Queering the *Flâneur*: Erotics, Synesthesia, and Gesture in Modernist Literature

Alex Zivkovic

CSRE 200X: CSRE Senior Seminar

Tomás Jiménez, Director, CSRE Undergraduate Program
Paula Moya, Director, Research Institute of CSRE
Vanessa Chang, PhD, Modern Thought and Literature
Casey Philip Wong, PhD Candidate, GSE/RILE

Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity
INSTRUCTOR FOREWORD

With the ambitious goal of defining and elaborating on a new type of a modernist figure, the queer flâneur, Alex Zivkovic embarked on a wide-ranging study of two modernist texts and sought to situate them in the sociopolitical milieu. In his essay, “Queering the Flâneur: Erotics, Synesthesia, and Gesture in Modernist Literature,” Alex argues that as “queer flâneurs,” Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa (in Mrs. Dalloway) and Richard Bruce Nugent’s Alex (in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”) experience and represent new embodied modes of perception. They do this by “queering” the activity of wandering through the city that is commonly associated with the Baudelairean flâneur.

Like the traditional white male flâneur, these characters wander through the city streets and aestheticize their experience. But rather than doing as he typically does—that is, gazing at, objectifying, and judging the lower class men and especially women on the street who become spectacles for his and his reader’s enjoyment—Clarissa and Alex turn their attention to their own bodily sensations. Through the “queer flânerie” of their characters, Alex argues that Woolf and Nugent effectively and memorably contribute to the innovation that is modernist literature.

Demonstrating an agile and curious intellect and resourcefulness in research, Alex’s essay is a masterpiece of subtlety and sophistication.

—Tomás Jiménez, Paula Moya, Vanessa Chang, and Casey Philip Wong
In the late twentieth century, “out of the closet and into the streets” became a rallying cry for queer activism. This statement is a call to resist a society that condemns and restricts the movement of queer people, asking us to physically move outwards and declare public space ours. Being “out” does not simply mean occupying space, but requires a language of queer embodiment and queer gesture in order to communicate one’s interior identity in a public setting. But how does the body express queerness? Queer modernist literature exposes the beginnings of this language in stream-of-consciousness narration that crafts words and descriptions for interior, bodily pleasures.

While in public, these queer characters explored the city by recording their own desires and bodily experiences; however, other modernist literary works found a language for urbanity and its spectacle primarily through visual descriptions. Experiencing the city through
this traditional modernist visual language privileged surveying others, a mode of understanding that enacted distance, but also ownership, through sight. In the late nineteenth century, the modernist trope of the flâneur—the man able to wander and record the street—exposed the perils the city posed for a variety of people through recording their plight in literary works. The protagonists of these stories and poetry, like the narrating voice in Charles Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, are commentators who feel outside of bourgeois culture, yet are extremely privileged. As they explore the city, they lament its poor souls, but they themselves are never in danger in the same way as the prostitutes or poor workers they surveyed, recorded, and assessed were constantly. These stories made objects out of marginalized people, but the stories of these minorities exist apart from the flâneur’s appropriating gaze.

Two modernist works help expand our notion of the flâneur by following the urban wanderings of queer protagonists: Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” published just one year apart, in 1925 and 1926, respectively. In these works, we hear queer voices telling their own stories and, through their narration, we begin to see the formation of an urban queer language. These marginalized figures subvert flânerie to transgress norms in order to find private pleasures in public space. Woolf’s novel tracks a British woman wandering the streets of London as she prepares for a dinner party, while Nugent’s short story focuses on a black queer man in New York City who takes a stroll at night and picks up a lover on his walk. Instead of non-consensually recording other people’s actions like the canonical flâneur, these figures focus on their own inner experiences as they traverse city streets. By turning inwards, they ascribe an importance to their own experiences and desires in the face of oppression.

Naturally, these two characters respond to different social issues since they are outsiders in different ways and respective to different societies. But through this comparison, a type emerges, that of the queer flâneur. Their explorations of urban space follow the model of the city-
walker: exploring parts of the city and simultaneously responding to it. However, these two figures are more restricted and greatly policed by their societies than the white male *flâneur* in canonical texts. In addition to subverting the identities traditionally associated with the type, these figures also challenged the way the *flâneur* typically records the world around him by also exploring synesthesia and kinesthesis. Though these characters are contemporaneous to canonical accounts of the *flâneur*, these writers are rarely (or in Nugent’s case, seemingly never) discussed in academic texts about this literary figure. Figuring them into the canon, however, not only expands our conception of who can be a *flâneur*, but also provides a glimpse into other modes of registering the body and the urban environment.

This white bisexual woman and black gay man choose to move through space not as powerful surveyors of spectacle, but instead as pleasure-seekers who record their own bodies. They emphasize their pleasure through synesthetic expression, often centered around sensations of touch and bodily contact. Through these descriptions, they craft a new synesthetic language which privileges queer bodily pleasure, laying the groundwork for a queer language composed entirely of gestures. Although the urban environment provides danger and restriction, the queer *flâneur* re-appropriates aspects of *flanerie* to occupy public space and achieve bodily pleasure in the face of societal restriction. Consequently, in the city, Clarissa moves around seeking private, closeted queer thrills amidst the crowd, while the dancing joy of Alex consciously signals other queers by promoting a mode of existence centered around black queer kinesthesis and unapologetic queer expression.

**Marginalized Reclaimings of *Flânerie***

At the end of the nineteenth century, “urban space in cities like Paris or London became prime sites for spectacle, where the *flâneur*, gendered male, apparently ruled supreme” (Fehlbaum 153). This figure permeated the literature of the time, documenting the city streets and speaking as the voice of modernity. In 1876, the writer Victor Fournel
describes the *flâneur* as one who carries the charge to do what he wants—“Fais ce que veux”—highlighting the immense privilege and mobility of the figure in dictating his own fate and wanderings (270). Decades after Fournel, the poet Charles Baudelaire theorized this figure through a fictionalized account of a contemporary artist who he calls “Monsieur G,” the ideal *flâneur*. Monsieur G is not only privileged as a man that can safely navigate the streets, but also blessed with talent since “few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing; there are fewer still who possess the power of expression” (Baudelaire 12). Baudelaire continues to praise this man, writing that “for the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude” (9). But it is not enough to merely be out in public space; one must also “feel oneself everywhere at home” (9).

