train" suggest, Lorde complicates *flânerie* in similar ways that Brooks, Rich, and di Prima do. The speakers of the poems in *New York Head Shop and Museum* exhibit characteristics of unwilling detection of crime (sometimes more loosely identified than others: i.e., the junkie's drug habit is a crime of sorts, but so is the women's choice to look away), they are anonymous observers wandering in the crowd, they have a heightened awareness of the urban setting (demanding that it change), and they are outsider figures, alienated and making their "home" in the crowd. Although some of the speakers have identified destinations (the speaker of "My Daughter The Junkie On A Train" is "coming home . . . from a PTA meeting"), the destination rarely controls her attention.

Lorde's speakers often depart from defining aspects of *flânerie*, as when the speaker of "My Daughter The Junkie On A Train" breaks her anonymous observation to offer assistance to the junkie. This moment exemplifies Lorde's interrogation of the tension between visibility and invisibility in the crowd. She exposes the unstable foundation upon which Benjamin's *flâneur* teeters by assuming he could achieve invisibility. There are flaws built into presumptions of anyone's ability to achieve invisibility in the crowd, of the presumed objectivity that such invisibility affords, and the value of the supposed emotional distance provided by such anonymous observation.

Issues of visibility/invisibility have received critical attention from black feminist critics (including Lorde and which are corroborated in prose descriptions and theories from Rich and di Prima) who point out the ways that black women's invisibility can be either an asset or a liability.

Empowering the Invisible Margin

Black women expose the contradictory nature of visibility and invisibility in the crowd. They are both highly visible because of their gender (and particularly because of stereotypes of black women as hyper-sexualized), but invisible because of their race. Lorde explains that: "Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (*Sister Outsider* 42). Lorde notes that even in visibility, stereotypes render black women invisible. As critics such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have described, this kind of invisibility often silences black women, disabling them by denying their existence. In order to assert their ability to contribute, according to Collins, black women must break silence: "By speaking out, formerly victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity, they simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experiences" (48). The kind of testimonial of existence that breaks silence also "disrupt[s] public truths" or stereotypes about black women so that they can "claim the authority of experience" as Sojourner Truth did when she asked "a'n't I a woman?" (Collins 48, Truth 36). Lorde's *flâneuse* must interrogate this tension, both breaking silence from the crowd and choosing silence as empowering observation.

Lorde's invisibility in the crowd is often a source of anxiety in her poems. She seeks connections with other women in the crowd and the validation provided by acknowledgement by those she knows. In a poem that is not in the *New York Head Shop and Museum* volume called "A Poem for a Poet," the speaker responds to Randall Jarrell's missing her in the street. She watches him, imagining a conversation that could occur between them, but he does not see her (*Collected* 48–9). The distance between the speaker and Jarrell allows her to reminisce and to give closure to their relationship without his interference. She remembers their time together in North Carolina (her first trip to the South) and how it was

Untouched
by the winds buffeting up from Greensboro
and nobody mentioned the Black Revolution
or Sit-Ins or Freedom Rides or SNCC
or cattle-prods in Jackson, Mississippi—
where I was to find myself how many years later (*Collected* 49)

The distance between the speaker and Jarrell is filled now by her newly acquired commitment to politics. Their time together is remembered starkly, without nostalgia, because she wants to tell him that he was "mistaken that night" when he told her she "took [her] living too seriously" (*Collected* 49). The distance from which the speaker watches Jarrell walking by in "this dying city" allows her to place their relationship in context with the political climate of the time and in the urban context which defines their separation in this moment of observation. The city is between them, a metonym for the racist system which separates the speaker from Jarrell.

If "A Poem for a Poet" pursues the privilege of being able to observe both one's personal history and one's connection to other members of the crowd from a distance, other poems grapple with the denial such distance enforces. In another poem not from the

New York Head Shop and Museum volume, “The Dozens,” the speaker defends herself against the insult of being ignored on the street. The poem begins with a reproach: “Nothing says that you must see me in the street / with us so close together at that red light / a blind man would have smelled his grocer” (*Collected* 46). The delivery of these lines is clearly sarcastic, the implication that someone might be more willing to acknowledge the neighborhood grocer over an intimate friend. The lover’s denial of the speaker’s existence in the street is an insult which hurts the speaker. The lover’s refusal to acknowledge his lover on the street denies her existence. The denial creates a paradox by which his previous attention drew her out of invisibility and then, by the very fact of denial, enforces an invisibility that is no longer required. In these poems, Lorde works through the anxieties of public denial implied by invisibility.

