



## Flânerie in Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*

Magdalena Pfalzgraf

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Valerie Tagwira's debut novel *The Uncertainty of Hope*, set in Harare in 2005, depicts the city on the brink of collapse, characterized by the effects of economic crisis and political violence against the urban poor. Political marginalization of the working classes and gender-based violence intersect and diminish the prospects for the social and spatial mobility of the urban poor. In this article I apply the lens of flânerie to the pedestrian movements of Tagwira's protagonist Onai Moyo, an impoverished woman who makes a living by selling vegetables on Harare's streets. In order to make a case for Onai's 'flânerie against all odds', I revisit Walter Benjamin's theorization as well as recent scholarly engagements with flânerie in non-European settings. By giving her protagonist a gaze traditionally associated with a European middle-class urbanity of the 19th century, Tagwira expands a tradition of city writing/walking and, like other contemporary engagements with flânerie, also breathes new life into a concept often pronounced inappropriate or unproductive for readings of non-European literature. **Keywords:** Zimbabwean literature, Valerie Tagwira, mobility, flânerie, urban walking, modernity, gender.

### Introduction


According to Basile Ndjio, a contemporary African city embroiled in political and economic crisis is an unlikely walking ground for the Benjaminian flâneur. In his study on Douala, which he describes as a "city of crime and death" (104), he writes:

If Benjamin's bourgeois flâneur had lived in this African necropolis, he would not have enjoyed walking down the streets, because the few available sidewalks have been turned into free markets by street vendors, or are constantly congested by drivers who are trying to get around the potholes that generally riddle the roads. Benjamin's famous character would also have been in danger, since at night there are no streetlights to prevent the walker from falling into one of the countless open sewers that deface the public space [...]. (105)<sup>1</sup>

In such a city, Ndjio suggests, the flâneur would shun public space and seek the seclusion of the fortress-like enclaves of the elite. What about those city dwellers, however, who cannot withdraw into their private spheres, who are forced to move through the city on foot because their livelihood depends on the informal urban economy? Is it not possible that one of the street vendors referenced by Ndjio might also at times look at the city through the eyes of Walter Benjamin's "dreaming idler" (*The Arcades Project* 419)? In this article I apply the lens of flânerie to the pedestrian movements of Onai Moyo, the protagonist of Valerie Tagwira's debut novel *The Uncertainty of Hope* (2006). Onai is an impoverished woman who makes a living by selling vegetables on Harare's streets. By depicting her protagonist's walks through the city's different areas, during which Onai becomes aware of visible and implicit boundaries separating the city's quarters, Tagwira critically interrogates the spatial regime of urban Zimbabwe in the year 2005, but she also allows Onai desires and experiences traditionally associated with the leisurely strolling of Benjamin's bourgeois character. As she sets out to tout her wares, Onai perceives the landscape of the crisis-ridden and violent city through a gaze that is often remarkably close to Benjamin's flâneur.

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Tagwira's novel has received considerable academic attention. The aspects discussed by scholars are quite varied, reflecting that Tagwira excels at addressing a broad range of literary and social concerns. Two topics, however, have clearly attracted the bulk of interest: the text's portrayal of Operation Murambatsvina, a government-initiated program which started in May 2005 and involved the destruction of informal urban housing and the informal business infrastructure under the pretext of a clean-up program (Muchemwa, "Old and New Fictions: Rearranging the Geographies of Urban Space and Identities in Post-2006 Zimbabwean Fiction" 136–8; *Imagining the City in Zimbabwean Literature 1949 to 2009* 128–34; Musanga, 107–14; Ncube, 50–1), and its commitment to exploring the gendered nature of domestic, political, and economic violence, in particular as they relate to the protagonist Onai.

Critics have commented on Tagwira's detailed engagement with the numerous hardships faced by women. Where domestic and political violence intersect, most seem to agree, women are particularly vulnerable. Kizito Muchemwa (*Imagining* 131), for instance, emphasizes the role of internalized patriarchal ideals in his commentary on Tagwira's female characters who endure marital violence (see also Nyambi 43–4). Anna Chitando points to the intersection of the patriarchal legacy of colonialism and of contemporary Afrocentrist nationalism, arguing that the "status of women in Zimbabwe has [...] been compromised by the coming together of various patriarchies" (217). Other contributions emphasize Tagwira's portrayal of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Lene Bull Christiansen, for instance, writes that "[i]n this novel the problems of marriage in a time of AIDS are the catalyst in the plot" (517). Like Chitando, she also points out the co-existence of different patriarchal ideologies (513). Nonetheless, most scholars move beyond a 'victim narrative' and stress the agency and resilience displayed by Tagwira's (female) characters in the face of oppression and economic hardship, a perspective which I will also apply. Oliver Nyambi and Tendai Mangena, for instance, argue that, due to Zimbabwe's economic crisis, traditional gender roles are shifting, as women are often taking over as primary providers for their families: "The re-gendering of breadwinning is triggered by the emasculation of men who lose jobs in a deindustrializing economy" (11). In a different article, Nyambi points to an almost activist impetus in the novel which transcends the immediate reading experience, and might even add to social change:

