

# Wandering and Experiencing the City: Being a Woman, Being a *Flâneuse*

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**Abstract:** *This paper reflects on women's circulation in cities. Understanding that paths and experiences differ in various large cities of the world, we researched these female wanderings considering issues of race and class. We examine the concept of the flâneuse, a woman who wanders along routes through a city while reflecting and creating along the way, to understand the relation between women and city streets, and how mechanisms of resistance emerge in this relationship, by considering it in the scope of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro and its specificities.*

**Keywords:** *Women; Cities; Flâneuse; Ethnography; Urban wandering.*

## **Circulação e vivência nas cidades: ser mulher, ser flâneuse**

**Resumo:** *Neste artigo, propomos uma reflexão sobre a circulação das mulheres nas cidades, entendendo que os caminhos e as experiências nas diversas cidades grandes do mundo se diferem, levando em consideração as questões de raça e classe inseridas ao pesquisarmos essas mulheres. Encontramos o conceito da flâneuse, mulher que percorre caminhos pela cidade ao mesmo tempo em que reflete e cria durante esses trajetos, buscando de que maneira se dá a relação da mulher com as ruas da cidade e como, nessa relação, surgem mecanismos de resistência, ao trazê-lo para o âmbito da região metropolitana do Rio de Janeiro e suas especificidades.*

**Palavras-chave:** *mulheres; cidades; flâneuse; etnografia; circulação urbana.*

## Introduction

This article is the result of a master's study, conducted in a graduate program in education, and dialogs with a larger project, "Múltiplas Imagens das Cidades: Representações no Cinema e em outras mídias", [Multiple Images of Cities: Representations in Cinema and other media], and with the subproject "As Cidades das Mulheres" [Cities of Women]. The study "Mulheres, práticas de resistência cultural e ocupação simbólica: flâneuses da Baixada" [Women, practices of cultural resistance and symbolic occupation: flâneuses of the Baixada] was conducted between 2016 and 2018. At first, its proposal was to accompany cultural producers, audiovisual creators, writers, poets, performers, participants in bands and cinema clubs at events in the municipalities of the Baixada Fluminense region,<sup>1</sup> (FIRJAN, 2020) of the Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan region; particularly Nilópolis, Nova Iguaçu and Duque de Caxias. During the study, nine movements or collectives were accompanied and some of the events produced or in which they participated were ethnographed. At that time, four women who worked in different fields were interviewed

<sup>1</sup>The Baixada Fluminense region is part of the Metropolitan Region of the state of Rio de Janeiro, which is geographically composed of the municipalities of Nova Iguaçu, Belford Roxo, Duque de Caxias, Japeri, Mesquita, Nilópolis, Nova Iguaçu, Queimados, São João de Meriti, Magé, Guapimirim, Seropédica, Itaguaí, Paracambi and Mangaratiba. Source: Sistema FIRJAN. Available at: <http://flaneuse.firjan.com.br/o-sistema-firjan/mapa-do-desenvolvimento/#>.

in-depth; these women are young (the oldest was 33), black and white, residents and active in these municipalities.

The issue that was raised was that many of the events were produced and took place on the streets or in public spaces of those cities, where there is intense circulation on foot and by public transportation (Gabriela FERREIRA, 2018). We worked with the concept of “*flâneuses*”: women who not only walk and reflect, but who create through this urban movement, to reach the women who stroll in the cities of the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan region, and beyond its limits. We studied the strategies of occupation of female bodies that are in the streets of the Baixada Fluminense, producing cultural events, directing films, exhibiting their art or in the process of sociability.

To better understand the field, we examined the concept of *flâneur*, which is often used in various contexts when it refers to gaining the spaces of the cities.

It is important to emphasize that, at the time of this study, a broad debate was being constructed about a certain feminist explosion (Heloísa Buarque de HOLLANDA, 2018) and about the importance of perceiving the action of many women in a wide variety of fields. If the concept *flâneur* can raise many debates and developments, we understand that there was a specific action of these women and an association and later gendering of the concept of *flâneur*, and an interdisciplinary debate has been underway in recent decades (Régine ROBIN, 2009; Elizabeth WILSON, 1992; 2013; Nadja MONNET, 2014; Rebecca SOLNIT, 2016a; Lauren ELKIN, 2016).

We emphasize that in this debate there is still no concern for intersectionality (Kimberle CRENSHAW, 1989; Carla AKOTIRENE, 2019) that is subjacent to certain issues, whether the non-universality of ‘being woman’ or ‘of being flâneuse’, to reflect on the many social markers that are imposed in the debate, and on the distinct ways of living and experiencing cities and the cities themselves as they are presented. At a time of intense debates about decoloniality, we assume the limits of thinking of women based on a nineteenth-century concept, which is usually applied to the life of men and to other urban contexts. Therefore, we sought out possibilities for thinking of “*flâneuses*” in the reality of an urban periphery, in a Latin American metropolis, with specificities of race, gender and territory. Understanding the development of the European concept, we do not see the use of the term “*flâneuse*” as a response, but as a route that is found in the search to resolve what is found in practice. We will not go more deeply into these issues at this time, but we intend to present these first considerations about being woman and being a *flâneuse*, and to reflect on the contribution of some of these authors about what constitutes a *flâneuse*.