On the other hand, visibility is just as often a cause for denial as invisibility in the *New York Head Shop and Museum* poems. The poem “Cables to Rage or I’ve Been Talking on This Street Corner a Hell of a Long Time” responds to moments when the speaker’s visible skin color causes other members of the crowd to treat her as invisible. The speaker describes three moments when other members of the crowd deliberately render her invisible: first when she slips in the snow and the booted feet of the crowd trample her laundry ticket, ignoring her presence; then, in her Brighton Beach home, her “yente” neighbor bemoans having to live with a black woman while drinking up the speaker’s cream soda, simultaneously decrying the speaker’s existence and rendering her visible by ignoring her right to ownership; finally, a bus driver refuses to pick up the speaker when he sees that she is black, leaving her standing in the rain. The speaker calls

these incidents “doses of truth— / that particular form of annihilation,” explaining that the look—the gaze that marks visibility—is a “cold eye of the way things are”:

but oh that captain marvel glance
 brushing up against my skull like a steel bar
 in passing
 and my heart withered sheets in the gutter
 passing passing
 booted feet and bus drivers
 and old yentes in Brighton Beach kitchens
 SHIT! said the king and the whole court strained
 passing
 me out as an ill-tempered wind
 lashing around the corner
 of 125th Street and Lenox. (*Collected* 116)

The speaker’s simultaneous visibility and invisibility (the glance that denies) represents the accepted racism against black women in the crowd. The speaker’s repetition of the word “passing” is particularly poignant in this regard: not only does it suggest the crowd’s movement past her without pause and the scatological connection to the speaker’s treatment as—and therefore metaphorical embodiment of—a bowel movement, it also suggests the ineffectiveness of the crowd’s persecution since other, more light-skinned women may be “passing” and blending into the crowd, which is another problematic form of invisibility which is both empowering and a denial.

Lorde’s poems refuse to resolve the problem of black women’s simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Instead, she investigates the repercussions within the city’s labyrinthine social structures. For Lorde, neither the visibility nor invisibility of black women in the crowd address the biggest problem: when invisibility negates the possibility of the gaze. In each of these poems, the speaker is still capable of looking and watching. Lorde recognizes that the issue of invisibility can prevent women from comfortably exchanging glances on city streets. Particularly between lesbian women, the

exchange of the gaze can be dangerous. Lori Walk explains that “rather than a reciprocity that leads to strength, the gaze leads to a revealing of invisibility or powerlessness, a reflected oppression or reversible ‘objectivity’” (822). Walk’s observation complicates the issue of women’s inability to employ the gaze suggested preeminently by such feminist scholars as Luce Irigaray and Laura Mulvey and propounded by critics such as Buck-Morss, Wolff, and Ferguson who argue the gaze as evidence of the invalidity of women’s *flânerie*. Walk implies that although women are able to exchange gazes, for lesbian women, that gaze suggests collusion in accepting invisibility. In fact, the women are not invisible, but their visible existence is maintained through the denial of the invisible lesbian identity. As the averted glances of the women on the train in “My Daughter the Junkie On A Train” demonstrate, even in visibility, the gaze can be used to deny existence.

One of the ways that Lorde’s poems empower her anonymous gaze is by validating the existence of marginalized individuals by observing and recording them in poems. For instance, in the poem “Keyfood,” the speaker describes a woman who is watching the crowd. Like the narrator of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” the woman “waits / by the window” “[i]n the Keyfood Market on Broadway,” her “restless experienced eyes” watching and judging (*Collected* 117). The speaker says that the woman has been “labeled old / like yesterday’s bread,” a name that implies her invisibility in the crowd: she goes unnoticed except by others who have been marginalized, like the black *flâneuse*. The woman has been reduced to this watching because she has been stripped, presumably by age, of her other powers:

Once she was all
the sums of her knowing

counting on her to sustain them
 once she was more
 somebody else's mother than mine
 now she weighs faces
 as once she weighed grapefruit. (*Collected* 117).

Despite the old woman's lost purpose in the crowd, the speaker gives her a history, just as Baudelaire's *flâneur* did for the women he passed in the crowd. The speaker recognizes that the old woman is still participating in the crowd, seeing the reflection of her own "weighing of faces." From an empowered position of invisibility, Lorde's *flâneuse* watches others who resist the void created by their invisibility.

One way that Lorde resists negative invisibility is through a motif of naming. By naming places, objects, and themselves, the marginalized members of the crowd can reclaim their existence. In "To Desi As Joe As Smoky The Lover of 115th Street," Lorde's *flâneuse* responds to her observation of a graffiti artist writing underneath a bridge. According to Lester Olson, "To engage the double bind posed by language for members of subordinated communities, Lorde underscored the value of naming, renaming, and redefining experiences though [sic] an activity that she referred to as 'reclaiming language'" (453). Such a practice writes or speaks the existence of the named person or object. Whereas the absence of naming had previously justified the invisibility of the person, by inscribing the name, Lorde brings the person into lasting existence. The speaker remarks that "[t]here was nothing at all / furtive / about your magenta scrawling" which named "Desi as Joe as Smoky the Lover of 115th Street" (*Collected* 105). Speaking in opposition, as if denying another's claim that the naming should be furtive, the lines declare the existence of a neglected member(s)/artist(s) of the inner-city.