Though the *flâneur* himself often conceives of himself as a social outcast because he transgresses social norms to be with the urban downtrodden he writes about, his documentation and recording of others indicate the privileges that he holds. Even the hint of impropriety about being associated with the specific streets he wanders suggests he could (and should) associate with wealthier, more privileged circles. Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* in *Les Fleurs du Mal* highlights these isolated, alienated figures in his society. The poet’s voice speaks of the importance of his own work when he remarks, “Quand, ainsi qu’un poète, il descend dans les villes, / Il ennoblit le sort des choses les plus viles, / Et s’introduit en roi, sans bruit et sans valets, / Dans tous les hôpitaux et dans tous les palais.”1 (“Le Soleil”). The power of the *flâneur*’s gaze transcends documentary to become high art. His gaze ennobles those on the street, thus the *flâneur* is conceptualized (and self-conceptualized in Baudelaire’s work) as a man capable of redeeming his surroundings by writing about its beauty. All of this occurs through his gaze, which looks upon the less fortunate and raises them up.

---

1 “When, like a poet, he goes down into cities, / He ennobles the fate of the lowliest things / And enters like a king, without servants or noise, / All the hospitals and all the castles.” Translation by William Aggeler.
But he notably does not interact with these other figures. Instead, he merely sees beggars, prostitutes, and other downtrodden figures of the city and writes about them, “tak[ing] visual possession of the city” (Wilson 98). He remains distant, and clearly controlling, through the gaze—a literal distance rendered psychological elsewhere in Baudelaire’s inability to fully understand these Others, notably women. Baudelaire writes of femininity from a distant vantage—calling Woman a “star”—and thereby placing man and woman apart on the order of celestial distance.

Women enter Baudelaire’s understanding of modernity only as objects of beauty. In fact, some scholars believe women are “excluded a priori” from the art of *flânerie* because it perceives of “woman as herself being part of the spectacle, one of the curiosities in which the *flâneur* will take an interest in the course of his walk” (Bowlby 209). For instance, Baudelaire writes of Woman that “she is […] the object of the keenest admiration and curiosity that the picture of life can offer its contemplator” (30). She does not, and cannot, enter his understanding of *flânerie* since she reflects the ephemeral beauty of modernity; by nature she is fleeting and immaterial. He does not speak to a woman’s substance, merely her appearance and adornments, thus his conception of women does not seem to expand to include women writing, thinking, and exposing the city. In writing about a woman walking through urban space and observing London, Virginia Woolf effectively resists this notion of feminine objecthood.

Richard Bruce Nugent’s work similarly changes the identity of the *flâneur*. Instead of partaking in others’ stories or the workforce, his character Alex assumes agency of his own story and body. He co-opts the *flâneur*’s leisurely stroll and consequently resists contemporary assumptions about black bodies as sources of labor, not art. He chooses to be his own subject, injecting a black and queer subjectivity into *flânerie* that challenges the traditionally white, European, heterosexual male *flâneur* figure just as Clarissa does with her femininity and bisexuality. These two works represent a departure from the privileged recording of marginalized Others that is rampant in most modernist texts of *flânerie*, since
these two characters are themselves marginalized. Like the traditional \textit{flâneur}, they wander city streets, but instead of recording other figures, their thinking is almost entirely introspective, incorporating others into their writing only when they interact with them. Thus, their movement in the city is based on consent rather than consumption, about staking a claim in urban space rather than recording others.

\textbf{Expanding Urban Discourse: Touch and the Visual}

Because their texts are narrated primarily through this introspective lens, these \textit{flâneurs} subvert the traditional visual mode of \textit{flânerie} by recording their inner world in non-visual ways. Instead of recording the city structure and the rest of the city’s population, they choose to privilege their own internal sensations, which manifests in writing about synesthetic colors-sounds and touches, for example. Urban life in the nineteenth century “gave birth to a new kind of literature, a journalistic record of the myriad sights, sounds and spectacles to be found on every corner, in every cranny of urban life” (Wilson 96), which is the tradition of writing that the \textit{flâneur} emerges from. This proliferation of detailed ekphrasis of daily life, recording the spectacles that came to define modernity, became translated into literature through the recordings of the \textit{flâneur}, a figure who embodied this detailed, visual approach. Thus, a visual understanding of the city is integral and inherent to traditional \textit{flânerie} as it was originally conceived and canonized. Yet, a discourse structured around visual sensations privileges normative conceptions about perceiving the world, drastically limiting who can be a subject and what they should be recording.

The prevalence of certain modes of registering a specified set of sites in public space has been criticized from the lens of disability studies. I wish to draw on these critiques to help center the non-normative, synesthetic recording of public space that comes from these two characters’ queer embodiment. I will also argue, by examining the marked and unmarked identities of Clarissa and Alex, that their mobility in the city is limited and noted in ways similar to the disabled \textit{flâneur}’s, thereby also challenging the same traditional \textit{flâneur} that Serlin delineates below:
In all of these scholarly explorations, however, there is a constant and, arguably, almost tacit commitment to the normative elements of the *flâneur*’s physical experience — betrayed implicitly by what some critics have rightly insisted as modernism’s tendency toward ocularcentrism or the “hegemony of vision” — that is not factored into discussions of *flânerie* nor, for that matter, the codes of urban modernity that are assumed to crystallize around certain kinds of acts (observing, shopping, collecting) or sensorial experiences (listening, moving, gazing) associated with the *flâneur*’s body (Levin, 1993). (Serlin 198)

There are two critiques here. One examines the way the city is recorded, arguing that the normative *flâneur* privileges sights and spectacles, not any of the other senses, because that is how the city is structured and meant to be displayed and recorded. The other argues that different bodies move through urban space differently and thus record different sensations. I believe the two are intimately connected in the case of the queer *flâneur* who resists the city’s structure and chooses to instead experience many sensations at the liminal space of the skin in both *Mrs. Dalloway* and “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.”