## The paths of the *flâneuse*

What is it to be a *flâneuse*? To respond to this question, we take up the figure of the *flâneur*. The literature about the *flâneur* is initially male, and the predominance of men in cities points to this trend. However, we present a bibliography that considers the *flâneur* from the perspective of women, and we therefore use the female form of the term. We want to understand how the concept of “*flâner*” became applied to the space of women in cities, and to a lesser degree, to their space in the streets of the Baixada Fluminense.

Various studies describe the *flâneuses*, the female figure who *flana* through cities, whether in literary writings, like those of Elkin (2016), or in urban studies conducted by women such as those by Robin (2009), Solnit (2001), Monnet (2014), Wilson (1992; 2013), and others.

Elkin conducted her studies by wandering through the cities of New York, Paris, Venice, Tokyo, and London. To wander through cities, for Elkin, is something that gives her pleasure: “I like being able to stop when I like, to lean against a building and make a note in my journal, or read an email, or send a text message, and for the world to stop while I do it.” (ELKIN, 2016, p. 21). Robin (2009) *flanou* in New York, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, London and Tokyo. Monnet (2014) wrote about being a *flâneuse* as a researcher in the streets of Barcelona. Wilson (1992; 2013) writes about the space of women in the cities of New York, Paris, Chicago, London, Moscow, Lusaca and São Paulo.

We understand that, by placing ourselves in the street as researchers, we also wind up conducting *flânerie* by walking through the cities of the Baixada Fluminense, such as Nilópolis, Duque de Caxias and Nova Iguaçu.

Rebecca Solnit (2001), a historian of art and feminism, reflecting on this walking, believes that,

In great cities, spaces as well as places are designed and built: walking, witnessing, being in public, are as much part of the design and purpose as is being inside to eat, sleep, make shoes or love or music. The word citizen has to do with cities, and the ideal city is organized around citizenship – around participation in public life. [...] Walking is only the beginning of citizenship, but through it the citizen knows his or her city and fellow citizens and truly inhabits the city rather than a small privatized part thereof. Walking the streets is what links up reading the map with living one’s life, the personal microcosm with the public macrocosm; it makes sense of the maze all around (SOLNIT, 2001, p. 189-190).

Therefore, according to Solnit (2001), to explore the city is to feel like a citizen, to take the city for oneself. Michel de Certeau (2014, p. 163) analyzes the act of walking by proposing some procedures that are “multi form, resistant, astute and obstinate – which escape discipline without remaining outside the field where they are exercised, and that should lead to a theory of daily practices, of lived space and of a disturbing familiarity with the city”. According to Certeau:

This story begins on the ground floor, with steps. They are the number, but a number that does not form a series. [...] Their agitation forms countless singularities. The interplay of the steps shape spaces. They weave places. From this perspective, the moticities of pedestrians form one of these “real systems whose existence effectively makes the city”, but “has no physical receptacle”. (CERTEAU, 2014, p. 163)

Anthropologist Nadja Monnet (2014), in her reflections on female *flânerie* examines the self-fiction of the French historian Régine Robin (2009), who believes that *flâner* is to explore the city, not only to walk through it, but to capture it in all its forms. For Robin, to conduct urban ethnography is also a way of being a *flâneuse*:

For Régine Robin (2009), a *flâneuse* of the contemporary megalopolises, it means to explore the city in all directions and through different forms of locomotion, to learn it completely. To conduct an ethnography in an urban context, it would be to set out in search of urbanity, to somehow transform oneself into a collector of clues to understand that which makes the city a city (MONNET, 2014, p. 218).

Thus, like Robin (2009), to approximate *flânerie* to the realization of field research, to explore the city, the act of circulating through the city in a context of field research show us in practice that – before we are researchers, or at the same time that we study – we are women engaging in *flâneries*. The experience of learning the city by passing through cultural spaces traced a path in the research, which was revealed by women who live, who place themselves in the streets, resist, walk, inhabit, and circulate through spaces inside and outside the Baixada Fluminense (Luísa MELLO, 2018).

Through the immersion in the paths that we took during the field research, circulating along the streets and squares of the cities, being presented to each character and conducting a visual and theoretical study along with the field work, we began to see ourselves as *flâneuses* as well.