The speaker wonders both about the permanence of the words (any metaphorical or literal "approaching storm" is less likely to "wash you away") and the audience for the

word: “But there was nothing at all / to see over your shoulder / except my eyes in a passing tide of cars” (*Collected* 105). The graffiti writer has declared his existence, but the speaker of the poem wonders if she is the only one who recognizes and acknowledges the value of this naming. The speaker sees indecision in a flourish that resembles a question mark, and recognizes that, despite the multiple names in the title phrase, the face of the artist she sees remains a “face without a name” (*Collected* 106). By seeing the artist, the *flâneuse* recognizes the simultaneous invisibility of the person behind the “tag” and the reclaimed space implied in the words.

One possible resolution to negative invisibility that Lorde’s poems suggest is reclaiming identity through naming. Another is her own reclamation of the gaze by assuming the empowered invisibility that allows for poetic observation, writing from the perspective of not just a *flâneuse*, but a *flâneuse* who is empowered by her reclamation of blackness and lesbianism as positions which complicate invisibility, observation, and *flânerie*. According to Benjamin, the kind of order implied in naming—similar to the numbering of houses and streets under Haussman’s urban reforms—was an infringement on the *flâneur*’s free movement through the crowd. But for Lorde, the intoxication that the *flâneur* experienced in the crowd was a delusion. People whose invisibility in the city crowd was caused by disenfranchisement rather than chosen from luxury, were developing ways to break down the binary of visible/invisible. She allows her *flâneuse* to acknowledge the affects of race, sexuality, marginality, etc. in the crowd and to write from that position, so that *flânerie* disrupts illusions rather than perpetuating them.

One system through which visibility and invisibility are inscribed is consumerism. The speakers of Lorde’s poems respond to the commodity culture’s ability to empower or

deny access. The destruction of the laundry ticket in “Cables to Rage” symbolizes the denial of the speaker’s right to have access to consumer culture. Without the ticket, she will have difficulty retrieving her belongings: “I’ll never get my clean sheet” (*Collected* 115). It also marks her as unworthy of possession, so not only is her purchasing power restricted, her right to claim ownership is restricted. Similarly, the women on the train in “My Daughter the Junkie On A Train” represent women’s value in mainstream consumer culture: their use as mothers is to raise daughters who participate in consumer culture. The symbolic “daughter” who is a junkie represents the failure of this system: she functions outside mainstream commodity culture (her commodity needs are illegal) and she therefore renders the “mothers” useless. The poem ends: “women avert their eyes / as the other mothers who became useless / curse their children who became junk” (*Collected* 104). The women—both the useless mothers and the daughters who are junk—are reduced to commodity items themselves, but they are commodities which have no exchange value.

Protesting Economic Disenfranchisement

For Lorde, the superficiality of commodities is a problem, but even worse, she recognizes the implied purchase of hegemonic, white culture through the purchase of commodities. The *flâneur’s* intoxication was “the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers” according to Benjamin (55). Lorde recognizes her *flâneuse’s* relationship to commodities in the city as well and, like di Prima, chooses to resist their control. The poem “Monkeyman” responds to the insistence of consumerism in the city. Like a drug addiction, the “monkey” on the speaker’s back is specifically male-defined. He is a man who “tugs at my short hairs / trying to make me look into shop windows / trying to make me buy / wigs and girdles and polyutherane pillows” (*Collected*

135). The items that are displayed in the shop windows are either unnecessary or would force the speaker to conform to a singular, white notion of beauty and femininity.

The connection between the sub-culture of illegal commodity exchange in “My Daughter The Junkie On A Train” and the culturally condoned commodity exchange of items designed to distort one’s physical features (wigs and girdles) enacts a stunning rejection of Anne Friedberg’s “window shopping” *flâneuse*. Lorde’s *flâneuse* turns the mainstream consumer into a socially accepted junkie who exchanges self worth for items that are, at best, costumes and, at worst, physically destructive. This politically aware *flâneuse* has a perspective that charges the consumer exchange with economic, social, and environmental consequences.

The speaker especially responds to the ways that hegemonic, commodity culture infiltrates her conscience in the lines “he confuses my tongue by shitting his symbols / into my words” (*Collected* 135). By controlling her language construction, the monkey man not only controls the speaker’s desire for commodity items that mass culture (the crowd) pushes her to buy into, but he also restricts her ability to communicate her own, unique thoughts outside of the dominant definitions. The name “monkeyman” resonates with pejorative allusions beyond the metaphor of a “monkey on one’s back” as an addiction. It reverses the American heritage of white men treating black people as animals, making the white men the monkeys now. The poem begins with an explicit denouncement against the racism of the “monkeyman”:

There is a strange man attached to my backbone
 who thinks he can sap me or break me
 if he bleaches out my son my water my fire
 if he confuses my tongue by shitting his symbols
 into my words. (*Collected* 135)

The man tries to diminish the speaker's autonomy (and Black pride) by bleaching out her sustenance and legacy. The monkeyman's white "symbols" distorts her language, her access to the consumer culture. And because "aping" behaviors is a form of imitation, the monkey here critiques the conformity required by commodity culture. Therefore, by dismantling the connection between language construction, racism, and commodity culture, Lorde's *flâneuse* rejects the commodity's control over her urban vision.

