Flâneusing the City: Cape Town through the Eyes of an Unnamed Female Narrator in Patricia Schonstein-Pinnock’s *Skyline*

**Carol Leff**  
*Rhodes University, South Africa*  
c.leff@ru.ac.za

Up until fairly recently, the literary figure of the flâneur, an aimless wanderer and detached observer of urban life, has generally been regarded as male. However, feminist critiques of the flâneur can be seen in the work of Wolff (1985; 2006), Ferguson (1994), Wilson (1995) and Scalway (2006), amongst others, and the female version of this literary figure has started to garner attention through publications such as Catherine Neschi’s *Le Flâneur et les Flâneuses* (2007) and cultural critic Lauren Elkin’s *Flâneuse* (2016). This paper focuses on the gaze of the young narrator-flâneuse in Patricia Schonstein-Pinnock’s *Skyline* (2000), a novel set in the city of Cape Town in post-apartheid South Africa. Through the eyes of the unnamed narrator, who describes a city of contrasts and displaced individuals, the African humanist notion of *ubuntu* is seen to connect the marginal inhabitants of “Skyline”, a fictional apartment building that becomes home to African diasporic immigrants and refugees. Cape Town is a city in flux, and the youthful narrator-flâneuse questions the ambiguous spaces that she encounters. Despite various contradictions such as belonging or not belonging (she herself comes from a broken family and keeps company with refugees and social outcasts), the narrator-flâneuse chooses to embrace hybridity and entanglement. Running parallel to the young flâneuse’s narrative is that of Mozambican refugee Bernard, whose paintings are described ekphrastically at the end of each chapter. Drawing upon De Certeau’s work on cities as well as Sarah Nuttall’s concept of entanglement, I argue that Schonstein-Pinnock’s novel suggests alternative, inclusive ways of feeling at home in a city that is constantly changing and can sometimes feel unwelcoming. The paper concludes with reflections on what it means for displaced individuals to finally feel “at home” in an Afropolitan city such as Cape Town.

**Carol Leff** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Literary Studies in English at Rhodes University, South Africa, where she is also a member of the Intersecting Diasporas research group which focuses on transnational subjectivities represented in literature of the African, Latin American and South Asian diasporas. Carol Leff investigates literary representations of the city and contemporary urban identities as embodied in and/or interpreted by the Afropolitan Flâneur. Of particular interest is how these individuals perceive their urban surroundings, how they influence their environment, and how it impacts upon them in turn. Afropolitan flânerie is about decolonising, re-centering and giving form to a dynamic urban African diasporic identity.


We get to know our cities on foot, and when we leave, the topography shifts. We’re no longer as surefooted. But maybe that’s a good thing. It’s just a question of looking, and of not hoping to see something else when we do. (Lauren Elkin, Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, 2016)

Flâneurs and Flâneuses in the City

From street wanderer to solitary onlooker, the figure of the flâneur has traditionally been associated with nineteenth century Paris, as interpreted or theorized by Walter Benjamin with reference to Charles Baudelaire’s poetic descriptions of how the artist flâneur leisurely strolled through the streets and arcades of the modern metropolis. This archetypal flâneur is defined as a figure of the modern urban environment, an individual who walks in the city, and carefully observes the surroundings while remaining detached. The flâneur records, generally in the form of writing, but sometimes even painting or photography, precisely what the city environment has presented to the individual doing the walking. However, the contemporary flâneur, in a global society, is less detached, and more intimately engaged in a symbiotic relationship with an increasingly changing urban environment.

The experience of walking the city has been described by Michel de Certeau as a “weav[ing]” together of places (1984, 97), and for him it is by walking that one gains an understanding of the urban environment. The city is paradoxical, seen differently from above and below, and by walking an individual is able to juxtapose and then bring together all manner of contradiction. It is, arguably, De Certeau’s influence that has allowed for a shift from the archetypal detached flâneur described by Baudelaire to a more embodied and involved flâneur of the transnational era. Urban critic Sarah Nuttall notes that:

De Certeau’s key insight was that people use cities by constructing who they are, producing a narrative of identity. They write the city without being able to read it— they don’t know how their individual paths affect the city as a whole. They make a sentence or a story of particular places in the city, while the city is not available as an overview— the city is the way that it is walked. (Nuttall 2004, 741)

This makes clear the symbiotic relationship between the walker who interprets the city by reading it through each step, and the space itself which is walked. Said differently, with reference to self, space and place, Emma O’Shaughnessy explains that “the term place in fact departs from the concept of lived space” in that it “refer[es] to how exchanges between subject and space produce and invest empty spaces with meaning, and how these in turn influence a person’s sense of self” (2012, 33).