To walk through the streets of the city is to create stories and perceptions, to learn about gestures, images and references; and to search for what we identify with and for what we find strange, affections and disaffections for spaces, events, and landscapes. The city exists as it is because we exist in it, it changes with our change, and we transform ourselves with it.

## About *flâner*

Charles Baudelaire (2001) consolidated the figure of the *flâneur* in a literary context, a man who walked slowly through the crowded streets of Paris in the mid nineteenth century. Years later, this character was revived in studies by Walter Benjamin, who himself was an adept of urban *flânerie*. According to Paola Berenstein Jacques (2012a, p. 41- 42), Benjamin (2006) revived this mythic figure and analyzed him in the twentieth century, “particularly in *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire (Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire, 1938)* and in the book *Passages (Das Passagen-Werk, published posthumously)*”. For Jacques, the *flâneur* developed along with the modernization of large cities: “Against the speed imposed by positivist modernity, the *flâneur* raises the issue of slowness and of idleness” (JACQUES, 2012, p. 47).

Another author recognized for a love of the streets, João do Rio (1951), wrote about wandering through the streets of Rio de Janeiro in his 1910 work *A alma encantadora das ruas [The Enchanting Soul of the City]*, connecting this route to vagrancy, to reflection and to an investigative look. For do Rio, *flâner* is a universal verb, which does not belong to any specific language. “*Flâner* is to be a vagabond, it is to reflect, to not be foolish and comment, it is to have the virus of observation linked to loitering [...]. *Flâner* is the distinction of perambulating with intelligence” (RIO, 1951, p. 12).

Times have changed, and the “men of genius”, who Benjamin said had been *flâneurs*, like that carefree man who wanders through the streets of João do Rio, give way to individuals who reflect while they walk. According to Wilson (1992), in her article “The invisible *flâneur*”, there is an ambiguity in the character of the *flâneur*; many see him as someone who strolls, wanders and observes the city; others understand that his actions must be represented in some way – in writings, films, images – so as to be described as *flânerie*. For Wilson, the emphasis on the “gaze” ironically obscures the issue:

Indeed, the *flâneur* worked as he wandered on the sidewalks or investigated the underworld of marginality. This also hides the enormous restlessness that the discourse about the *flâneur* expresses. The *flâneur* appears characteristically as a marginal. Baudelaire aligned himself with

all the marginals of society—with the prostitutes, the ragpickers, the drunkards. It is not unusual for a rebel of his class to identify with the 'lumpen' part of society; yet there was more to it than that. Baudelaire anticipated Kracauer and Benjamin in interpreting the society in which he lived in terms of an overwhelming process of commodification. The whole society was engaged in a sort of gigantic prostitution; everything was for sale, and the writer was one of the most prostituted of all since he prostituted his art (1992, p. 107).

For Wilson (1992), the *flâneur* can be a person who, while walking and exploring, thinks about the city in these processes. In the itinerary of the *flâneur*, the meaning is found in the walking, not as something aimless, without destiny, but as something functional; it is someone who observes the social interactions of the city, the rhythm, the movements, seeking, in this way, knowledge about oneself and the other.

## The existence of *flâneuses*

As we deepened our studies of *flânerie*, we had access to reflections about walking through cities as women found in the literary work of US writer Lauren Elkin (2016), who approximates the male term *flâneur* to the female: *flâneuse*, a woman wanderer who ambles through cities and, in her discoveries, reflects on the urban scenery and its subjects. Elkin emphasizes that this definition did not exist previously in the French language, and that many scholars and writers do not believe that a female figure corresponding to the *flâneur* could exist. The activities and opportunities of the wandering through the streets of the city were the privilege of men, even if there had always been women – in art, photography, literature – who challenged social impositions and went into the cities to walk, observe, and study.

Meanwhile, Solnit (2001), in her book *Wanderlust – A history of walking*, indicates that few women could walk through the streets, beyond those who exercised the function of prostitutes, and to dare to perambulate was sufficient reason for a woman to be considered a prostitute. According to Solnit, “Until the twentieth century women seldom walked the city for their own pleasure, and prostitutes have left us almost no records of their experience” (SOLNIT, 2001, p. 195).

Thus, the *flâneuse* arose as someone who prostituted herself, because, supposedly, this is the woman who would have the freedom to amble through the city streets. For Elkin, the problem with this thinking is in the fact that this “freedom” is controlled:

Firstly there were women on the street who weren't selling their bodies. And secondly there wasn't anything like the *flâneur's* freedom in the street prowler's prow; prostitutes didn't have free range over the city. Her movements were strictly controlled: by the mid-nineteenth century there were all sorts of laws dictating where and between which hours she could pick up men. Her clothing was strictly policed; she had to register with the city and visit the sanitary police at regular intervals. This was no kind of freedom (ELKIN, 2016, p. 8-9).