The commodities that Lorde lists in "Monkeyman" emphasize the misguided values that shoppers invest in: wigs and girdles to warp the female body and redefine woman's beauty as something unnatural. The poem "Keyfood," reinforces how consumer knowledge can betray a woman by providing a false sense of identity. In this case, the commodity items are food—a basic life sustainer that has been twisted into a commodity item. When younger, the woman was an expert consumer:

Once in the market
 she was more
 comfortable than wealthy
 more black than white
 more proper than friendly
 more rushed than alone
 all her powers defined her (*Collected* 117)

The skills of commodity culture distance the woman from the other people in the crowd, but when her purchasing power is used up, when her use value as a mother is complete, she becomes a commodity that has little or no exchange value: she is day-old bread. The woman in "Keyfood" allowed the "monkeyman" to determine her value, but the speaker of "Monkeyman" tries to deny his power in vain.

Although the commodity culture threatens to render the speaker invisible by "bleaching" her language and legacy, the speaker of "Monkeyman" cannot simply deny that she is influenced by its power. The insidious control of commodity culture extends

into black neighborhoods, wreaking havoc on the community. The speaker says she hears the “monkeyman” speaking to her in Harlem: “whenever / I walk through Harlem / he whispers—‘be careful— / ‘our nigger will get us!’” (*Collected* 135). She concludes by conceding that: “I used to pretend / I did not hear him” (*Collected* 135). Lorde’s speaker thus acknowledges the tendency for African American culture to permit and adjust to the controlling consumer culture. As Susan Willis explains of Toni Morrison’s character Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*: “In the absence of a whole and sustaining Afro-American culture, Morrison shows black people making ‘adjustments’ to mass white culture” (994). Willis questions the impact of white consumer culture on black women’s psyches, as represented by literary figures and popular culture figures, concluding that both examples “summarily den[y] the possibility of the mass-produced commodity having anything to offer Afro-Americans” (1007). Therefore, Lorde must redefine the *flâneuse*’s relationship with commodity culture to understand crowds—or members of the crowd—which are not white.

Lorde pursues the political implications of commodity culture further in the poem “The Workers Rose on May Day or Postscript To Karl Marx” (*Collected* 114). The poem complicates usual notions of the working class, separating students who “march for peace” from construction workers who help shut down the protest. The speaker’s apostrophe to Marx in the last stanza invites him to witness how race complicates class issues in “amerika,” limiting the function of socialist strategies. The narrative flow of the lines and overlapping imagery require looking at the poem in total:

Down Wall Street
the students marched for peace
Above, construction workers looking on remembered
how it was for them in the old days

before their closed shop white security
 and daddy pays the bills
 so they climbed down the girders
 and taught their sons a lesson
 called Marx is a victim of the generation gap
 called I grew up the hard way so will you
 called
 the limits of a sentimental vision.

When the passion play was over
 and the dust had cleared on Wall Street
 500 Union workers together with police
 had mopped up Foley Square
 with 2000 of their striking sons
 who broke and ran
 before their fathers chains.

Look here Karl Marx
 the apocalyptic vision of amerika!
 Workers rise and win
 and have not lost their chains
 but swing them
 side by side with the billyclubs in blue
 securing Wall Street
 against the striking students. (*Collected* 114)

The construction workers union affiliation gives them the power of protest, but they abrogate the students' similar right by shutting down the protest. Having lost sight of the socialist underpinnings of their affiliation, and of the value of the socialist policies which empower workers, they view the students' protest as evidence of luxury. The pre-WWII value of socialist theories to which African American writers such as Richard Wright ascribed have been squelched by post-WWII, Cold War, anti-communism. The "generation gap" is one of social policy here: the older generation fights for the status quo while the younger generation protests for change.

Because Lorde's *flâneuse* is removed from solely consumer locations, moving through the city beyond the department stores and shopping malls, she witnesses the ways that the members of the crowd have become commodity items themselves: workers

protecting the capitalist system that causes them to be commodities in a vicious cycle. They “secure” “Wall Street,” whose corporations and stock market exclude the interests of those very workers. The implication of race is implied by Lorde’s spelling of “amerika” with a “k,” but the students, construction workers, and police are not identified according to racial differences, implying the heterogeneity of the crowd. Lorde turns Marxism upside down in “The Workers Rose On May Day” having the worker’s revolt bolster the capitalist machine.

