NIGHTWALKER: an essay and photo-based installation

On a Brief History of [Street] Walking through Time and Space

The NIGHTWALKER project takes its name from the Surrealist text Le Paysan de Paris, written by Louis Aragon in 1924. Like his colleague André Breton, Louis Aragon was a member of both the Dada and Surrealist movements. In attempting to disrupt bourgeois social conventions, these movements focused an aspect of their cultural critique upon literary practices. Le Paysan de Paris, for example, was published in the same year that Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto first appeared. Influenced by Freud’s psychoanalytic research, the Surrealist writers attempted to emulate in literary form the psychic workings of the dream structure. By this means, they hoped to disorient and confront readers with their own repressed bourgeois social anxieties. This revolution of the individual psyche was meant to enact an experience equivalent to the political revolution proposed by Marx. In Le Paysan de Paris, Aragon takes the reader on two extended journeys through the Paris streets and arcades of the 1920’s, a textual passage which stands as a metaphor for the reader’s journey into the unconscious realm. The narrator, or ‘peasant’ of Paris, wanders intoxicated through what has become the naturalized Paris streets and arcades of the 1920’s, a textual passage which stands as a metaphor for the reader’s journey into the unconscious realm. The narrator, or ‘peasant’ of Paris, wanders intoxicated through what has become the naturalized landscape of spectacular production and consumption. Within this context walking performed a revelatory function, which brought into consciousness the social and economic conditions of the underclass—the human ecologies displaced by processes of modernization.

In Le Paysan de Paris, as in many other avant-gardist texts, women are read against the masculine narrative of urban exploration as a kind of ‘perilous’ landscape, which must be traversed by the central male protagonist. In this context, sexual difference is articulated in terms of the privileged position occupied by males within public space. During the late 19th and early 20th century, a new urban consciousness developed which mapped itself onto the phenomenon of flânerie or strolling. The flâneur, for whom there is no direct female equivalent, was the term given to a bourgeois male subject who loitered or moved randomly through the city capturing its vistas in his fleeting glances. The scopic nature of flânerie thus re-enacts a kind of loitering of the male gaze upon the body of a city, which is itself positioned as feminine. The early work of Canadian photo-conceptualist Jeff Wall invokes flânerie as a central mode for his picture making. Much like his 19th century antecedents, Jeff Wall endlessly scanned the city of Vancouver, trolling for images, events and ideas that he would later re-enact for the camera. While the male flâneur participated in the mobile currency of modernity and freely explored its

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4 In her her 1984 article “L’Ethique de la différence sexuelle (1984)” Luce Irigaray states “that historically in the west, time is conceived as masculine [proper to a subject, a being with an interior] and space is associated with femininity [femininity being a form of externality to men]. Woman is/provides space for man, but occupies none herself”. Although feminist revisionists are attempting to re-inscribe the feminine within linear time by calling attention to the many contributions made by women—a process of re-insertion that allows women to claim a space within the official history—Irigaray would argue that this revisionism does not engender or feminize space, but merely locates ‘woman’ in normal space which is theorized as male—sexed space can only occur at the level of discourse. At the same time, Irigaray’s mode of argument acknowledges that in so far as the study of space is concerned, the questions of ‘difference’ being posed by feminists are in fact already present there.

Similarly, Rosalyn Deutsche in her article “Men in Space”, Strategies 3, (1990) pg. 136 states that; “urban discourse continues to construct space as a feminized object surveyed by mastering subjects. Thus space is very promptly re-feminized or doubly feminized: first as the matrix, pure potential, nature, matter or substance, and then once this space has been ‘appropriated, dominated and over come’ it is again the finished feminine product; object and property of the masculine subject/overseer.”

pleasurable zones, women who loitered risked being called prostitutes and whores, an elision that the term streetwalker makes emphatic. Within this social and visual construct, even the seemingly directed gaze of the prostitute cannot be read as ‘active’ because it is primarily a mirror which reflects the desiring gaze of the male spectator or client. Similarly, the expression ‘she is a looker’ inverts its semantic logic so that she is in fact the one being looked at. In dismantling the agency of the female gaze, this linguistic transposition ensures that the act of looking remains inscribed within the discourse of masculinity. A parallel analysis of the activity of loitering suggests that this same “gendered logic” underwrites sexual difference at the level of the street. “Although the popular literature of flânerie may have referred to Paris as a ‘virgin forest’, no woman found roaming there alone was expected to actually be one.”