Historically, the flâneur first emerged on the streets of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century and has invariably been perceived as a male figure, since women in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe generally lacked the same access to the streets as afforded to men, and were considered by some men as merely objects of the male gaze. As pointed out by feminist scholar and cultural sociologist Janet Wolff,1 flânerie had

1 In a chapter titled “The Artist and the Flâneur”, Janet Wolff examines artists Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris, and notes that the difference between the female artist, Gwen John, and the two
been solely a male preserve because nineteenth-century women walking aimlessly “risked being seen as prostitutes touting for business” (in Acott 2009, 8). For Wolff and other scholars, the city street was not considered to be a place for women, but was rather a “white masculine space” (Bagheri 2015, 89); thus the flâneuse was rendered invisible on the streets. Elizabeth Wilson, on the other hand, was of the opinion that since the flâneur was a figure of contradictions, the flâneuse then did indeed exist, but mainly in a way that was “ignored by male-dominant history writers of the time” (Bagheri 2015, 89). Said differently, a woman walking in the street would not have been seen by men as a flâneuse, but rather as something else and therefore as a flâneuse she would have been invisible.

In Charles Baudelaire’s famous 1860 poem, “A une passante” he describes a woman he passes by in the street, whose isolated appearance in the same urban space as the poet renders her erotically desired by him. Baudelaire’s passante in the poem is anonymous – she could be any woman, and yet she is also many women. She is at once noble and majestic, as well as unavailable and unapproachable. Her fleeting beauty, in the original French written as “fugitive beauté” (Baudelaire 1961, 104) is no more than a vision, yet it is the object of the poet’s gaze as he walks. While opinions might differ in regard to interpreting who Baudelaire’s passante might have been, I wish to offer the idea that she herself was a flâneuse.

Writing about how novelist George Sand dressed as a boy in 1831 in order to experience the streets of Paris, Janet Wolff notes that “[t]he disguise made the life of the flâneur available to her; as she knew very well, she could not adopt the non-existent role of a flâneuse. Women could not stroll alone in the city” (in Whitworth 2007, 205, italics in the original). Thus, largely as a result of the objectifying male gaze that would follow any woman walking, the only way that Sand could experience flânerie was through deception by disguise.

The gendering of city spaces and the questionable existence of the female flâneur is examined in Deborah Parsons’s book Streetwalking the Metropolis (2000), in which she “identifies the ways in which the city has often been a place of exclusion for women” (Bentley 2014, 185) and shows how a few female writers have addressed this concern. The female flâneur has lately earned herself more serious attention, as evidenced in Catherine Nesci’s book Le Flâneur et les Flâneuses (2007) and in cultural critic Lauren Elkin’s recently published Flâneuse (2016), sub-titled Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London. Elkin depicts the flâneuse as someone who creates the city at the same time as observing it, and proves that this individual need not necessarily be male. Her book, “part cultural meander, part memoir” according to the dust-jacket, gives voice to the silenced flâneuse:

To suggest that there couldn’t be a female version of the flâneur is to limit the ways women have interacted with the city. We can talk about social mores and restrictions but we cannot rule out the fact that women were there; we must try to understand what walking in the city meant to them. (Elkin 2016, 11)

Women walking the city of necessity observe their surroundings in a different way to men, more cautiously, given the previously mentioned constraints. In the first chapter of Flâneuse, Elkin provides the following imaginary definition of the word:

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men is that she captures the city from a window in her studio. Gwen John preferred being indoors because she disliked crowds and felt “harassed by rodeurs” on the streets (Wolff 2015, 118).
Flâneuse [flanu-ehzh], noun, from the French. Feminine form of flâneur [flanu-ehz], an idler, a dawdling observer, usually found in cities. (Elkin 2016, 7)

Elkin goes on to point out that the word rarely occurs in most French dictionaries, and that the Dictionnaire Vivant de la Langue Française defines flâneuse as a kind of lounge chair, suggesting that “the only kind of curious idling a woman does is lying down” (Elkin 2016, 7).