The implications of this poem echo the social theory of Patricia Hill Collins, who demonstrates how race complicates usual understandings of class relationships (211–18). Although the students in Lorde’s poem could be of any class background, their college attendance implies that they are middle-class (especially since this poem was written in the 1970s). The working-class construction workers punish the students’ privilege, fulfilling the Marxist strategy of the proletariat pulling down the class hierarchy. But the speaker of the poem discloses the injustice of this situation by saying that the students “marched for peace,” thereby critiquing socialism’s ability to protect the kinds of social activism focusing on race, gender, sex, economic disenfranchisement as well as class that Lorde identifies as necessary in revolution.

Lorde’s use of an empowered invisibility revises Benjamin’s definition of the *flâneur* as necessarily male. Her interrogation of black women’s roles within consumer culture validates *flânerie* as a form which allows for the multiplicity—or what Frances Beale calls “double jeopardy” in 1970—of a perspective that is affected by both race and class as well (Beale 146). These departures from the limitations of Benjamin’s *flâneur* make black women’s *flânerie* a possibility, but her use of the outsider position, which she

calls being a “sister outsider,” establishes her alignment with the kind of social alienation that the *flâneur* felt, making the crowd his home (Benjamin 37). Lorde’s *flâneuse* makes the crowd her home because she has pinned her hopes for revolution on the masses.

Instead of resolving conflict, Lorde’s *flâneuse* observes the conflict, records the ironies and the hypocrisies, so that she rewrites the map of the city as a complex web of intersecting and overlapping paradoxes which shed light on each other. It is clear in Alexis de Veaux’s biography of Lorde that, just as social activism and art were inextricably linked, so were Lorde’s biography and her poetry. Poems such as “Cables to Rage” respond to incidents that she also records in other forms, such as in her “biomythography,” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. As the title of this book implies, Lorde uses the empowering practice of renaming herself as a frame for this story. De Veaux’s research shows that the conflation of fiction, fact, and myth that make up the connection between Lorde’s biography and her art may never be untangled. Similarly, the poems of *New York Head Shop and Museum* suggest that *flânerie* may be another part of the complex and contradictory forms that Lorde used to interrogate the paradoxical city.

Lorde’s *flâneuse* is informed by the biographical experiences through which Lorde related to the crowd and which affected her movement through urban spaces. Without slipping too easily into a biographical reading of her poetry, I want to explore the ways that Lorde’s personal sense of alienation informs her *flâneuse*’s ability to become an anonymous observer. Just as the speaker of *Zami* appears to slide fluidly between speaking biographically for Lorde and fictionally to paint a portrait of a black, lesbian, warrior, feminist poet archetype, the speakers of the poems in *New York Head Shop and Museum* negotiate the overlapping and unclear boundaries between Lorde’s voice and

vision, Lorde's political agenda, fictional or symbolic voices and visions, and objective response to urban spaces.

Lorde's vexed relationship with the city stems from her desire to find a physical location that could be "home." Lorde's concept of home reflects her desire to find a physical location that reflects and incorporates her identity, but her notion of such a place was shaped largely by her mother's nostalgic memory of Grenada as "home." Lorde explains that "As children, in New York City, we were raised to believe that home was somewhere else We were just visitors, and someday we would return home" (Rowell 52). The restrictive policies of Lorde's mother in their New York apartment made that space an impossible "home" for Lorde as well; she was doubly alien in the city. Critics have emphasized the importance of the "home" concept to the development of black feminism. Barbara Smith describes how homes are locations of empowered communities which fostered early black feminism. bell hooks similarly confirms that "homeplaces" are sites of politically empowering community for black women. For Lorde, who was raised by a mother who, much like di Prima's mother, protected her daughters by sheltering them from urban realities, the streets represented the connections to other people that she lacked in her family, and therefore, an alternative "home."

Alien from her own family because of vision problems, slow development of speech, skin color, weight, and an early desire to rebel, Lorde identifies herself as a voice for outsiders in almost every role of her life, but particularly in relation to communities within New York. She locates her source of power in the margin and her life work undertakes the process of breaking down the boundaries that create the margin. As an outsider, Lorde achieves a level of distanced observation that causes Jerome Brooks to

criticize her poetry as a “Whitmanesque democratic litany of events” (271). Although Brooks later acknowledges Lorde’s “ability to hold events up to [a] relentlessly critical analysis [which] often leads to a perception of human character that is, perhaps, the ultimate justification for art,” he overlooks the urban poetic legacy to which she contributes in her “insistence on detail” (271). These aspects of Lorde’s poetry link her unquestionably to *flânerie*, and in the city streets she finds crowds which help make New York a “home” and place of hope for change.

