Abstract

This paper takes its cue from the debate surrounding the notorious modernist figure of the flâneur that was initiated by Janet Wolff’s article “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity” in 1985. From diverse intersectional perspectives, feminist critics like Deborah Epstein Nord, Susan Buck-Morss, Elizabeth Wilson and Deborah Parsons have made visible the ways in which anonymous, idle and aimless rambling in the city was and continues to be a privilege of a specific group of men. The flâneur’s distinct mode of spectatorship, particularly his ability to see without being seen, they argue, was reserved for white middle-aged men of the upper ranks of society. For women of the nineteenth century, a solitary walk across the streets of London posed a risk to reputation and many female pedestrians experienced street harassment. The concepts of the black flâneur and the flâneuse thus remain highly contested issues.

In this paper, I aim to show how some female pedestrians in the nineteenth century deconstructed, destabilised but also affirmed this particular privilege of hegemonic masculinity by disguising themselves as male walkers. Cross-dressing allowed these women to enjoy invisibility on the streets and granted them access into patriarchal spaces that were usually impermeable for women and non-white or working-class men, such as coffee houses and the British parliament. My paper will begin with a brief account of the intersectional criticism on the flâneur and will then present textual and visual examples from nineteenth-century British periodicals (e.g. Punch and Temple Bar) that point to women’s precarious urban walking. Finally, I will analyse accounts of female cross-dressers who walk the streets of London, among them Flora Tristan’s London Journal from 1842.