These characters offer a corrective not just to the canonical notion of the *flâneur*, but even to contemporary scholarly reclaimings of *flânerie*. For instance, I wish to use Serlin’s example of Helen Keller’s Parisian trip to demonstrate how, even in this contemporary critique of normative *flânerie*, there is still an acceptance of gendered norms and a rejection of certain bodily sensations. Window-shopping was a crucial structuring element present in modern cities, such that when Helen Keller visits Paris in 1937, she is eager to do this activity. Keller cannot see the clothing and consequently “experiences the clothing in the shop window not through tactile means but through virtual projection as mediated through [her assistant Polly] Thomson’s gaze and subsequent description” (Serlin 195). Serlin uses this example to illustrate the ways urban
space is not structured for various bodies and abilities, yet underlying this reading is an understanding and acceptance of the gendered guidelines of the city. Even this disabled critique of window-shopping calls attention more to the shortcomings of windows than the shortcomings of this early twentieth-century expectation imposed on women.

Serlin also implies that the proper experiential mode of the city is still visual. He describes Keller’s shopping experience as one of “virtual projection” instead of direct contact. This reaffirms the capitalist gaze—another gaze structured by the city and further structuring power dynamics between a consumer and the consumed—that is comparable to the dominating gaze of the flâneur. Keller, like all window-shoppers, still does not feel the fabric with her body. She could, however, be led in to feel and experience the fabrics, but instead she participates in window-shopping like other people by feeling a projection of the visual information on her hand. The city forces this experience by enacting distance through windows which, for able-bodied people, can attract shoppers and draw them into stores as they stroll down the promenade. The city, then, structures itself around visual discourses, which means that a person recording the world visually is orthodoxly following its guidelines and structuring ethos—as the flâneur does.

Without touch, there is no intimacy in the city, just distance enacted by glass windows, by heterosexual norms, and by the strangeness of strangers. The queer flâneur resists all of these to claim private pleasures in the public sphere. Though they are expected to be subject to the city’s paths and their logic—women following streets to run their errands, black men following streets to get to the place of their labor—Clarissa and Alex actively defy this expectation, which manifests in a literary focus on their own bodies’ wanderings. This means their texts do not propose an adherence to city structures nor faithful recording of the city as it is laid out, but instead create a personal map of feelings and erotics.
Public Streets and Personal Rhythms

Instead of the city guiding them to their shops or their labor, Clarissa and Alex take pleasure in the rhythms of the street. They subvert or reject what is required of them and, in doing so, create a private, personal rhythm in the city. Clarissa and Alex both expand the notion of what flânerie can be, turning inwards as a resistance to a definition of modernity that accounts only for certain bodies with the privilege to safely navigate spaces and record them visually. Through stream-of-consciousness narration, Woolf and Nugent create a literary environment for their characters’ sensory experiences as they move through real time and real space. I want to posit the recording of internal rhythms and sensations as a means of queering flânerie, because it becomes inclusive of disabled flâneurs and queer flâneurs by resisting defining modernity “only through a recognizable set of compulsory able-bodied acts such as walking, looking” (Serlin 199).

This resistance to sight also resists urban codes and visual signs. Clarissa Dalloway rejects the capitalist directive of city streets as mere guides for shopping, choosing instead to use the pulse of the city to structure her thoughts. In the early twentieth century, the presence of women in public space was not without controversy. However, it was permissible in the case of shopping, as illustrated by the earlier example with Helen Keller. Only because of Clarissa’s errand, then, is she allowed into public space—and only because her maid is presently busy. The first line of the novel establishes her task, which simultaneously permits and validates Clarissa’s subsequent presence in public space: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf 3). So when she appears on the city streets, narrating other thoughts and enjoying the city for merits other than its stores, she strays from the purely shopping-related task expected of her.

Many contemporary feminist critics “have challenged this notion of the masculine flâneur suggesting that to different ends women [in literature] also strolled through the streets in search of sensation: shopping, window-shopping, going to parks, tea-rooms, and so on” (Fehl-
baum 153). While it may be true that fiction from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engaged with women figures in the streets, these shopgirl or prostitute figures do not assume as much agency in shaping their own experience of the city as men, or Mrs. Dalloway. Male flâneurs could wander throughout the city and impose their own narrative, while women, even in these other pioneering proto-feminist stories, were relegated to absorbing and consuming visual spectacles. For instance, Mary Erle from Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) is posited as an early female flâneur, because she is a journalist who explores the city on assignment. Though she has more agency in dictating her own way in the city because of her job, she still surveys the “panorama” of London, recording the city as an image then translating it to the written page. In surveying, she takes visual possession of the city, again a masculine mode of recording.

Mrs. Dalloway, however, engages with space in an even more revolutionary way, refusing to strictly follow this gendered script by imposing a new understanding of the city’s features. Instead of reading its features, Clarissa feels the city. For the first forty pages of the novel, Clarissa is outside, wandering the city, and her attention is paid not to the shops (as in the spectacle-driven novel, *The Ladies’ Paradise*, from 1883 by Emile Zola, where whole pages are dedicated to outlining the details of the department store) but to her thoughts. She asserts herself in public by disregarding not only the expectation of shopping, but even the expectation of perceiving the world purely visually. She begins to use the city streets not to guide her to shops, but to guide her rhythmically through disparate thoughts like memories of her friends or worries about her relationships.