The speaker of “A Birthday Memorial To Seventh Street” elevates a single street, through detailed memories, connections with people, and milestone life events (becoming a woman), to the status of poetic home. The poem includes the kind of detailed description of an urban setting to which Brooks objects, the blur of past and present, real and imagined, internal and external direct the speaker’s analysis of the urban location. The poem opens in a moment of nostalgia: “I tarry in days shaped like the high staired street / where I became a woman / between two funeral parlors next door to each other” (*Collected* 110). The place, Seventh Street, evokes erotic memories of entry into womanhood (presumably through a sexual encounter, but probably also through crisis which demanded maturity). The speaker lingers in the physical space as well as in a psychic space of memory. The funeral parlors bookend her memory and remind the speaker of how temporary her existence is in the crowd. The speaker, “memorializes” her friends by seeking them in the empty street at midnight. Like Benjamin’s description of Baudelaire who “loved solitude, but . . . wanted it in a crowd,” the speaker of the poem seeks a crowd which is now just the ghost of memory.

At the end of the poem, the speaker describes how the “ghosts of old friends / precede me down the street in welcome” (*Collected* 111–12). The crowd through which the speaker moves is imaginary, but haunting. Her actual movement is through an empty urban space: the Seventh Street through which the speaker moves is empty, but her memory fills the space with “Old slavic men” hawking their wares, the “masked men in white coats” who steal women out of their apartments and off the street to be “processed” in mental hospitals, and the ghosts of friends dancing, singing, and smiling.

The speaker of “A Birthday Memorial To Seventh Street” recognizes the dissolution of reality that occurs in the city streets, and that occurs when the body, text, and city fuse. The memories of her friends include the arrest and institutionalization of women for insanity. “[M]asked men in white coats” “batter down the doors into bare apartments” to “hunt” down “tenants” who they “process” into Bellevue or other institutions for correcting mental illness (*Collected* 111). Similar to Ginsberg’s “howl” about the loss of the “best minds of my generation,” Lorde’s memory becomes a “museum,” housing these lost friends (Ginsberg 848–55). Whereas Ginsberg’s “Howl” includes an actual “litany” of events, Lorde’s “A Birthday Memorial To Seventh Street” responds primarily to a moment of *flânerie* when the *flâneuse* found herself in a street that was full of memories instead of people.

The “reality” of the literal, physical spaces of Seventh Street for women is that even the presence of walls does not protect women from male intrusion. Shut away in institutions, the women’s absence in the Seventh Street buildings—their “vacancies” which create room for new tenants—marks the elision of their existences. The people, as gravestones in the speaker’s “head” become the physical city for her. The speaker

repeatedly describes Seventh Street as “stone,” although trains “scream” through the solid space and “ghosts of old friends” follow the speaker as she walks “over Seventh Street / stone at midnight,” she is unable to leave her personal mark on the petrified street space (*Collected* 111). The stone imposes borders to the city space that imposes on the speaker. By the last stanza, the memories in her mind of people in the Seventh Street space have “eyes / like stones.” The people have become the street, the speaker’s memories of their bodies become infused with the images of the physical street space through the stone.

Although I certainly haven’t covered all of the areas through which Lorde’s *flâneuse* moves in *New York Head Shop and Museum*, I will conclude this chapter with a poem in which the speaker, as *flâneuse*, chooses the city as the privileged site of women’s love. Although Lorde never specifically refers to the city as labyrinth, her poems articulate her refusal to acknowledge the physical or figurative boundaries constructed by men’s literary, architectural, or social histories. The *flâneuse* who navigates the city spaces rejects the mythic connection between women and the earth (suggested often by Rich, and to some degree by di Prima, in allusions or direct reference to the goddesses Demeter and Kore/Persephone). In the poem “To The Girl Who Lives In A Tree,” the speaker chooses to love both the city and women simultaneously. She addresses her lover, who has left the city to “love trees,” implying that the lover thinks she must leave the city to reconnect with women and nature.

After the speaker’s lover leaves the city in “To The Girl Who Lives In A Tree,” she moves through the city in tears. She is sad for the loss, but simultaneously grateful because the loss allowed her to see and understand her role in the city more clearly. The speaker explains:

When you left this city I wept for a year
 down 14th Street across the Taconic Parkway
 through the shingled birdcotes along Riverside Drive
 and I was glad because in your going
 you left me a new country
 where Riverside Drive became an embattlement
 that even dynamite could not blast free
 where making both love and war became less inconsistent
 and as my tears watered morning I became
 my own place to fathom (*Collected* 122)

The city becomes an “embattlement” in the lover’s absence, a word which simultaneously invokes safety (in preparation and fortification) and violence (the preparation is for war). The speaker does not identify whom she is battling: the city appears to protect her and also contain her. The sixth and seventh quoted lines suggest both that dynamite cannot destroy the Riverside Drive embattlement and that it cannot “blast free” of the embattlement. The speaker’s movement from downtown spaces (14th Street) to uptown spaces (Riverside Drive) suggests that her movement is possibly just restricted to the city.