Recognition in *The Uncertainty of Hope* involves seeing Onai in the context of a new cul-de-sac situation which is rooted in the enduring patriarchal culture and exacerbated by an emergent economic crisis. The resulting emotional attachment and sympathetic feelings stirred by this process can potentially shift previous perceptions (particularly in patriarchally-minded readers) of women. (499)

For the present purposes, the contributions by Muchemwa ("Fictions"; *Imagining*) and Terrence Musanga are particularly relevant, as they examine Tagwira's treatment of gender and of political violence—in particular Operation Murambatsvina—in relation to social and intra-urban mobility. Both scholars interrogate the link between gender and (social and spatial) mobility: "It is always men who inhabit sites of privilege and are in positions of power and influence that assist women portrayed largely as dependent on men. In this respect, the intra-urban mobility of most women is facilitated by men" (Musanga 114). In addition, they consider Onai's situation in a wider context of a politics which marginalizes the urban poor, including the residents of the 'townships' and the street vendors. Musanga argues that crossing the spatial boundaries between the city's affluent spaces and those inhabited by the urban poor carries the promise of subversion and empowerment: "intra-urban mobility is testimony of the transgression of spatial boundaries and is reflective of either upward or downward economic and social mobility. [T]his transgression is not just physical but metaphorically represents ideological and discursive migrations" (103). My main argument is twofold: through her traversal of urban space, Onai stages a quiet form of resistance against the structures of class- and gender-based violence and exclusion and, furthermore, she also seeks the fleeting moments of pleasure, diversion, and modernity which still exist despite the backdrop of crisis and decay. By imbuing her protagonist with affinities with the Benjaminian flâneur, Tagwira not only transports the originally European concept of flânerie into 21<sup>st</sup>-century Harare in an unexpected and innovative way, she also gives emphasis to flânerie's potentially subversive politics.

### Movement in *The Uncertainty of Hope* as a symptom of urban crisis

In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, Benjamin ties the emergence of the flâneur to the rapid expansion of industrialism and modern consumer culture in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a member of the moneyed urban leisure class, the flâneur was, not surprisingly, most comfortable in the covered, splendidly ornamented shopping passages which flourished in Paris during Charles Baudelaire’s time:

Flânerie could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades. “These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury”, says an illustrated guide to Paris of 1852, “are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the passage is a city, a world in miniature.” It is in this world that the flâneur is at home; he provides the arcade—“the favorite venue of strollers and smokers, the haunt of all sorts of little métiers”—with its chronicler and philosopher. (68)

Like Douala, Harare as represented by Tagwira provides little of the splendor described above. Her characters are afflicted by the myriad consequences of the so-called Zimbabwe Crisis in the post-2000 period: poverty, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, hyperinflation, food shortages, the breakdown of the formal economy, and political violence. Due to these circumstances, Harare indeed bears resemblance to the “thespian city where insecurity, violence, and terror have become the daily experience of the vast majority of city dwellers, whose lives are permanently subjugated to the power of hazard and uncertainty, and above all to the tyranny of death” described by Ndjio (103); in Tagwira’s Harare, caesarean sections are performed by candlelight due to electricity shortages and power cuts, cemeteries run out of burial space, and citizens are defenseless against the cynical brutality of state power which tries to restore Harare to its “former ‘sunshine city’ status” (*Uncertainty* 135) by demolishing homes and evicting unlicensed vendors like Onai from the inner-city areas.

In this context, movement through the city has little to do with leisurely strolling but is, first and foremost, connected to survival. Like other members of the informal street economy, Onai is constantly on the move through the city: vending, queuing, and chasing options for securing food and other commodities. At the beginning of the novel, she sells vegetables at Harare’s large market Mbare Musika, but after its demolition in the course of Operation Murambatsvina, she takes to “making door-to-door sales in the high-density townships” (180) and to “undercover vending in the city center” (195). This constant need to be on the move does not only relate to Onai, but reflects a pattern which pervades the novel, and also includes movements to other places in Zimbabwe and abroad, undertaken in order to secure basic supplies for everyday life. As resources in the city are diminished, people from all walks of life engage in frequent domestic and transnational travel to source basic commodities and pursue income strategies unavailable at home: Onai’s best friend Katy is a cross-border trader, Katy’s husband traffics women across the border to South Africa and smuggles foreign currency back home, and their daughter’s fiancé has a flower business which takes him on trips to the UK. Furthermore, the erosion of livelihoods and the informalization of the economy have fostered a dependence on remittances from relatives abroad. Onai’s frequent movements through Harare also have to do with the fact that, unlike most characters in this novel, she cannot travel transnationally; as her husband does not allow her to own a passport and to travel to South Africa in order to buy goods, she has to tap into the limited local resources and make the most of what the urban economy of her home town has to offer.