Polish-born Kinga Araya, conceptual artist and scholar residing in Canada, notes that “modernity in the last exhaustive years of the fin de siècle was obsessed with the female body” and, to provide an example of this, she explains that the only female character considered as an alter ego of the flâneur in the nineteenth century was “a prostitute, in French called peripateticienne, the one who walks the city” (Araya 2009, 64). Even now, two centuries later, as pointed out by Araya, a woman walking can still be subjected to “derogatory and sexist remarks” (2009, 69) in many parts of the globe.

Reviewing contemporary writings on walking practices, Deirdre Heddon and Cathy Turner point out that the “invisibility of women in what appears as a canon of walking is conspicuous; where they are included, it is often as an ‘exception’ to an unstated norm, represented by a single chapter in a book or even a footnote” (2012, 225). Certainly, women in European cities like Paris in the nineteenth century were not as privileged as men were to amble leisurely as spectators in the crowd. Rebecca Solnit draws attention to the fact that

women have routinely been punished and intimidated for attempting that most simple of freedoms, taking a walk, because their walking and indeed their very beings have been construed as inevitably, continually sexual in those societies concerned with controlling women’s sexuality (2002, 233).

Women have thus been denied equal access to the ordinary activity of walking because of a patriarchal practice that continues to dictate subordination.

As noted by Aimée Boutin, “[t]he discourse on the flâneur inevitably assumes his male gender” and yet “women did walk in the city and wrote of their trespasses as flâneuses” and in being denied the “right to look at passers-by, see, feel, and move about the city so that they were either hypervisible (as fallen women) or invisible (as flâneuses or reporters)”(2012, 128–29). Thus if women were not afforded the same access to the streets, what would that make of their particular observations?

“The desiring gaze of the flâneur”, says Allyson Kreuiter, “which feminist scholars have considered both controlling and voyeuristic in nature, seems to deny the flâneuse the right to an existence” (2015, 11). As already noted, it was almost impossible for a woman to move freely through the streets “without being sexualised” (Kreuiter 2015, 11), and this remains the case even today, in some parts of the world. Additional feminist critiques of the flâneur can be seen in the work of Janet Wolff (1985; 2006), Deborah Epstein Nord (1991), Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1994) Elizabeth Wilson (1995) and Helen Scalway (2006), amongst others.

Examples of the early flâneuse figure in literature include Nella Larsen’s black flâneuse in her 1928 novel Quicksand, which foregrounds her Harlem and New York experience, and Virginia Woolf’s 1922 Mrs Dalloway whose titular protagonist declares at the beginning of the novel, “I love walking in London” (5). Woolf’s 1930

essay “Street Haunting” offers yet another example of the early flâneuse in an ever-changing modern city, “opening the way to a female flânerie as a form of mobile creativity that blends street-rambling and street-writing” (Nesci 2014, 81). A more contemporary, South African example of the flâneuse in literature can be found in Skyline, written by internationally published novelist and poet, Patricia Schonstein-Pinnock (hereafter Schonstein3), and which is narrated by an adolescent girl, who observes her city surroundings by means of exploring the lives of African refugees in Cape Town.

**On foot and en fuite in Skyline**

The unnamed narrator in Skyline is a young woman. This namelessness is significant because the female flâneur – or flâneuse as she is known – has hitherto been largely invisible. The young narrator in Skyline is a flâneuse, who captures the urban metropolis through writing the city of Cape Town, as seen from the streets as well as from the edges, and from the high-rise building “Skyline”, situated in well-known Long Street. The narrator’s gaze thus takes in different views of the city: from above where she “live[s] on the fifth floor and can see the sea from [the] veranda” and “from outside where Skyline looks like a patchwork quilt draped over the sky” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 7; 8). Thus, in a De Certeauian sense, the narrator’s perspective allows for the point of view to shift from high above to street level.