The battle that she wages could also be against homophobia: the poem is openly lesbian and the speaker spends considerable time investigating the different ways that she and her lover “act out nightmares” of their mothers. The speaker’s battle could be against racism: although the speaker says that her lover’s “mothers” have “creamy skin,” she also says that “we both know you are not white,” a line that is adjusted through *apo koinou* when considered together with the following line. Together they read: “we both know you are not white / with rage or fury but only from bleeding / too much while trudging behind a wagon” (*Collected* 122).

Most importantly, as *flâneuse*, the speaker of “To The Girl Who Lives In A Tree” chooses the city as the site of these battles and also as the site of redemption through

love. Although her lover chooses to love trees instead of the speaker, the speaker does not separate her love of women from her love of the city. She explains how “My mothers nightmares are not yours but just as binding”:

If in your sleep you tasted a child’s blood on your teeth
 while your chained black hand could not rise
 to wipe away his death upon your lips
 perhaps you would consider then
 why I chose this brick and shitty stone
 over the good earth’s challenge of green. (*Collected* 122)

Although the poem ends with the speaker’s declaration that “between loving women or loving trees / and if only from the standpoint of free movement / women win / hands down,” she does not separate her decision to choose the city from her decision to love women. They are conflated in the poem, and the possibility of “free movement” is implied in city spaces rather than rural ones.

As the culmination of this dissertation, I have chosen to end with a poem that does not necessarily demonstrate the movement and observation of *flânerie*, but which declares a *flâneuse*’s choice to make the city her location for fighting political battles against racism, homophobia, poverty, and for loving, watching, and experiencing as well. Together, the poems of *New York Head Shop and Museum* exemplify Lorde’s ability to redefine *flânerie* by positioning herself either outside the confines of Benjamin’s *flâneur* or in critical deconstruction of those limitations. Unlike the other poets who feel the weight of tradition and literary expectation, Lorde chooses different poetic forms to empower her voice, she resists simplistic binaries which could limit her observation, and she moves through the city as an activist watcher.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The relationships between the four poets in this dissertation are intertwined and complicated. Several of them were friends or colleagues at various points of their careers, often influencing each other's work. Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde recorded discussions about feminism, race, and poetry, and Rich's poem "Hunger," dedicated to Lorde, details the intensity of Lorde's effect on Rich's understanding of these issues. Furthermore, Rich and Lorde taught together in City College's SEEK program, sharing a similar agenda that combined pedagogy and poetry. Lorde and Diane di Prima attended high school together and participated in counter-culture and, sometimes, radical writing and social practices. They appear in each other's autobiographical writing, unnamed, but unmistakable. Although removed from the New York scene where the other poets knew each other, Gwendolyn Brooks certainly influenced their work, especially as she openly made a move from a mainstream publisher to a black publisher and changed her poetic style in the 1960s and 1970s. Alexis de Veaux describes the profound effect that Brooks's transition had on Lorde (92-93).

Bringing together these four poets raises wonderfully challenging issues of identity, of the overlap of biography and fiction, and especially of the effects of urban life on different women poets. Each of the poets was writing between the late 1940s and the early 1980s, with much of the attention to urban life focused during the politically charged 1960s and 1970s. I have arranged this study in a deliberate attempt to link them in a progressive continuum of women's urban poetic development. Certainly other

women were writing from and about urban centers in the twentieth century, and even after WWII (Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, and June Jordan come immediately to mind), but the connections between Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde help convey the problematic development of a post-WWII flâneuse. Each one's poetic style picks up elements of tradition, of each other's efforts, and develops the next step toward working out the kinks of women's flânerie.

One of the strongest links between the four poets is that they all use *flânerie* to negotiate between tradition and innovation. Without entirely shirking tradition, they question the value of certain elements. Some struggle more than others: both Brooks and di Prima display a certain level of confidence in adopting roles that were not defined for them. Brooks feels as entitled as any poet to adopt *flânerie* and di Prima revels in the rebellion of donning a method from which she was supposed to be prohibited. The baggage that poets carry in the influences of their poetic idols is never more apparent than in these women's attempts to participate in *flânerie*.

The lasting shadow of high modernism and the New Critical theoretical perspective that at least partially affected Walter Benjamin's study of *flânerie* affect the women's success rate as well. Each expresses desire to dislocate her "poetic" eye from the elitist limitations of the modernist poetic legacy. The leisure involved in *flânerie* presents a particular problem for poets who have little time to write between work (to pay the bills), raising children, and adjusting to identity changes. The street scenes in their poems often focus on the poor (as did Benjamin's and Baudelaire's *flâneur*) but they empathize strongly with the plight of poverty in the city, often having experienced it themselves.