In contemporary research on the experiences of urban space, many scholars examine walking as a rhythmic experience. One scholar writes that “the rhythms of walking allow for a particular experiential flow of successive moments of detachment and attachment, physical immersion and mental wandering, memory, recognition and strangeness”
This conception of movement in space as one of rhythmic kinesthesis paired with similarly rhythmic thought has parallels in modernist literature, which espoused this view through experimental stream-of-consciousness narration. Mrs. Dalloway, as she traverses obstacles in the street, interrupts her musings with physical actions: “…whereas, she thought, waiting to cross, half the time…” (Woolf 13). These punctures of movement are not necessarily dams in her stream of thought, but perhaps tributaries that increase its flow. In other words, the urban environment helps shape and structure her thoughts. These interruptions are constant throughout Clarissa’s exploration of public space, meaning that her thoughts and the city’s feedback underfoot are intimately linked.

The stream-of-consciousness narrative style allows both Clarissa and Alex to connect their thoughts, their movement, and the city streets. They actively resist the city structure as they do not follow the dictated urban rhythm of shopping window to window. Instead, they each find a leisurely pace that allows them to muse through their movement in space. But the stream-of-consciousness style allows fragments of their interior thoughts and the public environment to interpenetrate, which calls attention to their resistance through subtle reminders of what they should be doing. The purpose of their movement is the movement, not the destination, and the text conveys their non-normative focus on simply moving and thinking by inserting fragments about their embodiment in the city throughout the text.

Virginia Woolf consciously draws attention to the inspiring nature of the city in a passage where Clarissa imagines her relationship to other people through metaphor, seeing herself “laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself,” and then she asks herself, “But what was she dreaming as she looked into Hatchards’ shop window?” (Woolf 12). This explicit juxtaposition of her poetic musings with the simple and pragmatic act of shopping serves to challenge contemporary notions of womanhood. Feminine flâneurs who
seek only sensations of shopping are in direct contrast here to a character who, while still fulfilling the societal demands of her feminine role as a host by purchasing flowers and perusing store windows, uses the urban environment to engage her mind, not just her wallet.

Similarly, Alex from “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” follows personal, unstructured rhythms in urban space. He registers the cityscape as a place to pace and relax. It helps him think and make art, not shop or eat out. He walks outside late at night when he has nothing else to do. He is not consuming public space for any particular reason, and the streets cannot guide him into stores because they are closed at this late hour. The physical structure of the city, for him, late at night, is just that: space to walk through and “just walk and think and wonder … think and remember and smoke … blow smoke that mixed with his thoughts and the night” (Nugent 1364).

Alex goes exploring at night for inspiration because he considers himself a great artist. In the 1920s and 1930s, despite the ongoing Harlem Renaissance that demonstrated black literary and artistic talent to a wider audience, it was still controversial to be a black artist because “artists subvert the modern industrial code that inflicts ceaseless compulsory labor under the worker, cultivating an individual expressivity grounded in what Paul Lafarge calls ‘the right to be lazy’” (Glick 420). Doing this was radical for its rejection of chains that remained from a dark, past history. English professor and black studies theorist Paul Gilroy says that “for the descendants of slaves, work signifies only servitude, misery, and subordination” (Glick 422). Thus, as a black man, Alex’s rejection of work and rejection of capitalism reflects his unabashed commitment to finding his pleasure and joy, a laziness reflected in (and demonstrated through) his unguided, unstructured urban strolling.

Instead of seeking work, Alex prioritizes having the ability “to wonder … to remember … to think and smoke” (Nugent 1360), even over eating. He asks himself why he was not worried that he did not have money, since he was still hungry despite spending his last five cents on
food. Glick argues that this is because of Alex’s commitment to rejecting labor: “even hunger does not drive the true dandy to wage labor, since his aestheticization of reality allows him seemingly to transcend such mundane concerns” (422). Nugent explains how one can be both “hungry and comfortable” in the text, since the narrator asks, “or was it because he had spent his last five cents and couldn’t worry” (1361)? Alex does not ask himself how to get five more cents; he simply says that absent money, he will not eat, which is fitting with Glick’s conception of unwavering radical black dandyism. He does not use the streets to head to food or head to labor to make money for food. Instead, he just walks through the hunger, making a path full of a different sensation—relaxation—perhaps to partially counter the hunger his body is otherwise experiencing.

The first lines of the story echo this sentiment of radical indifference to unpleasant and pragmatic needs like labor or food, opting instead for decadence. The narrator describes Alex saying that “He wanted to do something . . . to write or draw . . . or something . . . but it was so comfortable just to lie there on the bed . . . his shoes off” (Nugent 1360). Alex here, in addition to contradicting the expectations of what black men are expected to do by being an artist, is also an unfocused artist who, in his search for comfort and sensory pleasure, cannot decide if he wants to laze or walk, “write or draw.” He is not clear what he wants to do, oscillating between media and memories in his quest for pleasure.

For Alex, lazing is comfortable, and the style of the narrator’s depiction of his thoughts, his walking, and his walking-inspired thoughts offers a similarly casual, slow rhythm throughout. The entire story is told through short fragments of a few words, separated by ellipses, allowing thoughts to draw out and form slowly, leisurely. He slowly fills us in on the narrative, talking about the street and its properties for several fragments before announcing “…it was nice to walk in the blue after a party” (Nugent 1365). His telling of leaving the party begins at the street and what he sees, but then floats back to snippets of the evening “Zora had shone again . . . her stories . . . she always shone” (1365), creating
a collage of the night, rather than a strict telling of cause and effect or a normative chronological structure. Across the ellipses, thoughts jump spatially and temporally and only in the aggregate reveal a coherent narrative: Alex left a party and is now headed home alone. This is because, in the city streets, he records his immediate sensory experiences as they couple with only traces of memories. Before we hear about the party, we learn that “the street was so long and narrow . . . so long and narrow . . . and blue . . . in the distance it reached the stars” and also hear that it was “quiet” and that “Alex walked music” (1365). We are overloaded with material realities of the street, flowery musings on the street’s length and beauty, and personal recordings of his own body’s kinesthesis, because that is what Alex chooses to experience, that is the pleasure he wishes to get from the city.