Dedicated to child victims of the sixteen-year-long Mozambican civil war, Skyline tells the stories of migrant individuals residing in the same apartment building as the narrator. Briefly, the novel relates the experiences and social encounters of a young white teenage South African girl (the narrator) and her autistic younger sister, Mossie. Their mother is largely absent, and when she does appear in the narrative, she is either drunk or passed out. The novel is written in the first person, with experiences of the residents in the building related through the unnamed narrator, whom I shall henceforth refer to as “The Girl”. The Girl observes what she sees around her and she records her observations in narrative form by telling her story through her specific gaze, and in this sense she is practicing flânerie. She narrates that:

> Most of the people who live here are illegal immigrants and refugees from the rest of Africa. […] Not many have the right to be here and most of them carry forged papers or pay bribes to stay in the country. They arrive from all over Africa by taxi, by bus, by train. Some hitch rides on overland transporters. Many just walk. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 8)

The act of walking becomes a trope in the novel, as despite the availability of different forms of transport such as cars, trains and buses, walking is the chief manner that individuals in the narrative move from one place to another. The urban space of Cape Town helps to shape, or perhaps re-shape, the identities of some of these individuals, whom the narrator tells us come here looking for a new life (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 9). The Girl describes the migrants she befriends in the building thus:

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3 Skyline was published under the name Patricia Schonstein-Pinnock, but subsequent publications have been penned under the name Patricia Schonstein.
Under their western clothes, some are tattooed and cut with ritual scars. Some have ear lobes stretched and heavy with rings. Their hair is plaited or braided like rivulets running over granite kopjes. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 9)

The Girl’s descriptions draw attention to how the migrants appear different to herself and her sister, who are local Capetonians. These various migrants The Girl befriends in the building have walked hundreds of miles to find refuge and in fleeing their homelands their gaze has taken in stories of their flight. The Girl recounts the beginning of one of these migrant narratives:

I look at the woman’s shoes which she has placed neatly beside her sleeping mat. They have no colour left in them and are completely bashed up. They have taken on the weary shape of her leather feet. Her feet are hard and cracked. Her legs are dry and scratched with the markings of thorns and the merciless bushes which grow in dry places. Her children have no shoes. They have feet which look like worn-out little boots and their toes have no softness. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 14).

The Girl’s narrative here focuses on walking – shoes, legs, feet, and she conveys with empathy the lived experiences of some of the marginalised migrants with whom she shares the walls of “Skyline”. This particular form of mobility – walking – is often the only means some migrants have of getting from one place to another, sometimes crossing borders illegally on foot. Similar to the female flâneur, migrants thus can also be conceived as invisible flâneurs, and their walking is not with ease nor carefree. While it might appear incongruous to compare a migrant to a flâneur, since for the migrant, walking is not a choice nor is it out of idleness, a migrant can be considered a type of transnational flâneur. Refugees, for instance, might be on foot but they are also en fuite, in flight or on the run, forced migrants escaping their country of origin, and in doing so they are acutely observant of their new surroundings.

Individual, disparate lives come together as one new community in Skyline, where The Girl, who has a penchant for writing, desires bringing both friends and strangers together. Through her eyes a positive Afropolitan vision is imagined, in a city where both locals and foreigners can live together comfortably, suggestive of the notion of ubuntu, an African humanism that “addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to one another that flows from that connection” (Nussbaum 2003, 21). However, The Girl’s idea of bringing people together by transforming their sad stories into something good is perhaps too ambitious, as she herself attests:

So I gather up the words which I find spewed across the tar of Long Street and at the foot of Skyline and I try to turn them into poetry. I try to re-embroider these splintered words into the finery they once were – old litanies from Ethiopia; chantings from Sudan; fables from Eritrea. But I cannot turn the city's laments into anything of beauty. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 55)