In the 1950s the Situationists (an avant-garde artist collective) used the activity of the walk or journey through the city to critique commodity culture. Walking was considered a mode of production capable of altering the conditions of everyday life through consciousness-raising, which could in turn produce social transformation. The Situationists deployed the ideas of dérive and détournement—aleatory drifting within the urban matrix and conscious disorientation—as a means of disrupting the social narratives of the city. Their interest in psycho-geography was useful in trying to establish an awareness of how the conditions of everyday life were reproduced and controlled. By creating ‘situations’, they hoped to rupture the social landscape and expose its oppressive and excessive mechanisms in order to subvert the “society of the spectacle”. “Only an awareness of the influences of the existing environment can encourage the critique of the present conditions of daily life, and yet it is precisely this concern with the environment in which we live which is ignored.”

Dérive—“The sudden change of ambience in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance which is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the ground); the appealing or repelling character of certain places—all this seems to be neglected.”

Unlike Surrealist automatism, the dérive was not a question of submitting to an unconscious and free-associative state of mind. To dérive was “to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed.”

These avant-garde strategies of artistic and literary disruption created alternative systems of representation and articulation that could be used to shift the normalized readings of images and contexts. The Situationists in extending these subversive modalities or tactics of dislocation to real spaces [their urban environment] developed a ‘technique’ with wide ranging political applications.

5 For example Edouard Manet: Painter of Modern Life.
8 Ibid., pg. 58.
9 Ibid., pg. 59.
10 It is worthwhile noting that very few women participated in the Situationist project. Exceptions include Elena Verrone and Michele Bernstein, who co-authored a number of texts with Raoul Vaneigem and Guy Debord. It remains unclear as to whether women ever participated in the dérive; in fact it is unlikely that women participated in the drunken ambulation that characterized one aspect of the dérive. While the consumption of alcohol certainly contributed to the state of disorientation that the Situationists desired their revolutionary aspirations remain resonant in spite of such predilections.
Although NIGHTWALKER refers to an aspect of the Situationist project, it also acknowledges the fact that women must negotiate space differently and therefore challenges the notion of disorientation and aimless drifting as perhaps impractical strategies for women. In consciously asserting its presence, the body claims a physical space within the urban landscape. This cognizance of site is a necessary survival tool for women who move within demanding environments. It also functions to make women more visible within the ‘public’ sphere as active social subjects. The NIGHTWALKER project invokes a feminist critique of theorizations of the modern city, which in the west has aligned women with the domesticated landscape of the home.11 At the same time it explores the notion of desire in relationship to women’s experience of the city.12 It argues that if the city can only be conceptualized as a place of danger for women, then we [women] are once again subject to the same patriarchal codes of urban planning which traditionally prevented women from becoming active social subjects within the city. How might we reconsider the urban experience as a site of pleasure, rather than just risk, for women? Is this possible?

Foot Loose

From the beginning of modernity, the presence of women in cities, and in particular on city streets, has been problematic. As Elizabeth Wilson has argued mechanisms for surveillance and control have always directed certain attentions towards women. While beyond the scope of this text, such an argument must include all persons who do not occupy spaces of legitimate public presence. “In the city, the forbidden—what is most feared and desired—becomes possible. Woman’s presence in cities as seductress or whore, or alternatively as virtuous woman in danger, clearly poses a problem to order because their presence symbolizes the promise of sexual adventure; a promise which is converted into a general moral and political threat.”13 The current anxiety around non-western immigration and the racial re-distribution of geopolitical representation in North American also poses a similar threat to established notions of White Eurocentric power and control. During the 19th century, British town planning movements began a systematic campaign to exclude women and children, along with other ‘disruptive’ elements, from urban space. Josephine Butler, a social reformer writing at that time, spoke of several occasions during which respectable women were mistaken for prostitutes and arrested or detained. It became undesirable and even indecent for a young woman to walk the streets of London unaccompanied by a suitable male companion. Yet the freedom to wander through the city unfettered was exhilarating for those women compelled by necessity to travel alone. Lucy Snowe, heroine of Charlotte Brontë’s Villette, recounts her solitary journey through London:

“It was the beginning of the year and I was thirty—Thirty years, Lucy, you must count; you have passed the prime of life. . . . It was Prodigious was the amount of life I lived that morning. . . . I went wandering whither chance might lead, in a still ecstasy of freedom and enjoyment, and I got—I know not how—I got into the heart of city life. I saw and felt London at last. I mixed with the life

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11 Nancy Fraser discusses the notion of the domestic as a kind of ‘counter-site’ in her seminal text “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, 1992.
12 As a visual artwork the project is indebted to the complex theoretical terrain excavated by many feminist scholars to which this paper can only make passing references.
passing alone; I dared the perils of crossings. To do this, and to do it utterly alone, gave me, perhaps an irrational, but real pleasure. . . I had a sudden feeling as if I, who had never yet truly lived, were at last about to taste life.”

The regulation of women’s movement within the city is still operative in many insidious forms today. For example, public transportation systems continue to be organized around peak business hours, so that women traveling into the city from suburban communities during the middle of the day are often stranded for long periods waiting for appropriate bus connections—patriarchal jurisdiction which only valorizes a certain kind of productivity is thus reproduced in spatial terms. A recent personal anecdote also points to these prevailing conceptions. When installing a publicly sited art project with a female gallery preparator in downtown Vancouver, a male passerby by asked us “what we lesbians were up to”. Women who are perceived as ‘out of place’ or rather not in their ‘proper’ place [the space of interiority or domestic sphere] are quickly marked as ‘other’. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was acknowledged that women constituted a significant portion of the industrial labour force and would continue to work in cities and thus could not entirely be excluded from the public realm. It was in part for these reasons that the policed city ‘cleansed’ of temptation emerged alongside moral reform programs. At the same time, the suburban ideal begins to emerge as an ideological counter site to the city in order to de-legitimate the pleasures and possibilities of urban life.

The spaces of spectacular consumption which reorganized and redefined the architecture and utility of 19th century cities such as New York also reconfigured ‘identity’ itself as a site of potential commodity exchange, to the extent that one could sustain aspirations of upward social mobility or pursue alternative sexual lifestyles without immediate censure. While conservative urban reformers undoubtedly saw the anonymity of the commuting mass public as an implicit challenge to the maintenance of law and order, such anonymity also held out the promise of certain freedoms. Writer George Sand described how, when disguised as a man, she could experience the pleasure of being a flâneur; “no one knew me, no one looked at me.

. . I was an atom lost in that immense crowd”. Baudelaire, who coined the term flâneur, saw the essential condition of Parisian city life as a kind of “universal prostitution created by consumerism, circulating securely in the city’s clogged heart.” Although both the flâneur and the prostitute shared an intimate knowledge of the vagrant and precarious spaces of the city, its topography was always charted by the masculine epistemophilic impulse to see, to consume and to maintain sovereignty over. Many Parisian women did participate actively within the urbanized atmospheres of sexual and political excess however such independence usually came at the cost of their over-sexualization and complicity in what was usually a