Here lies a significant difference to the main source for Benjamin’s theorization of the flâneur, namely Baudelaire’s prose poetry, where movement takes place against the backdrop of a rapidly flourishing urban modernity. In *The Uncertainty of Hope*, movement is the result of the opposite development. The frenetic movement of Tagwira’s characters should not be confused with the modern global city’s “characteristic urban restlessness” described by Zygmunt Bauman as a defining feature of urban modernity (5), and neither can it be understood in terms of Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe’s characterization of Johannesburg’s specific brand of urban modernity, in which they see a “culture of indifference and restlessness” (282) producing “an original form, if not of African cosmopolitanism, then of worldliness” (282). In Tagwira’s novel, frenetic movements are symptoms of crisis. “All that is solid melts into air”—the fundamental experience of modernity as theorized in Marshall Berman’s seminal study of this title—is given a specific twist in *The Uncertainty of Hope*: the city’s frenzy results from the breakdown of previously existing modern urban infrastructures. This is highlighted by Onai’s nostalgia for the stability and security before the crisis years “when schools provided all the textbooks required by their pupils; a time when a school fees’ invoice meant nominal charges for people in difficult circumstances like her, and a time when the

words ‘social welfare’ had held a meaning of sorts” (*Uncertainty* 33). More permanent forms of transnational migration play a marginal role—the emphasis is on circular, short-term migrations undertaken with the aim of bringing goods and money back home. Mobility is thus represented as a way to keep life going in Harare. Rather than getting away from the site of crisis, Tagwira’s characters move in order to stay put.

### Flânerie as lens for Tagwira’s novel

At first glance, little seems to speak in favor of reading Onai’s inner-city movements through the lens of a concept which is so firmly grounded in the streets and shopping arcades of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, where the flâneur could only be imagined as male, white, and affluent.<sup>2</sup> In Baudelaire’s famous essay “The Painter of Modern Life”, one of the main sources for Benjamin’s concept, the roles ascribed to this figure are male: “Observer, philosopher, *flâneur*, call him what you will [...]. Sometimes he is a poet [...].” (4–5, emphasis in original). Not surprisingly, these characterizations have been emphasized by critics of the flâneur: “An aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them, the flâneur can be—and has been—condemned as a fatally bourgeois figure attempting to reprivatize public space” (Vermeulen 41). In a similar vein, feminist scholars such as Janet Wolff have questioned this iconic figure’s value for understanding female engagements with urban modernity, arguing that modernist literature’s conception of public space as unequivocally male renders women absent or at best objects of the flâneur’s male gaze. As will become clear in my discussion of Tagwira’s text, this is a reductive reading of Benjamin’s original concept. To dismiss the flâneur for these reasons means, furthermore, to overlook that this iconic literary figure has long overcome the constraints of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian high capitalism and has, in fact, experienced a revival of sorts in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

A famous example is Julius, the protagonist of Teju Cole’s novel *Open City* who engages in “aimless wandering” (4) through New York and Brussels, and soon finds that these walks constitute not merely “a counterpoint to [...] busy days at the hospital” (4) but also an immediate, intimate form of communion with urban space: “New York City worked itself into my life at walking pace” (4).<sup>4</sup> In Cole’s novel, we can see a glimpse of the flâneur’s capacity of challenging racial stereotypes of a black person moving through the city space, an aspect which is easily overlooked by those who see the flâneur as merely elitist and self-indulgent: “Julius does not fit the stereotype of the black man who walks the streets aimlessly. Far from being homeless or down-and-out, he is a refined, cultured flâneur: a type easily recognized in a white character, but less so in a black African” (Varvogli 240). Further examples of contemporary postcolonial flânerie are discussed in Patricia Fox’s analysis of crime novels by Richard Crompton and Kwei Quartei, set in Nairobi and in Accra, respectively. According to Fox, both authors’ detective protagonists can be seen as “contemporary Afropolitan” (62) reincarnations of the traditional Benjaminian flâneur: “By design or by coincidence, both crime novel detectives recall the figure of the flâneur that so intrigued German philosopher Walter Benjamin: [...] the urban setting, the commercial backdrop, and their sensory acuity by virtue of their nature and standing (not to mention a stature that sets them above the crowds), which distinguish them from the oblivious or gawking throngs” (62).