This recalls Walter Benjamin’s description of the flâneur’s act of walking as “botanizing the asphalt” (1973, 36), involving meticulous examination of what is found in the environment. In the extract above, The Girl finds not plant specimens, but words on the tarmac which she refers to as “poetry”, “litanies”, “chantings” and “laments”, richly lyrical in their descriptive mode. The act of writing is a consequence of flânerie as it occurs in reflection after the activity of walking. Although the unified
society The Girl desires to create (bringing together various nations: Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea) might be no more than a chimera, it is through her writing that The Girl still wants to give voice to the silenced people of Africa. The marginalised travellers have come from afar, but The Girl encounters others who do not feel as she does and who are not nearly as welcoming to foreigners as she is. It is no accident that Schonstein’s young narrator remains nameless, suggesting, as Grace Kim points out, “an effacement of self, and a renunciation of her ‘privileged position’ to represent others’ stories” (2011, 79). The Girl’s youthful naïveté is juxtaposed with the hostility of others towards refugees seeking shelter. Nonetheless, The Girl continues to seek a new order, a new society:

One day I will leave Skyline and live with Mossie in a nice house up on the side of the mountain. Then I’ll find words in places other than wind and war and traffic. I will find beauty and words of a new order. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 56)

The new order which The Girl hopes to espouse is for her writing to aestheticize her surroundings into a form of art. This new order, according to Jana Pretorius, is “linked to the narrative’s vision of an unconditionally hospitable social space, where ordinarily disparate lives can come together without prejudice or fear” (2015, 65).

For the diasporic characters in Skyline, “home” has a variety of meanings. Princess, who is from Rwanda, lives in the flat above The Girl and Mossie, and she braids and cuts hair to earn a living, as well as rents out sleeping space to new arrivals in the country. Thus, Princess acts as host, sharing out her own space with other displaced people such as herself, people who “arrive in Cape Town with nowhere to go” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 11). Migrants such as Princess thus start their own system of informal economy, by admitting others into their space. These other people often “arrive without money but with stories written on the parchment of their hearts” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 11) which they do not easily talk about as most are memories of war and flight. There are other individuals living in “Skyline” who are similarly marginalised: the “Spice Girls”, Alice and Bluebell, who “are not actually girls but men who cross-dress in silks and satins” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 62); a blind, mixed-race South African couple, Gracie and Cliff, who could only marry in 1990 “thanks to Mr Mandela” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 24); Kwaku who “walked from Ghana to Zimbabwe” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 118); and Cameron and Liberty Chizano who “have driven from Zimbabwe to nobody in particular” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 115). “Skyline” in Cape Town is seen as a safe haven for such lost individuals – both local inhabitants as well as those from elsewhere in Africa. However, the streets might not always be as welcoming:

The wire-workers will introduce [Cameron and Liberty] to the merchant who controls the pavement space and who will charge them protection because they are kwere kwere, foreigners who are not really welcome here. Sometimes traders from Africa get beaten up because people think they’re stealing jobs. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 118)

While these migrants are formally unemployed, and very likely could not find other work if they tried, out of necessity they create their own employment, by selling goods such as curios they have brought from other parts of Africa. The “merchant” is a local resident, and therefore a host character, who provides hospitality to newcomers to ensure they are not mistreated by others.
One of the refugees sheltered in the building is Bernard, an artist who seeks asylum in South Africa. Having left war-torn Mozambique like countless others as a result of the war, Bernard explains his arrival in the country:

You always wanting to know how I am come to Skyline. I walking here from there. I walking from Mozambique. Even through that Kruger animal park and I coming with some others through the fence. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 142)

Once again, this is very significant, with the emphasis on actual border-crossing. Bernard too is a flâneur, but not in the traditional sense, as his walking has been far from casual strolling: his walking has been necessary flight with urgent purpose. I argue that this too is indeed a type of flânerie, and the original concept of flânerie has to be extended or repurposed in order to include these types of walkers, such as the woman with the ruined shoes, and other refugees who are en fuite, fleeing, on foot. In Schonstein’s novel, Bernard’s nomadic stories are entrusted to The Girl, whose hope for a “new order” is linked to a notion of literary aesthetics. The Girl narrates that Bernard “is here illegally” and his fake passport says “he was born in Cofimvaba, though he was really born near Vila de Manica in Mozambique and his name was once Bernardino” (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 29). Despite the fact that the war is over, Bernard’s tragic situation has rendered him homeless and it is uncertain whether or not his wife and children are even alive. The Girl relates that:

Bernard lives on the fourth floor. He lives alone and has no friends except us. He sells flags at the Buitengracht intersection and dresses really well in designer suits and wide-brimmed hats. He comes from Mozambique and speaks Portuguese and rolling, round English. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 29)

It is no accident that Bernard positions himself at an intersection as he has crossed borders and fled his native Mozambique and is living diasporically between two places. The intersection is a crossroads, and traffic passes him in different directions, thus further relating to border crossing.