15 The insistence upon an ‘hygienic’ society also finds another 19th century precedent in the teaching of domestic science. The Home Economics curriculum produced a professional class of women who believed that culinary and domestic literacy could not be handed down or casually absorbed; it had to be taught. Early domestic scientists were not focused on liberating intelligent women from the drudgery of housework, their objective was to raise housework to a level worthy of intelligent women. In this regard, they tried to apply rational methods to the messiness of housework and in so doing attempted to earn the respect accorded the masculine domains of science and business. “Their model housewife was a pseudo-professional woman with little time for sublimating her ego to the ministrations of husband and children. She was more like a factory supervisor who always prioritized the managerial and aesthetic challenges of homemaking to the social attentions of the family.” Alison J. Clarke in Visions of Suburbia, Routledge: 1997.
18 See Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering”, New German Critique 39, Fall (1986). See also Melanie Klein’s theorizations of the masculine epistemophilic desire ‘to know’ which constructs another useful model for understanding the psychic mechanism of the colonizing impulse. In her research she directs our attention to the ways in which “masculine envy of, and identification with, maternal fertility fuels the sublimation of infantile epistemophobia into cultural quests to discover or create new bodies of knowledge, land resources, or
voyeuristic spectacle. Despite the over-determined characterization of the public sphere as the domain of the masculine subject, women formed an essential element of 19th and 20th century street crowds. Department stores in their elaborate seduction of female consumers created leisure zones such as restaurants, rest rooms, and even reading rooms where bourgeois and middle-class women could go unaccompanied. Parisian urban life also provided a fertile environment for the growth of a lesbian subculture. American heiress Nathalie Clifford-Barney opened a lesbian salon. The poet Renée Vivien and the writer Colette lived openly in their own lesbian neighbourhood. Metropolitan life provided the space in which subcultures could flourish and create their own identities and yet the more visible they became, the more vulnerable they were to surveillance and containment. Although marginalized groups can exist more autonomously in the city than elsewhere, their perceived threat to take over the city is always questioned by dominant groups, always subject to retaliatory and often brutalizing actions.

Walking, Canadian Style

NIGHTWALKER was also influenced by a landmark civil liberties case concerning “the inherent right to place oneself at risk within the public sector” that was argued and won in the province of Saskatchewan. Although this case dealt with the relationship between disabled people and public transit, its legal implications are twofold. Firstly, it recognizes the constitutional right to place oneself in a potentially dangerous situation within ‘public’ space, and secondly, it attempts to define the limits between ourselves [our bodies] and the state. This is a thesis predicated upon the belief that our corporeal body is still the boundary, which establishes and protects our privacy. Lesbian and gay culture in particular testifies to the contradictory nature of city life—its opportunities and its risks. For example, cruising culture makes visible a desiring gay urban identity, which would probably be subject to disapproval in a small town; at the same time, such ‘publicity’ makes one more vulnerable to verbal and physical abuses such as gay bashing. Clearly our corporeality is no marker of private property, given the frequent and invasive maneuvers into the body on the part of medical, religious, and legal communities. Nonetheless, it would seem that both the pleasures and the dangers of the city are disproportionately allocated to women. As women, we have the inherent right to be out on the streets at night. Choosing that right does not make us unaware of the risks that such an activity entails. On the contrary, it demonstrates the unacceptable alternative, which is to be relegated once again to the domestic as the only place that is safe for women. Such a proposition finds ideal expression within contemporary neo-conservative agendas that have reclaimed the ‘home’ in the name protecting the nuclear family and by extension the state both of which are perceived to be under threat from destabilizing external forces. The more the state maintains internal order, the more its produces conditions of chaos externally.

Street Smart

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19 Statistically this is inaccurate as most violent acts towards women occur within the home itself.

20 See also Lynn Spiegel’s discussions wherein she links the post-war Russian/American space race to the representation of the nuclear family in 1960s sci-fi television as “under threat” from external forces. Spiegel argues that these TV shows were produced to counter the momentum of women’s movements by grafting fears about an imminent communist threat onto feminism’s radical challenges to patriarchy. The acceleration of the space race was justified in semantic terms as a need to protect the American way of life and therefore the sanctity of the American nuclear family.
Video maker Andrea Slaine has created a project in which women walk the streets, secure in the knowledge that their .38’s are close at hand. In her essay “Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representations of Rage and Resistance”, Judith Halberstam quotes a poem by June Jordan entitled “Poem about My Rights”. Halberstam writes that the poem “signifies not simply legal rights but the right to exist, the right to walk at night, the right to write, the right not to be raped, the right to reply, the right to be angry, the right to respond with violence, the right to lawfully inhabit and populate a place of rage”.21