In a similar vein, Bibi Burger refers to the narrator of the Afrikaans-language novel *Werfsonde* as a “Johannesburg flâneur”. She disagrees with critics who argue that this “novel’s protagonist cannot be considered a flâneur” because “the concept has a very specific meaning in European literary history” (37) and rightfully points out that such an understanding rests on a truncated understanding of the flâneur and does not do justice to the complexity of both Baudelaire’s urban poetry and to Benjamin’s theorization:

Benjamin [...] doesn’t conceive the flâneur simply as someone who wanders, but argues that a flâneur text is one in which the explicit political commentary of the writer or narrator is of less importance than the ways in which the text is marked by the urban environment through which the flâneur moves. Through these marks the contradictions of the society in which the flâneur is situated are exposed. (38)

In addition to this example from contemporary South African literature, we may also point to an older history of flânerie in South African city writing. Corinne Sandwith analyses Dhlomo’s column “R. Roamer Esq.”, published weekly from 1933 to 1943, which “invokes both the pleasures (and provocation) of aimless city wandering and looking” (22) and thereby creates a “nexus of storytelling and city journeying [which] bears a close resemblance to the European flâneur tradition” (23). Sandwith’s discussion of Dhlomo’s column not only confirms the long history of the flâneur in Southern African literature, but also points to this character’s specific capacity for observing and chronicling urban realities as well as for subverting colonial policing of movement:



As in the European tradition, the city of Johannesburg in Dhlomo's column is presented at street level, from the perspective of the mobile traveller-observer. Archiving a compendium of city movements and city stories, the column [...] complicates the nineteenth-century European ideal by drawing attention to the ways in which this mobility is curtailed by the regulating norms and material-legal practices of 1930s segregationist South Africa. (24)

Whereas these examples relate to male characters, and might therefore be seen as confirming the flâneur's invariable male identity, female characters have also articulated their 'right to the city' by engaging in flânerie. Kirsten Ortega applies this concept to "In the Mecca", a poem by the American writer Gwendolyn Brooks which deals with violence against women and segregation, and which centers on movement in a city which, similar to Harare in 2005, "imposes restrictions and surveillance" (Ortega 141) on inner-city communities and particularly on women. Far from being content with common perceptions that "flânerie is simply off-limits to women" (141), Ortega argues that, "[c]onsidering 'In the Mecca' through the lens of flânerie unfolds the layers of literary, racial, gender, and spatial restrictions which Brooks negotiated in the city" (139). In Zimbabwean literature, the theme of a woman walking to create space for herself in the city has been established in Yvonne Vera's city novels which portray women as "reconstructing the city, traversing various spaces that lead them to contest how they are restricted and figured in particular spaces and in the process remaking themselves" (Muchemwa, *Imagining* 88). This aspect is also explored in Frank Schulze-Engler's analysis of Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, in which he identifies the activity of loitering on street corners as a form of resistance through which Bulawayo's black population transform the blind spots of colonial town planning into spaces where a black urban modernity can be embodied: "the street corners, originally markers of exclusion from the 'white' interiors of built-up city space, become galvanizing points of a 'sudden and miraculous' black modernity. Vera's 'history of the present' thus begins with a poetic account of fleeting moments of sly urban civility lived against all odds 'outside' the architecture of racial exclusion" (Schulze-Engler 270). As I will demonstrate, a similar reading can be applied to Onai's traversal of the post-independence city.

The multiple examples above illustrate the long history of flânerie in non-European contexts and in depictions of urban walkers which disturb the tradition of flânerie as a middle-class, male activity. The concept's validity as a framework for Tagwira's city portrayal becomes clearest, however, when returning to Benjamin's original concept. There are significant parallels between Baudelaire's European mid-19<sup>th</sup> century world and post-2000 Harare. These enable us to understand that, far from being merely a spoiled idler who remains aloof to suffering, the flâneur's strolls are as much tied to political crisis as to a thriving bourgeois consumerism. The flâneur's original walking ground, namely Paris during the Second French Empire, was not only defined by the rise of capitalist modernity and decadent consumerism, but also by an authoritarian regime, rampant misery, and the desire for revolt. Paris was, moreover, home to the flâneur's impoverished counterpart: the "ragpicker" (Benjamin, "Paris" 54), a recognizable Parisian stock type who shared the middle classes' desire for revolt and reflected their fears of downward mobility (108). Baudelaire recognized in this figure a kinship to the wandering poet, as Benjamin explains: "Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping [...] [T]he gait of the poet who roams the city in search of rhyme-booty [...] is also the gait of the ragpicker, who is obliged to come to a halt every few moments to gather up the refuse he encounters" (108). Despite his affluence, Paris held its own confinements for the bourgeois flâneur, for whom the marble-floored passages not only promised diversion, but also refuge from the despotism of the totalitarian regime of his time: "the arcade provides him with an unending remedy for the kind of boredom that easily arises under the baleful eye of a sated reactionary regime" (68). Benjamin makes it clear that the rise of the leisure class constituted a counterpoint to political authoritarianism, and that the wandering poet and chronicler was well aware that "life in all its variety and inexhaustible wealth of permutations can thrive only among the gray cobblestones and against the gray background of despotism" (69). As the following discussion will show, similar circumstances impact on Onai's urban wanderings, and she enacts a similarly subversive role in her flânerie.

