

# Women and the City in French Literature and Culture: reconfiguring the feminine in the urban environment

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## Women and the City in French Literature and Culture: reconfiguring the feminine in the urban environment

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The story of the city as a recognized place of familiarity and ease for men, and quite the opposite for women, provides a strong framework across the centuries and across France and the Francophone countries evoked here, within which a very broad range of different approaches are analysed. Women's perceptions of the urban environment are the focus of this volume, and these are explored in fiction, film, art and journalism. The classic figure of the Parisian *flâneur* and his now classic counterpart, the invisible (overlooked, marginalized, sexualized or subversive) *flâneuse*, are cited and developed in several chapters, but are only part of the variety of ways the spaces of the city are experienced. Relationships in and beyond the variegated map of the city are constructed through many binaries: inside/outside, public/private, city/domesticity, as well through a variety of connections and contrasts. Gendered identities and identifications are variously shown to reinforce, challenge and subvert these categories across an interesting range of very different texts.

With the female work force in late medieval Amiens, Julie Pilorget offers a demonstration of the fluidity of boundaries between inside and outside, between public and domestic as 'women's work' takes them to building sites and markets as well as the home. Two of the 19<sup>th</sup> century examples are more oblique: Lucie Roussel Richard presents the splendidly named Jeanne Justine Fouqueau de Pussy who created images and guidelines on city behaviour in her columns for the young readership of the *Journal des demoiselles*; studying the recurrent image of a woman reading a newspaper in fine art paintings, Kathryn Brown teases out the visual and ideological complexity of these representations of women's access to and involvement in public affairs. Marina Starik pays close attention to Zola's language in her study of the impact of Paris on Thérèse Raquin, this incomer from Algeria and the French provinces, to argue that she takes on the characteristics and behaviour of the dandy. The city is also an imagined space. Sonya Stojanovic explores Marie Darrieussecq's fictional postcolonial country in *Le Pays*, while the editors' chapter on Leïla Sebbar's 'La Jeune Fille au balcon' and Nina Bouraoui's *La Voyeuse interdite* explores the similarity of vantage point as the central protagonist interlaces her knowledge of the city through restricted excursions with observing, reflecting and imagining. Sarah Cooper's reading of Duras's *Le Camion* accentuates the layering of perceived images and imagined images in the projected journey travelling around the city's outskirts, through reflection on the dark rooms of cinematic production and spectatorship, whereas Agnès Varda's direct engagement with various Parisian landmarks—the rue Mouffetard, the Caryatides and the Lion de Belfort in three short films—is shown by Jennifer Wallace to combine the highly personal with a complex awareness of the gendering of the built environment. Both Duras and Varda put themselves in the frame, as do the Groutt sisters, Benoîte and Flora, in their double-handed diary of Paris under occupation, *Journal à quatre mains*; Imogen Long tracks their movements through the city for the Resistance as well as through the process of writing. This sense of access to the city coinciding with more personal landmarks is also evident in contrasting chapters on gender and ageing and coming-of-age narratives in the city, that Kate Averis's explores in Annie Ernaux's *Les Années* and Nancy Huston's chronicle of the illness and decline of her friend Annie Leclerc, while Nathalie Ségeral, using the notion of the 'ultraperiphery', treats stories of violence and dehumanisation in Nathacha Appanah's *Tropique de la violence* and Ananda Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*, situated in Mayotte and Mauritius respectively, and Karin Abbou's film of the Jewish *banlieue* in Sarcelles, *La Petite Jérusalem*. Julia

Waters tackles some of this material from a different direction, arguing that gendered reconfigurations of imaginary geography and space in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* and *Ève de ses décombres* create different connections between the urban and the volcanic on the island of Mauritius.

The strengths of the volume lie in its diversity and in the quality of these detailed attentive readings. There is an occasional slip in the French, with 'errors' highlighted by 'sic' not being errors at all. Some of the chapters deploy sociological binaries rather inflexibly, taking the 'absence' and 'exclusion' of women from urban spaces to implausible levels, yet none loses sight of the ideological and cultural challenges for women and girls that characters and authors alike are concerned to unpick.

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