“Even tonight and I need to talk a walk and clear my head about this poem and why I can’t go out without changing my clothes my shoes my body posture my gender my identity my age my status as a woman alone in the evening/ alone on the streets/alone not being the point/ the point being that I can’t do what I want to do with my body because I am the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin. . .”22

Halberstam goes on to argue as follows: “Women, long identified as victims rather than perpetrators of violence, have much to gain from new and different configurations of violence, terror and fantasy. . . women are taught to fear certain spaces and certain individuals because they threaten rape: how do we produce a fear of retaliation in the rapist? Thelma and Louise is an example of imagined violence that produces or may produce an unrealistic (given how few women carry and use guns) fear in potential rapists that their victims are armed and dangerous. Of course there is no direct and simple relationship between imagined violence and real effects: to claim that representing female violence quells male attacks would only re-stabilize the relationship between the imagined and the real.”23

Such a proposition articulates what is often termed ‘female revenge fantasy’ in that it inverts the traditional gendered narrative in which the violent perpetrator is a white male. According to Halberstam, the disruption in the logic of representation “women with guns confronting rapists—has the potential to intervene in popular imaginings of violence and gender by resisting the moral imperatives to not fight violence with violence. Films like Thelma and Louise suggest, therefore, not that we all pick up guns, but that we allow ourselves to imagine the possibilities of fighting violence with violence.”24

In 1993 I produced a series of public art installations on the University of Washington campus in Seattle. This project dealt with the increasing violence towards women on university campuses. One aim was to provide basic information that would assist students in dealing with this serious problem. The project was structured around a series of images and text panels that referred to the experiences of walking alone at night. Although the reference to a potential confrontation between a female and male nightwalker was implicit, the ambiguity of their interaction allowed for a more complex reading of the work—one that did not reduce the reading to ‘woman as victim’, ‘man as aggressor’. At the site of the installation, a Plexiglas box contained printed cards with Walk Safer Tips for students to take. These outlined information that both women and men could use to facilitate their safety when walking alone at night. I was extremely concerned with developing a situation that could

24 Ibid. pg. 8/9.
encourage thoughtful consideration of the problem of violence towards women, and felt that an open-ended strategy would be more effective than an overtly didactic one. Nor did I wish to create a sense of paranoia and fear for those people who needed to traverse the campus grounds at night. There are things that we can do to ensure our safety that does not necessitate carrying a gun—a practice that statistically has proven to be inversely detrimental to its carrier, and frequently results in its lethal use against them. As Halberstam reminds us, the imagination is a powerful and tactical tool especially when deployed to project another, perhaps unimagined, sometimes unthinkable, version of a “crucial myth” into the discourse; in this particular case the static ascription of woman as victim. “Redistributing the narrative field by telling another version of a crucial myth is a major process in crafting new meanings. One version never replaces another, but the whole field is rearranged in interrelation among all the versions in tension with each other”.

*Take Back the Night* is an annual protest march or walk that declares “we’re women, we’re on the street, we have a right to be here, to be safe, to be left alone, get used to it, but don’t mess with us because we are many”. A threat perhaps, a demand certainly. Protests are always simultaneously a struggle with power and a demand for power. However the threat that these women pose is not a violent threat per se, but a threat to disrupt the “sexed logic” of power relations in which women assume the passive non-aggressive position. Such demands bring gender and sexuality into the ‘public’ realm of the networks of power and knowledge, which actually produce them. Thus the project that feminism presents is not to input gender and sexuality into social discourse but rather to insist that we all recognize that “the issues currently being examined by feminists—relations of representation and difference—are already present there”.26