The history of the *flâneuses* was made invisible for many years in the history of walking through cities and was constructed as an idea of *flâner* as told by men, through a male perspective. By studying the historic relation of women with cities, Wilson (2013) spoke about the discomfort generated by the presence of women in public places of entertainment and in the streets of Europe during the Industrial Revolution, in the nineteenth century, which caused a series of repressive and moralizing discourses. According to Wilson: “In fact, the fate and position of women in the city was a special case of a more general alarm and ambivalence which stretched across the political spectrum” (WILSON, 1992, p. 90). Urban life was undermining the patriarchal authority, men and women would go to the cities in search of better jobs and salaries.

For Wilson (1992, p. 92), prostitution was, in addition to a threat, “a metaphor for disorder and the overturning of the natural hierarchies and institutions of society”. Thus, a reason arose for the establishment of laws and reforms that would affect all women.

The prostitute was a 'public woman', but the problem in nineteenth century urban life was whether every woman in the new, disordered world of the city—the public sphere of pavements, cafés and theatres—was not a public woman and thus a prostitute. The very presence of unattended—unowned—women constituted a threat both to male power and to male frailty. Yet although the male ruling class did all it could to restrict the movement of women in cities, it proved impossible to banish them from public spaces. Women continued to crowd into the city centres and the factory districts (WILSON, 1992, p. 93).

Meanwhile, bourgeois men continued to freely explore cities for pleasure, and the growth of spaces of leisure created the mythic figure of the *flâneur*, inclined to wander among cafés, theaters and shops of all kinds. According to Wilson (1992, p. 94), *flâneur* was used to refer to an idle person, someone who could waste time with hobbies linked to urban activity, like observing the crowd and shopping, thus the allusion to the bourgeois man of the late nineteenth century. Among the *flâneurs*, were artists who made the urban landscape material for their work.

According to Solnit (2001), the character of the *flâneur* does not exist far from literature and the idealization of this character.

The *flâneur* is often described as detective-like in his aloof observation of others, and feminist scholars have debated whether there were or could be female *flâneurs* – but no literary detective has found and named an actual individual who qualifies or was known as a *flâneur* (...) No one quite fulfilled the idea of the *flâneur*, but everyone engaged in some version of *flânerie* (SOLNIT, 2001, p. 214).

According to Wilson (1992, p. 97), Siegfried Kracauer (1981) believed that the *flâneur* had substituted the bohemian man, at first appearing as an “the ultimate ironic, detached observer, skimming across the surface of the city and tasting all its pleasures with curiosity and interest”. Meanwhile, Benjamin (1973 apud WILSON, 2013), Wilson continues, “writes of the way in which the *flâneur*-as-artist ‘goes botanizing on the asphalt’”. He is the naturalist of this unnatural environment” (WILSON, 1992, p. 97, emphasis in the original).

Wilson (1992, p. 98) believed that these definitions about the *flâneur*, which range from Kracauer to Benjamin, are very rigid: “Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff concede that some women at least were permitted access to certain parts of the essentially masculine public domain”. Thus, Wilson affirms:

[Janet Wolff] states, for example, that middle-class women had ‘more or less’ been consigned to the home by the closing years of the nineteenth century, yet this was the very period when, in England, they were emerging more and more into the public spaces of the city. With the growth of white-collar occupations for women, there was a need, for example, for eating establishments where women could comfortably go on their own. The lack of these in London had long been felt. In 1852, one observer had noted that working-class women did frequent public houses—places in which no middle-class person of either sex felt comfortable. By the 1870s guidebooks were beginning to list ‘places in London where ladies can conveniently lunch when in town for a day’s shopping and unattended by a gentleman’ (WILSON, 1992, p. 100).

As much as women were emerging from a period of reclusion, they could be seen in city streets, according to Wilson (1992). It is important to note that, although the author agrees with Janet Wolff (1985) and the feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (1988), when they indicate “that women were exploited and oppressed in the nineteenth-century city” (WILSON, 1992, p. 103), Wilson differs somewhat by saying that: “And whether urban space is structured at some fundamental level by gender difference, or whether such constructions are contradictory and shifting” (WILSON, 1992, p. 103).

Thus, when we think of the opportunities and dangers for women in the city, this depends on the comparisons implied in this interaction: “Then and now, opportunities were very much according to class and race” (WILSON, 1992, p.103).