Like Clarissa who rejects shop windows, Nugent does not necessarily react to the intended markers or shops along the city street and instead uses the city for his own wanderings, making his own paths in his mind and the surrounding urban landscape. Because of his identity as an artist, he goes outside for no particular reason; maybe just for inspiration, if anything. We know more about his poetic goals of reaching the stars above the long blue street than which street he is on. He does not record any specific sites or even, as Clarissa did despite her rejection of shopping there, name the specific stores he passes. Instead, he speaks in generalizing terms, “the cafeteria,” “the street.” Unlike Clarissa who at least feigns to notice the stores she passes, Alex asserts his presence in space by simply being there, making no attempts to justify his presence with words or reasons.

These rhythms imply a significant amount of agency, as both characters dictate their own pace. Even if they are just wandering, they must first choose to ignore the city’s directives. The active role they take in determining their fate is useful for then thinking about how, in addition to bodily recording the city street underfoot as they pace the city, they also make changes upon the city. They are not passive recorders of urban
sights, but engage bodily with the urban environment to achieve pleasure and partake in the discourses they desire.

There are limitations to their pleasure, however. Examining each character’s relationship to inside and outside space reveals the varied approaches they each take in attempting to live queerly. Clarissa’s queerness manifests in intentionally closeted ways, hiding and obscuring her queer emotions, while Alex’s queerness is more external, consciously signaling outwards. Both depict queer embodiment, but Alex attempts a queer body language as well. In the following two sections, I will explore these notions of interiority in each work, examining first the bodily boundaries of Clarissa’s inner queer sensations and then the signaling power of Alex’s bodily gestures and deliberately queer movements.

**Bodies and Boundaries in *Mrs. Dalloway***

Moving into public space, Clarissa is able to find a significant amount of bodily pleasure in the urban environment; however, her pleasure is regulated by her self-monitoring that ensures her queerness remains self-contained and private. Clarissa’s movements through public space allow her to seek out her own private pleasure in her mind and inside her body, but this activity carries the risk of betraying her by outing her queer desires. For Clarissa, her skin can reveal these private pleasures and personal rhythms because skin is the literal mediator between herself and the world. Examining her body’s free movement helps delineate the way Mrs. Dalloway carves out erotic space in public and private spheres, but looking at her fixation on her skin helps demonstrate the societal restrictions imposed on women in the 1920s that inhibit flânerie and particularly queer flânerie.

Previous scholarship has attempted to argue for radical feminine flâneurs by highlighting that “not all, however, were pleasure seeking” since some “seriously engaged in advocating greater independence for their sex,” particularly through the act of writing (Fehlbaum 154). But this approach still fits into the normative flâneur’s transmission of knowledge—writing about sights and experiences. And why should pleasure not
be achieved? Why is a detached, journalistic act of writing the only way women can radically engage with urban space? Only thinking through a queer female flâneur does it become possible to acknowledge bodily engagement and erotic pleasure-seeking as a challenge to existing (white, male, heterosexual) systems of knowledge and—through Clarissa’s assertion of pleasure in a variety of spaces—spaces of power. Tied to her public body, however, is the risk of being discovered, thus Clarissa’s pursuit of pleasure is part of a frustrated, closeted liberation that limits itself to her own internal sensations, regulated at the boundaries of her body.

Clarissa calls attention to the agency of her body in space, by hinting at the potential for her to actively shape the world around her. She says of her body that it “sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on” (Woolf 11). She acknowledges her movement in the city, here, not by registering what she passes, but by physically cutting through space. She is not like the flâneur who is a moving daguerreotype —“un daguerréotype mobile” (Fournel 268). Instead, she registers the city through cutting, through the physical sensation of her skin as the boundary between herself and the world, private and public, body and space. Mrs. Dalloway assumes a perhaps violent power to penetrate and enter the world around her, assuming the power to slice through space and restrictions if she pleases. This powerful mode of engagement frees her from the city’s guiding pathways, allowing her to wander the city and leaving the potential for her to perhaps actively carve a new path to seek out non-normative or queer sensations in the city.

But this mode of engagement carries a risk, since that same skin and body which cuts through space, and thus is actively asserting itself outside, is “a medium through which her lesbian desire finds representation” (Curtin 22). When Clarissa remembers Sally, a woman whom she kissed and had a sexual attraction towards, she describes “an inner meaning almost expressed” (Woolf 47). Curtin’s argument for a queer blush builds from this memory since in this scene Clarissa admits that, after that kiss, “she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt” (Woolf 47). While
these queer erotic feelings begin inward, they then manifest as “a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered…” (47). As it spreads, this desire becomes visible and can be marked.

These emotions of attraction are particularly dangerous in social settings, for they could jeopardize her feminine networks as well as her marriage. These social contacts happen indoors, at parties like the one Mrs. Dalloway is planning that evening, which means that inside, she must regulate in ways that outdoors she does not because her specific identity may not be registered as obviously there. Thus, outdoors, amidst the crowd, these queer sensations and the blush they create may carry no meaning or, in the crowd, they may get blurred and lost. Any thrill she shows may then be attributed to the modern city’s spectacular nature, not an inner, queer sensation.

The strict dichotomy between public and private space and the thoughts and actions they afford conjures queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*. In this text, Sedgwick argues against binary pairings like “secrecy/disclosure and private/public” by challenging the logic of the closet for its assertion of the interior as the only safe space for expression. This closeted logic seeped into the contemporaneous discourse around the gay rights case *Bowers v. Hardwick*, after which liberals argued that the sacrosanct bedroom should never be invaded by policemen and regulation. But underlying this is an assumption that homosexual behavior must be kept private, “as though political empowerment were a matter of getting the cops back on the street where they belong and sexuality back into the impermeable space where it belongs, are among other things extensions of, and testimony to the power of, the image of the closet” (71).