As with walking, traffic also is a trope in Skyline, even framing the narrative in a sense. At the beginning of the novel The Girl says:

We buy Cokes at 7Eleven and sit outside drinking, watching the flow of cars move through Long Street and split up at the intersection. I’m used to the traffic and the way it washes through my mind, swirling with changing rhythms. It is a moving, liquid, smooth and soothing music; a song of haunting sounds and hootings woven from the speed and rushings of the city. The traffic is a song which plays my feelings as though they were a string instrument or distant drum. It erases all silences within me. (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 6)

This passage indicates The Girl’s ability to be part of the city and feel at peace, listening to the sounds of traffic, which she compares to music. The rhythm, flow and sound of traffic are a metaphor for music and The Girl herself is compared to a musical instrument, as the music of traffic plays through her, soothing her. This highlights the close relationship between human subject and city, which is the way of the flâneur. At the Long Street intersection there is a mix of movement as well as encounter, suggestive of conditions that are temporary. The soundscape described by The Girl is part of the city and is not perceived as harsh and alienating; rather she absorbs the sound meditatively, as it all adds to the dynamic and hybrid experience of this
particular area of Cape Town. Thus, at the outset of the novel, The Girl feels comforted by the sound of traffic, a sound which soothes her, and later again, only a few pages before the end of the novel, The Girl feels caressed by the traffic:

And sometimes, when the caress of Long Street traffic becomes that of the mothers of the dispossessed, affirming the dreams and hopes of those who have walked down Africa, I might hear Bernard’s song at the intersection… (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 183)

Here the relationship between human subject and the traffic is an interesting one, as traffic appears to be a metonym for the city. It is as though the traffic is the pumping lifeblood that never ceases, bringing people to and from elsewhere. Again, the criss-crossing of traffic at the ever-changing intersection is suggestive of the bidirectionality of movement. Once again, the significance of walking is repeated, highlighting the constant movement of migration amongst peoples in Africa.

Finally, at the end of the novel, The Girl comes to accept her gift of writing and her passion for telling stories and acknowledges that she is a writer, exclaiming:

Bernard! Look at me! I am a writer now. I can spin my words, my many gathered words, into fine coir and threads of raw cotton, as you always said I should, so as to weave from them all manner of finery. [...] I can weave from my words histories and songs of love, rhyming sculptures and pictures of every sort! They fly in the wind for you! Do you see them? Not concrete, not traffic fumes! They are no longer vagrant and wandering words. They are tales, Bernard, tellings which the wind will always carry for you! (Schonstein-Pinnock 2015, 184)

The negations in this passage suggest that the harshness of the street has given way to something finer and more delicate. Just as threads of fabric cross each other when woven together, so too do the Girl’s words now spin together to form something of beauty. The metaphor of weaving here echoes that of the criss-crossing of the intersection discussed earlier. Girl as narrator-flâneuse has recognized the experiences of migrants she encounters in her urban surroundings as a subject for literature. Bernard, similarly, has captured migrant life in his artworks. Thus, the idea the reader is left with at the end of the novel is that there are more “stories of the marginalized, waiting to emerge from the shadows” (Kim 2011, 82), opening “a hospitable space, in which ordinarily disparate lives can converge to create new, shared, intimate public narratives” (Pretorius 2015, 80). Once again, the sense of ubuntu is conveyed, with the suggestion that instead of dispersals and xenophobic schisms, new social groupings will emerge, bringing seemingly different individuals together in one hybrid Afropolitan community. Through her sensitive gaze and acute observations, The Girl has seen aspects of the cityscape in a different light, tinged with hope, and she has captured these into stories that will, as she says, continue to be carried by the wind. This article is one of them.

Works Cited


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