**Wanderlust**

In her article “Lived Spatiality” Elizabeth Grosz describes the *body phantom* as: “the condition of the subject’s capacity not only to adapt to, but also to become integrated with various objects, instruments, tools and machines. It is the condition of the body’s inherent openness and pliability to, and in, its social context. . . It is the capacity to integrate or internalize otherwise apparently external objects into one’s own corporeal activities. . . in sensual experiences, to bodily incorporate the objects of our desire through sustained intimate contact. The body phantom is the link between our biological and cultural existence, between our ‘inner’ psyche and our ‘external’ body, that which enables a passage or a transformation from one to the other. Moreover, it is the body image that enables the human body to shift its various significances; to endow one part of the body with the meaning and value of another; to displace sexuality from the genitals to other zones, or vice versa; to become infinitely malleable, transposable, mobile—for example, enabling the whole of the body to take on phallic significance”27

When extended to a reading of the NIGHTWALKER texts, this psychoanalytic condition suggests that the *walking* body has become a kind of orgasmic body. Through ambulation, the city enters the body, is absorbed by the body, becomes one with the body—a consummation of urbanity and corporeality. In NIGHTWALKER, the city becomes the object of the woman’s

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desire and is thus incorporated into her body, made flesh, through the act of walking—a kind of urban transubstantiation. Annie Sprinkle—porn star turned performance artist/sex therapist—is able to control her breathing in such a way that the inhalation and expulsion of breath becomes an orgasmic pleasure. Similarly, the nocturnal paced movement of the woman throughout the city becomes an orgasmic gesture—"her pace measured by the languid beating of her pulse"—pleasure displaced via the subject’s passage through darkened spaces over the entire epidermis of the walking female body.

Similarly, Freud’s conception of the narcissistic ego as libidinal containment—that which regulates the flow of the sex drives in anticipation of finding appropriate objects in which to invest its libido—proposes that the city as ‘imaginary’ body can become the object of libidinal cathexes (that through which concentrated libidinal energies are channeled). The narcissistic ego, unlike the realist ego (another Freudian postulate), is “an entirely fluid, mobile, amorphous series of identifications, internalizations of images/perceptions invested with libidinal cathexes” (Grosz 1990). It stands to reason that if the primary relations of the ego are libidinal—that is, based on pleasure and constituted through and by its relations with others/objects—then the experience of walking can act as a libidinal cathexis in which the city becomes the external object that is re-absorbed by the ego and thus re-invested with desire. Walking becomes an active force in determining the subject’s relational identification to and with its environment, so that the inscription of desire upon the body of the city is re-traced within the subject’s own psychic corporeality.

Crossing the Line

"Without hesitation she moved out into the crowd—night air concealing—congealing the spaces between their bodies—till she could no longer trust her skin to maintain discretion—felt betrayed by its easy assimilation—yet curiously pleased with her new mutated body"

“I know where I am, but do not feel as though I’m at the spot where I find myself. To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, and digests them. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is the ‘convulsive possession’.”

In his essay “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (1935), Roger Caillois claimed that “the ability of an insect to mimic his environment is not an adaptive or defensive function but a luxury and even a dangerous luxury. Mimicry even within animals threatens to assimilate the individual into its environment at the cost of any identity.” This inability to locate one’s body in relational space becomes a danger for the ambulating subject who, through assimilation with/into the urban matrix, risks a potential loss of identity culminating in a return to the undifferentiated state of the Real. It should be noted that this phenomenon, ‘depersonalization by assimilation into space’ is absolute; that is, unlike the body phantom in which

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the body is able to assimilate certain external objects into its corporeal sphere, psychasthenia demands the subject’s total assimilation into its external environment. If considered once again through the cipher of nightwalking, this mimetic condition of assimilation implies the ambulating body’s surrender and interface with the spatial configuration of the city. This results in the loss of a ‘located’ knowledge on the part of the subject about his/her position in space. However, within the context of NIGHTWALKER I will suggest that this temptation by space is only partially articulated and therefore remains within the realm of imaginary and visual speculation.

In Writing and Difference, Derrida quotes from Freud’s lecture on “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety”: “As soon as writing, which entails making a liquid flow out of a tube onto a piece of white paper, assumes the significance of copulation, or as soon as walking becomes a symbolic substitute for treading upon the body of mother earth, both writing and walking are stopped because they represent the performance of a forbidden sexual act.”