For Clarissa, the construction between the closeted public and the intimate private is flipped. In public, she is able to resist the city and go beyond her feminine script: thinking and enjoying the sounds and feel-
ing of London, more than just registering shop windows and shopping. Clarissa’s boundaries expand in the outside world where she feels warranted to speak to a universal “we,” connecting her thoughts with other people experiencing the city alongside her. She remarks “such fools we are” (Woolf 5), using a universal term to suggest that she too—as any other man or woman—has a right to participate in public space and perceive public spectacles. She is a part of the urban mass, part of this enjoyment of sensations; but she gets this thrill through her footsteps, her cutting skin, and hearing Big Ben, not shopping as is expected of her. She takes agency for herself in public, and it is there, not her heterosexual home, that she has a chance to then seek out synesthetic, urban pleasures, many of which should be read as erotic.

The liberation she feels outside is made more apparent when she moves indoors, defining, by contrast, her desired relationship with the public. This moment of transition is important for defining the potentials of Clarissa’s body since “the movement of the body across a socio-spatial environment changes our relationship to both other living bodies and objects in the space; it also enhances the sense of body and self” (Wunderlich 6). When Clarissa moves indoors, she suddenly feels trapped: “Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy’s skirts, she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions” (Woolf 42). For Clarissa, the “world” she cares about constitutes the outside world of London. Her house, in contrast, feels inhospitable. Her hallway “was cool as a vault” (42), thus she finds herself in a type of place meant for locking bodies up.

But it is not just her body, but her sexuality that is subjected to regulation in her home. The evocation of nuns reminds us of a sexless life, particularly since she vacates any religious meaning from the word when, in the same paragraph, she says that “not for a moment did she believe in God” (Woolf 43). Because her home and its accoutrements are products of her upper-class lifestyle, established through and contingent upon her
heterosexual marriage, I believe the home becomes a vacuum of desire, namely her queer, lesbian desire. When she enters into her heterosexual home and thinks about Sally, it is no coincidence that she feels hypothetical clothing around her. It is as if her heterosexual home environment is actively preventing her from expressing her lust by covering the skin that manifests her lesbian hopes. Outside, she experiences herself as a body, while inside, she fixates on her clothing enveloping that skin, stifling her erotic blush and, like a sheath to her flame, the erotic desire behind it. Her home costumes Clarissa in nun’s clothes, forcing her to perform a character marked by a sexless life, just as she herself actually performs in an unfulfilling heterosexual marriage every day.

In contrast to her sexless home, the sort of pleasure she gains from the outside world is described almost orgasmically, with a buildup of energy suddenly released: “a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense [...] before Big Ben strikes” (Woolf 4-5). The contrast between a moment of intimate pause and a pleasure-filling eruption conjures the rhythm of sexual intercourse. Thus, this quote highlights the liberating potential of being outside, especially important when she has a heterosexual, unfulfilling relationship at home. Outside, particularly when she deviates from highly structured and guided paths for a shopping trip, she can seek out what she most desires since “random motion is suited for the experience of pleasure” (Low 101).

Importantly for her, she experiences these pleasures amongst the crowd, who are all enraptured by these same urban sensations. Like others, she is able to enjoy the “leaden circles dissolved in the air” (Woolf 5) and the other various noises of urban life. The city around her is full of spectacles that could flush her appearance, providing a cover for Clarissa’s erotic blush. Thus, if a sound triggers a sexual or orgasmic thought, she can still hide that emotional reveal amidst the larger crowd who are not having an erotic experience, but enjoying Big Ben. Regardless of whether or not Big Ben’s sound is necessarily orgasmic for her, this scene provides an example precisely of the cover the city could theoretically
provide if Clarissa wanted to seek out lesbian pleasure. Just as she resists the script of the city when she shops, so too can she use the city as a place to inspire erotic thoughts, and then, importantly, simultaneously also mask them.

She is not, however, entirely free. Her erotic thoughts must be hidden, and the same skin that cuts and expresses a subversive desire is often hidden in clothing. Clarissa refers to “this body she wore” (Woolf 14), as if she herself were clothing. In her private journals, Virginia Woolf creates a term “frock consciousness” to speak to the interpenetration of clothing and a woman’s interiority in the nineteenth century. It is a term that “is apparently an oxymoron, since the first word refers to a winsome sheath, something for the outside, while the second describes the quality of mind and spirit we imagine inhabits our insides” (Cohen 150). These constraints are self-imposed since Clarissa thinks about how she looks even when no one is around: “Oh if she could have had her life over again! she thought, stepping on to the pavement, could have looked even differently!” (Woolf 14). With these inhibitions, Clarissa cannot be truly free. She is trained to be aware of her clothing as part of her being. She cannot fully accept the reality of her body—its interior desires, the erotic blush its skin manifests—because she still fears how she looks and what her body can (visually) betray. By taking an active role in public space to find some forms of bodily pleasure, Clarissa asserts a woman’s agency, but she still cannot explore the city in the pursuit of queer pleasure in an out and actively visible way. By keeping sensations within, she does not signal to other queer figures outwards; her pleasure is a solitary one.

**Black Queer Kinesthesia in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”**

The queer *flâneur* expands our notions of what can be public, recording an urban queer embodiment that anticipates later outward expressions of queerness in the public arena. Both Clarissa and Alex find joy in public space, but Clarissa finds this exhilaration in secret by developing a strategy to help hide her erotic thoughts amidst the crowd. Alex, by contrast, seeks and ultimately finds an explicitly erotic and explicitly
queer encounter outdoors. While Clarissa and Alex both form a language for describing their inner queer sensations, only Alex engages in active signaling to other queer figures. His queer kinesthesis demonstrates a way of enjoying uninhibited black queer erotics in urban space, using his dancing rhythm to signal another queer person of color to have sex with him. I again build my argument from Serlin’s essay on disabled flâneurs and political movements, which says that the radical potential of disable-bodied (or here, non-normative) movement is that “the disabled flâneur visibly alters perceptions of public space by exposing that which has typically pertained to the ‘interieur’” (Serlin 200). I argue so would the queer flâneur, demonstrated here through the figure of Alex, whose synesthetic movement allows him to court and find erotic pleasure with another man.