We also add that when thinking of the space of women in the city, it is necessary to consider what street, what country and what city we are speaking of and if we are speaking of women who are predominantly white, articulating issues of race and class. It is not wise to make generalizations about the *flâneur* of women either in the nineteenth century or today, given that there are many inconsistencies in the history, as Wilson indicates:

Nor was it the case that female advancement could only be by means of prostitution in one form or another. There were ‘*flâneuses*’ in the sense that there were women journalists and writers. George Sand is the most famous example (famous, among other things, for wearing male dress on occasion in order to roam the streets in freedom—a clear indication of the limitations on that freedom); Delphine Gay, who married Émile de Girardin, the newspaper proprietor mentioned earlier, was a most successful novelist, playwright and poet, and had been long before her marriage. Her mother, Sophie Gay, was also an independent woman who supported herself and her daughter by writing, after her husband, a Napoleonic functionary, had fallen from grace. Mme. de Girardin wrote in her husband’s papers under a male pseudonym, but her biographer states that this was an open secret,<sup>footnote<sup>50</sup></sup> and she wrote under her own name in other publications. Thus, the fact that women writers were forced to take on a male identity indicates the narrow parameters of their freedom; but the convention was also one form of the resistance that too intense an emphasis on ideological discourse occludes (WILSON, 1992, p. 104-105).

## The *flâneuses* in Brazil

We have seen, until now, that by giving such weight to pre-conceived considerations about *flâneurs* and the belonging of city streets to male bodies, we fail to give the proper emphasis to the resistance of women to this system of definitions. If the *flâneuse* is that woman who circulates through the city and thinks, in the Brazilian context, she is also that woman who occupies, produces and makes herself present in the city streets. In this way, we approach issues raised by Schuma Schumacher and Érico Brazil (2007) and Rachel Soihet (1997), in relation to the daily resistance

of poor and enslaved women as they circulated through the streets of Brazil, facing the barriers encountered.

In undertaking a reflection about the *flâneur* of women in Brazil and the use of this concept in the Brazilian context, a digression was needed. In this sense, we sought references about women and their presence on the streets of cities in the periods addressed in the study, and the distinctions between this *flâneur*, and the presence and occupation of women in the streets of Brazilian cities, understanding the specificities of class and race imbued in these contexts.

According to researcher Maria Ângela D'Incao (1997), in her article "Mulher e família burguesa" [Women and the Bourgeoisie Family], in the early nineteenth century, Brazil was still a rural country and the lifestyle of the dominant elite was mirrored on the Portuguese aristocracy. According to D'Incao, in the nineteenth century, in relation to Brazilian cities: "With weak differentiation and social stratification, the city is inhabited by a homogenous population: rich people do not appear to be distinguished, in their way of life, from others who are poorer, with whom they relate" (D'INCAO, 17, p. 224).

Thus, there were not many rules about the occupation of spaces, until then. However, a time arrived when city streets (such as those in Rio de Janeiro and Olinda) came to be more controlled, and many restrictions were imposed on the population: "The urban space, formerly used by all those in collective encounters, parties, markets, social conviviality, etc. began to be governed by a new interest, that is, 'the public interest', controlled by the governing elites." (D'INCAO, 17, p. 224-225). According to D'Incao (1997, p. 226), a set of European ideas came to be implemented in the colony, which were based on slavery and on the exploitation of land, with the presence of new values; "The proposal was to be 'civilized', as were the French and the Europeans in general". In this way, all of the social relations that were not considered civilized were fought by laws and by the press. It was then that the street came to be seen in opposition to the private space of the home:

The woman of the elite began to mark her presence in cafes, dances, theaters and social events. Yet if she was now freer – "the social conviviality gave more freedom to emotions" – not only the husband or father watched her steps, her conduct was also submitted to the attentive gaze of society (D'INCAO, 1997, p. 228).

Rachel Soihet (1997), researcher of the history of women in Brazil, in her article "Mulheres pobres e violência no Brasil urbano" [Poor Women and Violence in Urban Brazil], affirmed that during the *Belle Époque* (1890-1920), the women were pressed to conform to the desired forms of personal and familiar behavior. However,

The family organization of the poor assumed a multiplicity of forms, with countless families led by single women. This was due not only to economic difficulties, but equally to various norms and values specific to popular culture. The implantation of the molds of the bourgeois family among workers was considered to be essential, given that in the capitalist regime established at that time, with the suppression of slavery, the cost of reproduction of labor was calculated considering as certain the invisible, non-remunerated contribution of the domestic work of women (SOIHET, 1997, p. 362-363).

Soihet emphasizes the difficulty of researching the women of Brazil at that time. Only since the 1960s were the enslaved and women considered as subjects of history. Soihet affirms that seeking out sources about the action of women in Brazil is a disheartening task; "In relation to poor women, most of whom could not read, the situation was aggravated" (SOIHET, 1997, p. 364).

Nevertheless, she examined criminal suits and, in relation to the urban circulation of women at the time, argued that "although the wealthiest women were encouraged to attend to the streets on certain occasions, in the theaters, tea houses, or even walking along the avenues, they had to be accompanied at all times." (SOIHET, 1997, p. 365). The street was considered a place of temptations and deviations and poor mothers had to watch over their daughters, which was difficult, given that they needed to work and to go into the streets after options for survival. Soihet found that for a poor mother, "her entire form of survival implied the freedom of circulation through the city, because it depended on an active circuit of information, conversations, carrying and fetching, verbal contracts" (SOIHET, 1997, p. 365).