### Urban walking in *The Uncertainty of Hope*

The novel's interest in exploring the relationship between agency and urban walking first surfaces in a passage which describes Onai's walk from Mbare to the city center for a day of "undercover vending" (*Uncertainty* 195) shortly after Operation Murambatsvina:

The fuel queues were longer these days and that meant more potential customers. She was beginning to get used to city vending; even to enjoy it a little. [...] Onai [...] set off on the long walk into the city centre. Far from tiring her, the walk filled her with a sense of purpose. With one basket balanced on her head and holding the other with her hand, she pounded the tarred road with fierce determination. By the time she entered the central business district, she was panting, but still felt herself to be in high spirits. (195)

The direction of her walk, from the 'township' to the city center, and the fact that it takes place after Operation Murambatsvina, speak to Harare's economic and spatial divisions. As noted by Musanga (104) and Muchemwa (*Imagining* 117; 127–34), the mapping of post-independence Harare as depicted in *The Uncertainty of Hope* reproduces the violence of the colonial city: the structures of Salisbury's racial segregation are still intact and visible, albeit redefined in terms of class, gender, and, I would add, political affiliation and power. The city's oldest dormitory township, Mbare, is now an impoverished working-class area, and the formerly white residential areas have become the spaces of a new elite. The buzzing activity of traders, vendors, and transnational travelers is thus contrasted with the rigid barriers separating the city's wealthier quarters from its high-density areas. Musanga notes that these boundaries are not completely static, and that movement between the two spheres occurs in both directions: wealthy and powerful people cross into Mbare for temporary stays and to maintain personal or business relations, and a few residents of Mbare manage to climb the social ladder and move away (Musanga 106). But for the city's most vulnerable like Onai, the prospects for upward social mobility through relocation to better areas are very limited. Tagwira places her engagement with Operation Murambatsvina within this history of spatial control. Murambatsvina—a Shona word whose official meaning is "restore order", but which can also be translated as "drive out rubbish" (Potts 274)—reflects a politics of exclusion which privileges nativist versions of citizenship and displaces those considered undesirable from city and nation (see also Muchemwa, "Fictions" 136–7). Tagwira portrays the disastrous consequences of Operation Murambatsvina for Mbare—toddlers die under the rubble of bulldozed houses, entire families are made to camp in the open, livelihoods are destroyed—but also explores its effects on the wider cityscape, and in particular on the ways in which people are allowed to move through the city's different quarters. Operation Murambatsvina diminishes the space for commercial activity in the city through the displacement of vendors and the demolition of informal businesses, thus leading to a quieter, emptier, and, hence, consistent with its agenda, 'cleaner' city space: "The face of Harare had changed drastically. There was no sign of the street kids who had spent their days loitering on pavements: begging, rummaging through bins and sometimes being a general nuisance. There were no vendors at street corners inviting city strollers to buy cigarettes, bananas, sweets or pens" (*Uncertainty* 163).

As a result, the intra-urban mobility of those working in the informal sector is subjected to control and surveillance from state authorities; when conducting sales, they have "to be constantly watchful, in readiness to run away should the figures of authority appear" (180). In addition, Onai is also made to feel unwelcome by well-off citizens who resent her presence in the city center: "I thought they'd got rid of these people in Murambatsvina and dumped them in the rural areas! Look how quickly they're back on the streets!" (196). These dynamics illustrate an instance of liberation and empowerment in unlikely circumstances. When Onai finds that she is "beginning to get used to city vending; even to enjoy it a little" (195) and stands up for herself, she transforms an activity born out of crisis and need, and which is potentially dangerous due to harsh law enforcement against unlicensed vendors, into a positive and restorative experience. In fact, she manages to transform the marginalized and precarious position of an informal vendor into one she positively inhabits and makes her own. This is also indicated by the fact that she does not simply walk but "pound[s] the tarred road with fierce determination" (195), which evokes Michel de Certeau's conception of pedestrians as active writers of the city text (93) as well as the activity of "botanizing on the asphalt"—a metaphor employed by Benjamin ("Paris" 68) which suggests that the observant walker experiences the city similarly to a park or garden landscape—and thus highlights her sense of control over the city space and, quite literally, its materiality. It also reminds us of Cole's protagonist Julius, for whom walking facilitates an intense relationship with the city. It is hence no coincidence that this passage contains one of the few instances where the meek and gentle Onai stands up for herself and openly defies the well-off pedestrians who