Though Alex only has sex indoors, he feels just as comfortable smoking indoors as outdoors, for instance, and is able to attract a man on the city street regardless of contemporaneous social norms. This comfort outside is a crucial element of flânerie, since literary critic Walter Benjamin argues that “the street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as the citizen is in his four walls” (Serlin 200). For Alex, what occurs in his four walls is homosexual sex, and he translates this desire into the public sphere (“among the facades”), making a pleasure map of the city as he walks. His rhythm finds joy in unmarked city streets by actively reimagining proximal sensations to realign them with his homosexual desires and by moving in ways that signal outwardly to other queer men.

Immediately upon exiting his home he remarks a scent: “the breeze gave to him a perfume stolen from some wandering lady of the evening” (Nugent 1363). But he goes on to think that this scent, which he is aware comes from sex workers, would be better on men, acknowledging “… it pleased him … why was it that men wouldn’t use perfumes … they should” (1363). At first, this passage seems similar to the recording of social outcasts that Baudelaire wrote in Fleurs du Mal. Baudelaire, however, refers to prostitution in the aggregate, remarking that “La
Prostitution s’allume dans les rues”

(“Le Crépescule du soir”). This enacts distance in the text between him and the actual women (despite the fact that Baudelaire himself likely often frequented brothels), and is in contrast to the olfactory sensation that Alex experiences as he passes by them, close to the actual women. This sensation refers equally to their embodiment and his—establishing their proximity in public. Since Alex lives right where they work, they share similar parts of the city. Thus, Alex’s description queers the flâneur’s relationship to prostitution and the city through the proximate way it is recorded, as well as by playing with the gendered expectation of who can and should wear perfume.

But more than just noticing the prostitutes, like the traditional flâneur who records and enjoys seeing other people’s sensual encounters, Alex finds his own direct erotic experience in the city. Baudelaire makes clear that the flâneur is not only comfortable in public space, he also gets a great thrill from the experience. The type of excitement and pleasure the traditional flâneur elicits is often framed as a passive one: seeing and taking in a visual spectacle, not engaging with the people he passes. For instance, Baudelaire’s poetry records the wanderings of prostitutes in Fleurs du Mal. The approach Nugent takes, however, speaks to the physical sensations of sexual partners while engaged in sex, not an outsider’s visual recording of other people’s actions. Baudelaire likens the flâneur “to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life” (9). This is quite a different way of finding pleasure in a city than the active role Alex must play in order to first find another queer partner, and then consensually receive sexual pleasure from this random contact on the street.

The narrative’s preoccupation with the moves required to enjoy sex is fitting with African American modernism’s embrace of chance and experience. Like the shift from recording sex workers to recording in-

---

2 “Prostitution catches alight in the streets.” Translation by William Aggeler.
terior sexual actions, literary critic Houston A. Baker, Jr. writes of African American writers that “As we move beyond a solid state (such as ice cubes), our instrumental powers of observation lead not to ‘primary’ forms but to events—motions of hypothetical particles unmeasurable” (16). Nugent then focuses on the process of courting between the two men, luxuriating in this quotidian meeting on the street, rather than depicting the sexual embrace itself, for instance. Alex must first assess the person approaching, then communicate with him through their dancing footsteps, and, only then, once the two are made intimate, lead him to his room.

In the scene where the man approaches, he moves from a hyper-awareness of approaching (and perhaps dangerous) sounds, to a knowledge that they could maybe court one another. They do not speak, since “strangers didn’t speak at four o’clock in the morning” (Nugent 1365), but they also do not remain strangers long, instead following alongside one another in this rhythmic musical movement. The intimacy inherent in their interaction is atypical of the modern, bustling city. Here, it is just the two of them, and the city at night is still and quiet enough for Alex to remark on the sound of the stranger’s footsteps: “he walked music also” (1365).

The recognition of oneself in another by chance is a step towards a queer language of signs that was just beginning to solidify in the 1920s, and is manifest clearly in drag culture today. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz writes about the potentials of queer futurity as expressed by a language of queer movement in drag culture in our contemporary moment. In his work on urban space and queer futurity, he focuses on the gesture, a movement which manifests a duality of signals legible only to other people with the same marked identities. He remarks of a black queer drag performance that “while the short-sighted viewer of Aviance’s vogueing might see only the approximation of high-fashion glamour as he moves and gestures on the stage, others see/hear another tune, one of racialized self-enactment in the face of overarching opposition” (Muñoz 80). Here,
I see a similar parallel to the sound of someone’s footsteps, since their changed tempo indicates something to another queer man that could get subsumed by the larger concept of simply moving to others. His and my unit of analysis is quite subtle because gestures speak more to tone and style—in other words, chosen movements—rather than the inevitable way one’s body moves. Muñoz, referring to gestures, emphasizes that “these acts are different, but certainly not independent, from movements that have more to do with the moving body’s flow,” like “the tilt of an ankle in very high heels” (Muñoz 67) or, in Nugent’s work, the clicking, dancing movement as the two queer men walk and simultaneously signal each other in urban space. This dancing, sexual movement literally expresses what Nugent’s contemporary, the poet Langston Hughes, calls the Negro artist’s “heritage of rhythm and warmth” (Hughes 1322). Thus, here dance is used as a mode of non-normative expression that celebrates and signals not just Alex’s queerness, but his blackness and specifically black queerness, much like Aviance’s performance in Muñoz’s analysis.3