Thus, the repression against women was accentuated, and, consequently, their resistance grew so they could continue to circulate through the streets. Soihet believes that the repression of the presence of women on the streets was due to an attempt to Frenchify the city and show that we were civilized. In addition, Soihet (1997, p. 366) specifies that, "the case of women, combined with prejudices related to their behavior; their condition of class and gender accentuated the incidence of violence". Thus, the poorest women resisted the norms imposed. In the passage below Soihet recalls the importance of circulation and their permanence in the streets:

This process did not take place without an effective resistance from the members of the popular classes, including the female portion, who disputed their right to every bit of urban space. It should be kept in mind that for many the street would serve as a home where they ate, slept and

extracted their sustenance. It was also in the squares and plazas that women usually gathered to talk, debate, or have fun, in the same way that they gathered at the fountains and spigots, often fighting for their turn. With most of the responsibility for maintaining the family, the freedom of movement and permanence in the streets and squares was vital to poor women, who each day improvised informal roles and forged ties of sociability (SOIHET, 1997, p. 366-367).

It is also important to emphasize that, before the abolition of slavery, there were black women circulating through the streets of Brazil, in the public markets and in the comings and goings of their tasks. According to Brazilian scholar, architect and urbanist Raquel Rolnik (1989), the street was also the territory occupied by the enslaved population:

The contiguity of the *sobrados* [large houses] in the central zones of the city would contribute to an intense circulation of domestic slaves: seeking water from the fountains, coming and going with clothes or waste to dump in the creeks, carrying baskets close to the markets, transporting objects from one point to another of the city. In 1854, the population of São Paulo, around 30 thousand inhabitants, was composed of eight thousand slaves, nearly 1/3 of its free population. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, in 1860, there were one hundred thousand slaves for a total population of 250 thousand residents, 60% of whom were involved with domestic services (ROLNIK, 1989, p. 31).

The black markets and religious spaces were meeting points of the slave and free populations according to Rolnik (1989), and black women in the markets were *Quituteiras* [peddlers], workers who ambled through public spaces of the city. Also known as *quitandeiras*, they participated in the urban scene and in the market for female labor in the slave period. Schumacher and Brazil (2007, p. 61) affirm in the book *Mulheres negras do Brasil* [Black Women of Brazil], that the term *kitanda* comes from a word in the *quimbundo* language of the Bantu group: "In many African societies the responsibility for subsistence and sale of basic goods were, since the earliest times, female tasks".

Schumacher and Brazil (2007) highlight that the place of commerce was occupied by the enslaved women and also by black women who had been freed, which allows one to suppose that, given their need to survive by working, their bodies were seen passing through the streets of the cities of Brazil.

This circulation through the streets also led to some problems involving local authorities (SCHUMACHER; BRAZIL, 2007), as was the case of Eva Maria do Bonsucesso, a freed slave who sought out her rights:

In July 1811, she mounted, as she did every day, her tray of collards and bananas on the former street of Misericórdia, in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Disturbed by a goat that ate her products, the *quitandeira* hit the animal, which to her surprise, belonged to Prince Dom Pedro. Upset with the situation, the animal's caretaker slapped the woman, and the issue went to court. After facing the suit courageously and supported by many witnesses in her favor, Eva was able to have the white man who disturbed her placed in jail (SCHUMACHER; BRAZIL, 1998, p. 61).

These women were seen as a danger, given that they had freedom to circulate, conducting sale of important products in cities at the time. According to Schumacher and Brazil (2007, p. 65), "spread through strategic regions of the cities, they walked the streets and allies, not only hawking a wide variety of products, but also promoting ideas". Therefore, repressive measures were created to restrict their free movement: in São Paulo, for example, they were "prevented from going beyond the city limits and were required to close the *quitandas* [sales stalls] after Ave-Maria [Mass]" (SCHUMACHER; BRAZIL, 2007, p. 65). Thus, given the reflection about the space occupied by women in the streets of Brazil, it is essential to emphasize the importance of this occupation of the streets and strategies for resistance, given that, as the authors comment, these women, whether slaves or freed women, exercised an important role not only in the streets of the cities, but in the economy of the country: "From one continent to another, black women moved and shifted a world. They came and went through their feelings and knowledge, transformed memories in rhymes and ways of being (SCHUMACHER; BRAZIL, 2007, p. 65).