would like her expelled from the Central Business District: "I am a respectable married woman. I'm only trying to raise my family in difficult times. Not everyone is living well like you" (*Uncertainty* 196). This passage underlines the link between spatial and economic mobility, as well as the role of personal agency in Onai's flânerie; it is her walk away from Mbare and into the Central Business District which affords her the opportunity to sell her wares and carry home "lots and lots of notes" (196).

The aspects explored above are part of the broader theme of movement explored throughout the novel. This becomes clear in a passage which depicts movement in the opposite direction: Onai has been discharged from a hospital in Avondale and, together with her friend Katy, she must walk home to Mbare. While one would expect the walk to be exhausting and distressing, given the fact that Onai is recovering from injuries inflicted by her husband Gari, the women's outlook is very different:

The two women decided against a bus to the city centre just in order to find connecting transport to Mbare; it simply doubled the expense. Such luxuries they could not afford. Instead, they chose the long walk home, which would cost them nothing, apart from their time and energy. They had both in abundance, but a determination to reach home in the shortest possible time put a lively spring in their steps. They shared township gossip and companionable laughter as they walked through the bustling Southerton industrial area. (52)<sup>5</sup>

Undertaking a walk from a more developed area, Avondale, to Mbare changes Onai's perception of her home and strengthens her desire for social and spatial mobility: "Onai took in her surroundings with fresh eyes. She admitted to herself that this was not the place where she wanted her children to grow into adulthood" (52).

These moments highlight how Onai's walking reflects her desire for upward economic mobility and allows her to assert her presence in spaces from which she is excluded. She claims her right to the city by walking across boundaries of gender and class.

The next example from the text similarly includes aspects of subversion and transgression, but also illustrates Onai's desire to experience the city through an urban modernity from which she is excluded in her everyday life, and to indulge in a form of escapism and search for beauty. Walking home to Mbare "empty-handed and dejected" (104) after a morning of fruitless queuing for food and an encounter with the riot police, Onai suddenly decides to set out on a stroll to the city center which will take her from Speke Avenue to First Street and, finally, to Africa Unity Square. In so doing, she hopes to momentarily escape not only the squalor of her surroundings, but also to reclaim an identity crushed under her many obligations as a wife and mother: "She did not want anything particular, but she felt the desire for an hour alone to briefly experience an existence that was not related to anyone else; to exist unfettered, not as a mother or a wife, but simply as herself" (104). In the lengthy passage depicting this excursion, Onai is most clearly depicted as a flâneur, but it is also revealed that she encounters obstacles and frustrations that differ from her Parisian precursor. Onai's solitary stroll into the city center is an expression of her desire to experience the inspiring and pleasurable aspects of city life and partake in an urban modernity unavailable to her in her home and neighborhood: among other things, she enjoys the singing of a street musician and stands with a crowd to admire the balancing acts of an acrobat. The image of Benjamin's "dreaming idler" (*Arcades* 419) on Harare's streets is evoked when Onai indulges in daydreaming: "From Speke Avenue, she wandered towards First Street. She let herself idle, her thoughts remarkably far away from soap and groceries. She passed a beggar just outside Clicks. Blind, he was singing a Bob Marley song to a guitar that he played beautifully" (*Uncertainty* 104). Furthermore, this passage evokes the desire for "solitude [...] in a crowd" (Benjamin, "Paris" 81) which is a central motif in 'classic' flânerie.

Throughout this passage, Onai remains an observer and bystander who does not make contact with other passers-by. It is interesting to note that, while listening to the street musician, there is a subtle shift in Onai's position. The blind beggar who is singing Bob Marley songs becomes the object of her gaze which, in this moment, is similar to that of a middle-class, bourgeois spectator: "The plate by his side was empty. Onai had nothing to spare for him either, but that did not stop her from enjoying his singing" (104). In a way, Onai looks at the blind beggar like Baudelaire looked at the Parisian "ragpicker". It is notable that her outlook changes based on her economic behavior and the products she covets. The passages depicting this lengthy walk are among the few instances in this book where movement in the city is not connected to securing basic needs. In fact, it is explicitly mentioned that the products of everyday life that are often lacking—soap and groceries—are for the moment pushed to the back of her mind. Instead, Onai turns her attention to the few items of 'luxury' consumption and goes window-shopping:

The beautiful clothes in Topics Store caught her eye as she walked on along First Street. [...] Onai hung around the entrance to Topics, briefly intimidated by the atmosphere of sophistication within the shop, and by the sweet perfume that wafted towards the entrance. She gathered her courage and entered, thinking to herself, “Who knows, I might shop here one day. Even better, I might even make clothes for them.” Dreams, dreams. (105–6)

The representation of public space, and in particular the streets, as the only sphere offering escape resonates with Benjamin’s characterization of Baudelaire’s Paris as a space where “life in all its variety and inexhaustible wealth of permutations can thrive only among the gray cobblestones and against the gray background of despotism” (Benjamin, “Paris” 69). Like her Parisian counterpart, she seeks not only refuge and invisibility in the urban masses but also what Benjamin describes as the experience of “intoxication” (“Paris” 81) of being abandoned in a crowd which “permeates [the flâneur] blissfully, like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations” (85).

These motifs are continued in the depiction of Onai’s stroll from First Street up to Africa Unity Square. Again, it is not so much what the crisis-ridden city offers, but the change in her perspective that allows her to be transformed into a flâneur:

She continued her languid stroll up First Street. There was no reason to linger in town, but Onai had no desire to make her way back to Mbare. [...] She decided to walk up to Africa Unity Square to admire the jacaranda trees whose beauty she’d always loved, and to browse among the art and craftwork stalls on the periphery of the square. (*Uncertainty* 107)

The description of this part of her walk also emphasizes the defiance and subversion inherent in this re-classed, re-gendered version of the flâneur. This is indicated when Onai walks up from First Street to Africa Unity Square, which was formerly known as Cecil Square in dedication to Cecil Rhodes. The square contains the jacarandas and flamboyant trees Onai longs to admire, craft and book stalls, and a large water fountain with a plaque honoring Robert Mugabe. Her walk to Africa Unity Square thus becomes an attempt to cross into the geographic center of the capital and also into a symbolic center of power.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that this stroll entails empowerment and can be read as a form of appropriation of urban space by those displaced through Operation Murambatsvina and other exclusionary policies against the urban poor, Onai’s flânerie brings only momentary escape, but no lasting transformation of her position and outlook. Her enraptured gaze is consistently disturbed by incidents which remind her of the reality of urban crisis, and eventually of her own vulnerability. The street musician mentioned earlier is a blind beggar, most likely forced into his occupation because he has no other way to support himself, and her brief stay at the clothes shop ends abruptly when she is made to feel unwelcome because of her frumpy attire. In addition, her absorption in the acrobats’ spectacle she enjoys while standing in the crowd is equally short-lived; she spots a thief and realizes that the crowd offers no protection from violence or crime, and that her moments of reverie and escapism are very fleeting:

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a smartly dressed young man dipping his hand into an unsuspecting woman’s handbag as she was engrossed in the lively street entertainment. The man’s eyes locked with Onai’s. Silently, he raised an index finger and passed it across his neck. Onai got the message. Speaking out was not safe. When had it ever been? (105)

As for the jacaranda and flamboyant trees which inspire her walk to Africa Unity Square—it is winter and the only flowers Onai can look at are artificial bouquets for funerals which bring back painful memories of deaths in her family, marring her initial delight at the things she sees while walking in the city: “Abruptly, she turned away, overcome by the power of memory” (107). These incidents reinforce her exclusion and indicate that, outside of the township, Onai is not wanted, and that the city offers little to fulfill her desire for social mobility, diversion, beauty, and freedom. As Muchemwa writes in reference to the portrayal of women’s spaces in the colonial city as represented by Vera, Onai’s momentary escape and participation in an urban modernity can only be performed in “cracks and interstices” (*Imagining* 103) of the crisis-ridden space of Harare.

However, while this might be seen as indicating that the concept of flânerie is incongruous with Onai’s experiences, the fact that Onai’s flâneur gaze is so easily broken is a further link to Benjamin’s original conception. The ambivalence that characterizes Tagwira’s engagement with mobility is also inherent to Baudelaire’s own development: Benjamin writes that, in the early days,

[Baudelaire] set out to conquer the streets—in images. Later, when he abandoned one part of his bourgeois existence after another, the street increasingly became a place of refuge for him. But in flânerie, there was from the outset an awareness of the fragility of this existence. It makes a virtue out of necessity, and in this displays the structure which is in every way characteristic of Baudelaire’s conception of a hero. (“Paris” 99–100)



This is not unlike the transience and fragility which characterizes the sense of escape and liberation Onai experiences while walking.