Here Freud is referring to the prohibition against incest, originally encountered during the Oedipal complex. At this stage, the child’s incestuous desires must be transferred to the parent of the opposite sex in order for the child to enter into ‘normative’ heterosexuality. Eventually the incest taboo forces the child to displace their love object from the parent to someone outside of the immediate family; the inability to complete this transference will result in a sexually disoriented subject. To ‘flesh’ out this discussion I would like to overlay Kristeva’s notion of the abject wherein the subject is reminded of their own mortality by the sign of the reproductive woman, who represents the original synthesis of subject and object. The desire for cohesive autonomy becomes the subject’s lifelong pre-occupation and yet is simultaneously encouraged and refused by the psychic memory of maternal oneness. In short, the abject signifies the inadequacy of the subject’s ability to differentiate completely between its corporeality and its “tenuous bodily boundaries”; it is an “abyss, which threatens to engulf the subject” and marks its potential obliteration. Although the psychoanalytic dimensions of walking constitute one the significant subtexts for NIGHTWALKER, the project ultimately demands that the act of walking—moving through space—remains inscribed within the discourse of the ‘real’. That is, the symbolic dimensions of walking cannot be separated from the concrete gesture of placing one foot in front of the other in real time and real space.

Another aspect of NIGHTWALKER, which demands further textual analysis, is the notion of ‘darkness’. Kristeva’s theory of the abject, as signification of both maternity and darkness, provides the synaptic link between Freud’s discussion of walking across the body of the procreative woman and my own discussion of walking at night. However, Kristeva’s variation on Freud’s position does not rely upon the ‘essentializing’ of the female body as a regenerative body—for Kristeva “maternity is a process without a subject”.

To synthesize these ideas in relationship to the NIGHTWALKER project, it is useful to understand the challenges this work makes to both the ‘popular’ reading of the maternal body as a metaphor for the city, and by extension, the reading of the ambulating subject as male. Bearing in mind Irigaray’s insistence that we understand that “sexed speech” (speech which does not assign the male into the subject position as human) can only be re-constituted at the level of the symbolic, the place

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30 Sigmund Freud, quoted by Jacques Derrida in Writing and Difference, pg. 229.
where the nature of the subject’s relationship to discourse is produced. We nevertheless need to investigate “the laws, which establish languages, discourses and theories”. NIGHTWALKER attempts to problematize the now familiar metaphor of [dark] space as maternal body/mother earth so that neither the ‘masculinized’ threat of danger, nor the ‘feminized’ promise of pleasure stand as ontologically fixed urban signifiers. To suggest that these categories are fluid is to suggest the possibility of a sexual explorer who is female, a violent perpetrator who is not necessarily male; in other words a space of urban negotiation not governed by the fiction of ‘normative’ behaviour. What was forbidden becomes imaginable. The darkness, which threatened to consume the subject, becomes an overture to the pleasures of anonymity.

Take a Walk on the Wild Side

Navigating beneath the semantic surfaces of NIGHTWALKER is a libidinal current that is at once pleasurable and then abruptly violent. There is a collusion between risk and desire which manifests remarkably similar physiological responses in the body—increased pulse rate, pounding heart beat, shortened breath, sweating, the rise in overall body temperature, a heightened sense of the body’s relationship to its environment, increased adrenal production, the clotting of blood in the genital and reproductive zones. According to Freud’s essay on the economic problem of masochism, “sexual excitation arises as an accessory effect of a large series of internal processes as soon as the intensities of these processes has exceeded certain quantitative limits. . . nothing very important takes place within the organism without contributing a component to the excitation of the sexual instinct. According to this, an excitation of physical pain would surely also have this effect.”

Freud calls this mechanism of libidinal psychic economy, ‘erogenic masochism”—all intense experiences, painful or pleasurable, charge the sex drives of the human being, a charge that accounts for the physiological effects detailed above.