The politically charged climate of the 1960s certainly affected their *flânerie* as well. It no longer appeared aesthetically possible to ignore political inequality. As victims of racism, homophobia, and other forms of social exclusion, each of the women discovered how impossible it is to become “objectively” detached from the crowd. The speakers in the poems who achieve it best—especially in di Prima’s poems—often result in a satirical tone, alternately, the indifference borders on either humor or pathology, as in the speaker of di Prima’s poem who spends all of her money on acid to eat through a lock on the gas only to discover that she has no matches to light the burner.

The connections to tradition seem to both help and hurt the poets. Of the four, Rich articulates the fiercest anger at the repression she feels the traditions cause. She and Brooks adhered most strongly to traditional forms in their early work, and received the most critical acclaim for their successes according to those forms. Therefore it seems natural that they would be the most vociferous in rejecting those forms when they discovered the deceit that was involved in their adopting voices that were not their own. *Flânerie* presents an especially vexed role in such a rejection of tradition because the form itself encourages innovation. Because it is dependent on the crowd, it is a loose “form” based primarily on the method of aimless observation within the crowd. Therefore, the prescribed list of rules about who can or cannot participate appears somewhat arbitrary and time-period-specific. And yet the poets’ each discover the nuances of control which those original rules exert over their attempts to participate.

Out of their negotiation of tradition and innovation develops the poets’ emphasis on the razing and raising of urban spaces. Each of the poets focuses on issues of destruction and reconstruction in the city, accentuating the *flâneuse*’s desire to make the city

something different than what it is. Each is motivated by fascination with the architecture and chaotic crowd, but they each return to the inevitable destruction of that space. For Brooks, the destruction is caused by the corrupt system, so she focuses optimistically on reconstruction. Her metaphoric reconstruction of the Mecca building is then a successful reconstruction of urban space. Di Prima's and Lorde's destruction of urban space move out of the metaphoric and into the literal. Theirs are calls to action, protests against political and social inequality that urban systems support.

The impulse to destroy the city—and the ability to imagine a reconstruction—reflects each poet's ultimate decision to either leave or stay in the city. Not unexpectedly, Brooks is the only of the poets who stayed in the city about which she wrote most prominently. The most conventional of the poets in most aspects of her life, Brooks's rebellion was a class rebellion. Despite critical acclaim as a writer and the prestige of winning a Pulitzer prize, she maintained the lifestyle to which she had always been accustomed, living in a modest home on the South Side of Chicago.

Ironically, none of the New York poets which I discuss stayed there. Both Rich and Lorde eventually rejected urban life altogether. Rich moved to California, and as her volumes of poems from the 1990s show, at least for her poetic attention, she chose rural areas. Lorde moved to the Caribbean—not back to the homeland of her parents, Grenada, but to the U.S. Virgin Island, St. Croix. There she found a life that combined her family's Caribbean culture with the political environment of the United States. Never having been happy or comfortable living in New York City, it is a wonder that she stayed for the majority of her life. As the most comfortable and optimistic of these urban women, it is less of a surprise that di Prima simply relocated to a different city: San Francisco. As the

cultural center of the Beat movement and home to the famous City Lights Books, the change makes sense. Her later work moves away from specifically urban focus, however, and attends to spiritual concepts and experimental language instead.

I have emphasized the problems that each of the women faced in achieving *flânerie*, but in each of the poets I see tremendous promise of an empowered *flâneuse*. The problems that each one faces only strengthen the aesthetic quality of their *flânerie* by forcing it to confront paradoxes that are inherent to urban life. These issues do not need to be thoroughly solved in order to indicate the value of *flânerie* to urban women's poetry. The practice highlights not only the theoretical position and relationship of the women to a particular space and language structure/form, but also to their role as poets.

These poets' work anticipates the style and motifs of women in contemporary hip-hop and spoken word poetry. As specifically urban poetic forms, rap lyrics and spoken word poetry slams such as Def Jam Poetry pick up the fragments of *flânerie* which Brooks, Rich, di Prima, and Lorde were beginning to piece together into a mosaic of feminist urban poetics.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega began her academic career at New York University in 1993. After completing her undergraduate studies in English in 1997, she taught New York City public high school for three years at George Washington High School in Washington Heights and C.M.S.P. on the Lower East Side. The years living and teaching in New York profoundly affected Ortega's literary interests. Motivated by her students' requests to find relevant, challenging, urban literature, she discovered her own desire to pursue further literary studies and returned to school full-time in 2000 at the University of Florida. This dissertation is a reflection of work that began under the excellent guidance of Marsha Bryant as a Master's Thesis and continued through Ortega's doctoral studies. The project was supported and made possible by the enduring optimism of her husband, Manuel. Ortega plans to continue researching women's twentieth-century poetry, especially as it relates to urban studies and pedagogy.