By using the gesture, Nugent demonstrates the subtlety and specificity of queer language. Nugent then draws our attention to this surprising (because it is both novel and revolutionary) act of recognition and intimacy by reminding us that these two characters, as most people are to one another in cities, are strangers. He uses the term several times throughout their interaction. The two “strangers” work to achieve intimacy, however, courting one another through their movement until finally they reach Alex’s bedroom: “up the stairs and the stranger waited for him to light the room … no need for words … they had always known each other ………” (Nugent 1366). They attain the intercourse they desire through consensual dance-walking. Alex hears, but does not see the man at first, and together, they speak in silence through their steps. Vision

3 Whether dance is a part of both of their racial/ethnic backgrounds is unclear. Alex is identified with Nugent, a black gay man, while Beauty, the man Alex courts, is not identified racially. He speaks Spanish and has dark curly hair, thus if he is Latino, they might both be partaking in dance as a manifestation of not just queerness, but specifically a queerness belonging to people of color. Their potentially interracial coupling adds to this sense of an expanding and newfound queer language, signaling within a queer circle across racial boundaries.
is the most distant sense, thus it is telling that their sensory engagement that night occurs first in non-visual ways and then ends in sexual intercourse—literally now closing the gap entirely between their two bodies.

The text captures the two men’s sense of pleasure by describing the fullness of their erotic encounter through synesthesia; the sensations they experience literally cannot be described in one sense. Instead these two queer men “walk music” together (Nugent 1365) and feel and hear—not just see—color: “the night was so blue … how does blue feel … or red or gold or any other color … if colors could be heard he could paint most wondrous tunes” (1363). His emphasis on colors feeling is echoed by the blue shadow on Beauty’s cheeks, which he notices when the two men kiss, a stubble his lips would literally feel moments later. Thus, through the collapsing of senses, Nugent communicates the richness of an erotic encounter and the sensual (and queer) recognition of another’s embodiment.

Alex and his partner demonstrate and assert the presence of queer figures in urban public space. Beyond just existing outside, their erotic encounter marks the intersection of two queer people’s personal rhythms and wanderings in the city. The dancing footsteps of a stranger join Alex’s dancing kinesthesia, thus the two consensually follow the same queer path together, a path which leads to his bedroom. They join together and combine two people’s private space and private maps of the city into a singular queer path that they follow together. Though they can mark and notice each other, the path they make is public only to their community since “queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds’ mapping of space” (Muñoz 72). By tracing this encounter between two bodies in urban space, remarking on things seen, heard, and felt—sometimes simultaneously—Nugent argues for a subversive and subtle queer claiming of public space. In allowing private intimacy to manifest itself outside, yet not fully publicly, this work demonstrates a consensual consumption of the city that, if not yet creating queer sanctuaries, creates queer pathways. Using the city as a pleasure-seeking, wan-
dering roadmap, these two queer men permit the convergence of their bodies and senses in order to gain pleasure from the urban environment and, importantly, each other.

From Resistance to Vogueing

Queer flâneurs reassert themselves in modernist discourse just as they assert themselves into public space in their respective texts. Through their personal consumption of private space, they render themselves visible and known. Their focus on the body aligns with an understanding of queer movement, of queer gesture, which “signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude” (Muñoz 65). This finitude and boundary is both symbolic and literal, with the two characters permeating beyond one sense and one body to experience a coherent, consensual, symbiotic relationship with their surrounding urbanscape.

Their individual, fleeting experiences actually fit nicely in with Baudelaire’s original conception of modernity, which he defines as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (13). And are not one’s personal sensations the most fleeting? Instead of recording a sight on the skyline, part of the spectacle that everyone in the city should encounter, these figures recount their individual feelings that no one else could have had. Unlike things seen, sensations felt are ephemeral. The specific street that Alex walks along may exist later in similar conditions, but the specific moment one first hears their lover cannot be reclaimed, thus it is truly modern (even in a Baudelairean sense) for Nugent to privilege the recording of the latter. Clarissa and Alex demonstrate that, despite being excluded from the identity and mode of recording associated with traditional flânerie, their experiences and recording of the city still fulfill the traditional conditions of modernity. Because of their commitment to ephemeral beauty, they are as modern as the canon, and perhaps even more so.

These two characters queer the way they explore the city streets by resisting capitalist impulses and perceiving the world non-normative-
ly. But notably they still make their presence known in quotidian ways, running daily errands or wandering in one’s neighborhood. These personal acts of resistance are embodied, yet mostly remain internal. Clarissa Dalloway still shops, but resists the total shopping impulse with her thoughts. Alex does resist norms by going out late at night, but notably when few people are around. These are personal and intimate modes of registering, and resisting, the norms of the outside world. The language they use and the signals they gesture are a step towards, but still far from, the outness of vogueing or genderfuck street performance. Clarissa and Alex experience and communicate an erotics on the street, but in subtle ways. She gets pleasure, but tries to hide it, while Alex moves alongside the man he courts, but dares not speak his desire.

In the 1920s, these figures lay the groundwork for reading public space as erotically charged, for fleshing out—quite literally on their own flesh—the queer potentials of being in an urban environment. Modernism attempted to do precisely this: examine the world with “new eyes” or, more accurately, with new embodied modes of perception, and the queer flâneur allows us to approach this goal and theorize this discourse more fully. Only through queer bodies can we raise the stakes to challenge traditional modes of seeing, and, consequently, the traditional bodies allowed to see, hear, feel, and, later, create. Through the exclusion of characters like Alex and Clarissa, modernism was able to solidify against prior literary “tradition,” while maintaining its inherent male, straight, and consumptive whiteness. With their reintroduction into the canon, however, we perceive a fuller examination of the types of experiments in language that were part of modernist discourse and, more importantly, see some of the earliest steps towards queer liberation in literature and the city.
Works Cited