## The *flâneuses* of the Baixada

It is possible to see in Elkin's writings how the relationship of the *flâneuses* takes place in cities today and how they are much more than a female figure corresponding to a male *flâneur*:

Once I began to look for the *flâneuse*, I spotted her everywhere. [...] She is going somewhere or coming from somewhere; she is saturated with in-betweenness. [...] She gets to know the city by wandering its streets, investigating its dark corners, peering behind facades, penetrating into secret courtyards. I found her using cities as performance spaces or as hiding places; as places to seek fame and fortune or anonymity; as places to liberate herself from oppression or to help those who are oppressed; as places to declare her independence; as places to change the world or be changed by it.

I found many correspondences between them; these women all read from each other and learned from each other, and their readings branched outward and outward in a network so developed it resists cataloguing. The portraits I paint here attest that the *flâneuse* is not merely a female *flâneur*, but a figure to be reckoned with, and inspired by, all on her own (ELKIN, 2016, p. 22).

Elkin narrates the moment when she felt like a *flâneuse*, when walking through the streets of Paris, often without knowing her destination, in a leisurely walk facilitated by the inviting Parisian urban scene. The challenge during the field research was to think of how this female flâner could be applied to the streets of the cities of the Baixada Fluminense.

Even if the studies mentioned previously were not about female bodies that walked the streets of the cities of the Baixada, we can extract many intersecting thoughts. Certainly, the walk through the Baixada is not peaceful or undisturbed, but that does not mean that it is impossible. For the *flâneuses*, who are the subjects of this study, the flâner is present in their daily urban activities where they connect the plots of the cities, move through Rio de Janeiro from one point to another of the Baixada, from Duque de Caxias to Magé, and construct their paths within their subjectivities, whether by choice or by professional, affective, personal destination. They live these cities within the contexts of cultural events, they come and go from soirees, shows, cineclubes, exchanging presences and reflections. This circulation is not always easy, it simply takes place in another form, according to urban design, and considering issues of mobility and violence, which make this act of flâner as a woman through the Baixada an act of resistance.

If in the works mentioned previously the work of the *flâneur* was to wander through the city and narrate, here, *flâner* through the Baixada is much more linked to doing, producing, not only observing, or reflecting on the city, or walking slowly but a “roaming through the cities”.

One issue that should be considered when thinking of the flâner of women through the Baixada is gender violence. According to the 12th edition of the Dossiê Mulher (2020), formulated by the Instituto de Segurança Pública (ISP, 2017), the Baixada Fluminense had a total of 28,765 registers of violence against women in the period, with 1,017 rapes, 9,324 cases of threats and 10,652 cases of assault and battery. “The Dossiê Mulher 2017 showed that women continue to be the greatest victims of the crimes of rape (85.3%), threats (65.4%), assault and battery (63.8%), sexual harassment (93.3%) and sexual assault (91%)”. This only includes the computed data; in reality, many cases are never registered.

The online journal “Gênero e Número” (Amanda PRADO, 2017) conducted a study with women who move through the streets of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro to show how women protect themselves from harassment and intimidation, and how these occurrences often change their routes. The journal’s study shows that harassment in public places has a direct effect on the patterns of mobility of women through the city and the needs of women are still poorly considered in urban planning.

To walk along the streets, for a woman, is not only an act of walking. There are a series of external pressures and interventions, people who collide with her, who invade the space of her body – harassment. The threats suffered by female bodies in urban space, unfortunately, are not specific to the Baixada Fluminense, they are found throughout the world. According to Solnit (2001) “Legal measures, social mores subscribed to by both men and women, the threat implicit in sexual harassment, and rape itself have all limited women’s ability to walk where and then they wished” (p. 248).

Walking down the city streets, young women get harassed in ways that tell them that this is not their world, their city, their street; that their freedom of movement and association is liable to be undermined at any time; and that a lot of strangers expect obedience and attention from them. “Smile,” a man orders you, and that’s a concise way to say that he owns you; he’s the boss; you do as you’re told; your face is there to serve his life, not express your own. He’s someone; you’re no one. (SOLNIT, 2016b).

Added to the issues raised by Solnit (2016), are racism, LGBT phobia, lesbophobia and transphobia that permeate many spaces. To place our bodies in the streets is of itself an act of resistance, in the sense that our presence in these public spaces that were denied to us is a form of resistance. We produce, reflect, circulate, occupy, and perceive together what are our strategies of living these cities, within the subtlety of each body. The strategies that are used in this *flâner* lead to believe that the woman, the *flâneuse* of the Baixada, resists by placing herself in the streets of the city.

And it’s the centre of cities where women have been empowered, by plunging into the heart of them, and walking where they’re not meant to. Walking where other people (men) walk without eliciting comment. That is the transgressive act. You don’t need to crunch around in Gore-Tex to be subversive, if you’re a woman. Just walk out your front door (ELKIN, 2016, p. 20).