### Conclusion

With her stylistically and aesthetically humble, almost simple prose, Tagwira creates a vivid and nuanced portrayal of urban life before and shortly after Operation Murambatsvina and engages sensitively with life in post-2000 Harare, mainly from the perspective of frequently overlooked and neglected citizens like Onai. Her depiction of Onai's experiences of being unwanted in other parts of the city is testimony to enduring spatial regimes which originate in colonialism and which have been appropriated by the post-independence regime of Mugabe's ZANU-PF and its anti-urban, anti-working class policies. Ambivalence remains at the core of Tagwira's engagement with mobility and modernity in 2005 Harare. Although movement is represented as the result of a deteriorating urban economy, and as a way to survive, her protagonist Onai also moves through the city in search of something beyond survival. In this context, the activity of flânerie as theorized by Benjamin becomes a productive trope for understanding how Onai stages a quiet and inconspicuous resistance against the structures of oppression and asserts belonging. In her strolls through the city, Onai combines the archetypal characteristics of Benjamin's concept—such as the search for diversion and beauty, the experience of getting lost in a crowd, and of inhabiting the streets while not getting directly involved—with de Certeau's concept of walking in the city, where the pedestrian passer-by is not merely an observer, but makes the city and becomes an active practitioner of urban modernity (de Certeau 91–110). The landscape of the crisis-ridden and violent city presents itself to Onai as one she seeks to enjoy, while simultaneously walking out of the confinements of class, gender, and political marginalization. Although, as the concluding passages of the discussion have shown, Onai's "sly urban civility", to borrow from Schulze-Engler (270), is ultimately quite limited, the unexpected figure of a marginalized woman acting as a flâneur reveals that Tagwira engages in what Ortega has termed—in relation to Brooks's city poetry—"urban feminist poetics" (139). By giving her protagonist a gaze traditionally associated with a European middle-class urbanity of the 19th century, Tagwira expands a tradition of city writing/walking and, like other contemporary engagements with flânerie, also breathes new life into a concept often pronounced inappropriate or unproductive for readings of postcolonial literature. Indeed, her interpretation and appropriation of the flâneur concept reveals this activity's frequently overlooked or denied subversive potential. In Tagwira's novel, the attempt to take ownership of the street, to "reprivatize public space" (Vermeulen 41) and seek out the few aesthetically pleasing experiences and consumer options available cannot be dismissed as a merely idle, 'bourgeois' pastime; instead, it becomes an act of resistance.

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A different version of this article appeared on pp. 51–69 of my monograph, *Mobility in Contemporary Zimbabwean Literature in English: Crossing Borders, Transcending Boundaries* (published 6 July 2021).

### Notes

1. AbdouMaliq Simone provides a different, more optimistic perspective on Douala in "The Urbanity of Movement".
2. A further aspect worth considering is Tagwira's social realism, which is very different from the aestheticism of Baudelaire's prose poetry (and also from the complex artistry and postmodernism of Vera's style), hence this might constitute a genre in which we might not expect to encounter the motif of leisurely walking and detached observation of Benjamin's figure. The complexity of Tagwira's fiction lies less in her use of language and style (which is rather simple and unembellished) but in the dense detail and accuracy of her depiction of the physical environment and social conditions of 2005 Harare. Furthermore, she weaves together numerous storylines and introduces readers to various settings and a plethora of characters from different social strata. This adds to a particularized and varied mapping of Harare's different geographical, social, and economic terrains. Her social critique is hence more indirect and also in marked contrast to that of other contemporary women writers such as Petina Gappah or NoViolet Bulawayo, who formulate their social critique through irony and satire.
3. Alexander Hartwiger provides a very helpful overview on discussions of the postcolonial flâneur.
4. For further discussions of Cole's protagonist in relation to the flâneur see Hartwiger; Alicki Varvogli; Pieter Vermeulen reads this protagonist alongside its more sinister counterpart, the *fuguer*.
5. Although the choice of Gari's name might be coincidental, it is interesting to consider that it is a shortened version of Garikayi or Garikai, a name derived from the Shona verb *garika* which means to prosper or make successful. This correlation adds a touch of sad irony to Onai's marriage to a man who embodies the failed prospects of her life. It also links him to Operation Garikai, a 'rebuilding' program following Operation Murambatsvina (Mpofu) which the novel, however, portrays as corrupt: when Onai tries to sign up for a new house under Operation Garikai, the official molests

her and tries to extort sex from her in exchange for a place on the Garikai housing list. This makes Onai's fate emblematic of the fate of the urban poor under pressure from the government and links the abusive husband to the repressive state: the aggression against the poor in Harare, the choice of Gari's name suggests, is the violence and injustice of the Moyo household writ large.

6. In recent years, Africa Unity Square has become the site of civil society protests and activism such as "Occupy Africa Unity Square".

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