This is not to suggest that risk is a necessary condition for deriving ‘pleasure’ from the experience of walking alone at night, but rather that “the inherent right to place oneself at risk within the public sector” is not to be understood in exclusively political terms. Sex is politics by another name, in that both are written within the desiring economy of power. The notion of deliberately putting oneself at risk in exchange for libidinal pleasure might seem foolhardy but clearly ‘safety’ is a relative term with widely divergent social and political applications. As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us “the idea of a risk-free existence is a fantasy about transcendence of the body, a desire to inhabit a perfect world in which the messiness of lived experience has been evacuated—a control fantasy which promises the utopian ideal of disembodied pleasure.”

NIGHTWALKER: A Photo-based Installation

The NIGHTWALKER project consists of a series of photographic images, walking words, and narratives. The texts are loosely autobiographical, in that they are lifted out of my own experiences of walking through the cities of Vancouver and San Diego at night, however, they are not an analog of my personal accountings but rather as emblematic of a specific kind of female subject. It is important to articulate this specificity, because the politics of walking—the question of who ‘occupies’ the street—are obviously discursive. In the preceding essay I have argued that the activity of women walking on

33 See Elizabeth Grosz, “Lived Spatiality”, pg. 5-8.
the streets served to make women more visible within the ‘public’ sphere as active social subjects. Although all women are vulnerable, to some extent, to the violence of city life, the collective situation of women in cities is not the same. Economically disenfranchised and working-class women find themselves negotiating urban situations that are often outside of the experiential spheres of the more economically privileged. These are the women who rely upon public transit, work the night shift, and live in precarious and marginalized areas of the city. Thus the notion of public female visibility to which NIGHTWALKER makes reference is actually very specific. While the installation refers to a particular ‘type’ of ambulating subject, there are deliberate gaps or disjunctures, which provide necessary spaces for the spectator’s own imaginings and meanderings. Moreover, the interplay between the visual and linguistic systems in NIGHTWALKER demands that the experience of viewing and reading the work happens concurrently. In this way, any sense of a ‘coherent’ narrative becomes the product of a collaboration between the artist's and viewer's own intellectual labour.

Although I am interested in producing knowledge about women’s subjective experience, the project aims to transcend the conditions of its own particularity. In understanding how the strategy of making something ‘public’ transforms the relationship between producer and consumer, we also come to understand the ways in which artwork can function pro-actively. Because the body is always simultaneously inscribed within the economies of pleasure/desire and domination/power, the construction of woman as subject in discourse demands an articulation of forms of ‘difference’ that is both political and theoretical. In attempting to operate within these multiple and discursive zones of critical practice, I have chosen a voice that is neither biographical nor neutral but one that is rather a ‘composite’ voice. The female protagonists in these narratives are intent upon claiming a space for female desires, they are determined to ‘go public’ in order to perform a kind of necessary work that is bound by violence to another violence, because “some things must be voided publicly first”. In naming this body of work NIGHTWALKER, I make reference to historical avant-garde notions which linked walking to social transformation, yet ones, which ultimately refused the specificity of a historical female consciousness and thus authored a sexed history of walking as ‘radical gesture’. This revisionist version of NIGHTWALKER is a fictional account of a woman’s nocturnal walking experiences. It looks less to the art historical tradition of the European avant-garde than to the work of contemporary feminist scholarship and the lived experiences of women who in the course of their day-to-day lives by necessity or choice have to get out and walk the streets.

Walking After Midnight

• I go out walking • after midnight • out in the moonlight • just like we used to do • I’m always walking • after midnight • searching for you • I walk for miles • along the highway • well that’s just my way • of saying I love you • well I’m always walking • after midnight • searching for you • I stop to see a weeping willow • crying on his pillow • maybe he’s crying for me • and as the skies turn gloomy • night winds whisper to me • I’m lonesome as I can be • I go out walking • after midnight • out in the starlight • just hoping you may be• somewhere awalking • after midnight • searching for me • I stop to see a weeping willow • crying on his pillow • maybe he’s crying for me • and as the skies turn gloomy • night winds whisper to me • I’m lonesome as I can be • I go out walking • after midnight • out in the starlight • just hoping you may be• somewhere awalking • after midnight • searching for me • (Patsy Cline, 1956)