*Flâner* and resist, to walk in resistance through the Baixada, as a woman, is not to deny these conditions, the fear of violence against the body, the issues of urban mobility, but to construct



strategies along these paths taken – whether by circulating in groups of women, accompanied by a male or female partner, or armed with devices that can bring a certain comfort and security, such as knives. They do not refuse to go and be in places of the city, but they create strategies. If an event ends very late, they go home by Uber, or sleep in the house of a girlfriend, they avoid streets and routes well known for reported violence. Therefore, they are permeated by a logic of urban violence and mobility that prevents the walking, but they resist, circulating in the Baixada and creating and attending cultural events that involve and reconfigure this *flâner*, this urban and reflexive walking, which does not take place only in idleness and does not need to have direct contact with a crowd. The unknown is not essential for consolidating the sensitive experience of female bodies in the city. The *flânerie* of these women takes place in encounters and not by constantly getting lost in slow motion; it is not to be distant from the familiar, but to seek it out. It is not to encounter alterity, it is to respect its existence, and to seek out that which unites them as women who take routes and come together in the cultural scene of the Baixada Fluminense.

## Conclusion

In this article we sought to discuss the potentialities of thinking and researching about women in the streets of the city, based on the emergent possibilities between being a woman and being a *flâneur* and the gendering of the concept of *flâner* through the existence of the character of the *flâneuse*. Used since the nineteenth century, the concept of *flâneur* has been applied to studies about cities, modern life and to possibilities for appropriation of urban life. In this sense, a recurring question during the study was: is it possible to think of the *flâneuse* in different racial contexts and with a focus on women of various social classes, from different times? Other pertinent questions were: what would be the limits to denominating the women of the Baixada as *flâneuses*? And is it possible for concepts and experiences from the dawn of a modern Europe to dialog with what we do in Latin American countries like Brazil?

“Roaming through cities” expresses in the closest manner the practice that the women interlocutors of the study do in the Baixada Fluminense. Thus, they inherit from the *flâneuses* the possibility to be active in cities, in urban spaces and conduct “their runs”.

Even if the bodies of women are affected, they are not always affected in the same way, because it is necessary to consider that race, sexuality and territory often integrate in composing the body of a woman in the city.

Elkin affirms, at the end of her book about the *flâneuses*, that space is not neutral: “Space is not neutral. Space is a feminist issue. The space we occupy – here in the city, we city dwellers – is constantly remade and unmade, constructed and wondered at” (ELKIN, 2016, p. 286). She cites Georges Perec (2008) who says space is a doubt: “I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It’s never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it” (ELKIN, 2016, p. 286). Thus, in her perspective, “From Teheran to New York, from Melbourne to Mumbai, a woman still can’t walk in the city the way a man can” (ELKIN, 2016, p. 286). According to Elkin,

It is only in becoming aware of the invisible boundaries of the city that we can challenge them. A female *flânerie* – a *flâneuserie* – not only changes the way we move through space, but intervenes in the organisation of space itself. We claim our right to disturb the peace, to observe (or not observe), to occupy (or not occupy) and to organise (or disorganise) space on our own terms (ELKIN, 2016, p. 288).

To opt for a route on busier streets instead of quieter ones, to not circulate through or occupy dark, empty spaces, or those that cause fear, is to contribute to the logic that that space will become increasingly empty and scary. If everyone avoids circulating through a region, the location tends to become increasingly less occupied, increasingly less occupied by female bodies.

Elkin believes that the *flâneuse* “is still fighting to be seen, even now, when, as we’d like to think, she more or less has the run of the city” (ELKIN, 2016, p. 18). It is important to note here that, unlike the urban man who walks slowly who gave rise to the study of the *flâneries*, the *flâneuse*, the woman who walks, runs through the city.

Though what they wrote was unauthorized, women blazed away anyway. Though what they painted went unrecognized, it fed the soul anyway. Women had to beg for the instruments and spaces needed for their arts, and if none were forthcoming, they made space in trees, caves, woods and closets (Clarissa ESTÉS, 1997, p. 3).

The *flâneuse* has the run of the city, she commands the city, she appropriates the city. To think of the right of women to the city is a process of (re)existence, of different modes of existing, it is a process of creation of identities, given that, if we reflect on the Brazilian experience, we perceive a country with vast territory, where experiences depend not only on how these different cities are constituted, but on how women who are very different from each other experience it.

Here we perceive that having the run of the city also allows reinventions, and a political process that aggregates multiple resistances, agendas and agencies.

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This article originated from the master's dissertation of Luísa Antonitsch Mansilha Mello, who conceived of the theme in dialog with her supervisor, collected the data, and planned and wrote the manuscript based on a discussion of the results.

Ana Paula Alves Ribeiro supervised the work and maintained a dialog about the conceptualization of the theme and the collection of references with Luísa Antonitsch, discussed the results and wrote part of the text found in this final article.

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