Cahiers
Marguerite
DURAS

Duras féministe ?

nº 5 · 2025

Comment citer cet article ?

Alicia Rodriguez, « Imagined Feminist Cartographies: A Rereading of Marguerite Duras's *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Through the Lens of Leslie Kern's *Feminist City*) », *Cahiers Marguerite Duras*, 5, 2025, p. 157-172, [en ligne].
URL : https://dx.doi.org/10.54563/cahiers-duras.1053

SIMD
Société Internationale
Marguerite Duras

© Société internationale Marguerite Duras, 2025.
ISSN électronique : 2804-7338.

Conception graphique
Éditions Perret
www.editions-perret.com/recherche

Perret
Publications académiques

Imagined Feminist Cartographies

A Rereading of Marguerite Duras's *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Through the Lens of Leslie Kern's *Feminist City*)

What does a 21st-century Canadian geographer wandering through London and Toronto have in common with a fictional teenage girl roaming the streets of Saigon in the 1930s? They share the gendered experience of a female body navigating an urban environment. For both real and fictional women, walking unaccompanied through city streets becomes a journey fraught with obstacles, where they are frequently confronted with attempts to diminish personal autonomy. For young and older women alike, womanhood is constructed by how space is controlled by, presented to, or denied to them. Walking alone through a metropolis is marked by a constant struggle between their identity and the patriarchal and/or colonial infrastructures that scaffold urban landscapes. Juxtaposing the works of Leslie Kern and Marguerite Duras demonstrates how women contend with navigating personal sovereignty in oppressive urban environments.

Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World, written by Leslie Kern, a feminist Canadian geographer, was first published in 2019. A theme that runs throughout Kern's book is that we experience a city through our bodies; our bodies are both shaped by and shape the city. For example, the author states: "My gender is more than my body, but my body is the site of my lived experience, where my identity, history, and the spaces I've lived in meet and interact and write themselves on my flesh." [1]

This article proposes a new focus on the urban dimensions of the narrative by reading *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, published in 1950 and one of Marguerite Duras's most discussed texts in scholarly circles, through the lens of contemporary feminist geography. By examining the protagonist Suzanne's movements as she transgresses the city's invisible boundaries through the scope of *Feminist City*, I explore how her positionality as a young white woman, the daughter of French settlers, born in the colonies and marked by economic precarity, illuminates the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics of colonial Indochinese space. In doing so, I ask how a contemporary, nonfiction feminist geographical approach helps us remap Duras's fictional portrayal of Saigon in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.

This essay focuses primarily on part two of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, where the family of three is propelled from their ever-stagnant concession into the bustling capital of the Indochinese colony. This abrupt change in landscape forces the mother, Suzanne, and her brother Joseph to negotiate their relationship with their new surroundings, a highly codified urban space. The capital city, unnamed in the text, is constructed by Duras's imagination through the

1 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* [2019], London, Verso, 2021, p. 8.

lenses of struggle and desire. "[L]a plus grande ville de la colonie" becomes a site of fascination and horror that simultaneously shapes Suzanne's spatial and sexual journey.[2] The young woman experiences the duality of the city as both a subject and an object of desire. This two-part essay focuses first on the colonial and patriarchal forces that shape the city before examining Suzanne's experience in the city during her outing to a high-end colonial neighborhood, and employs Kern's *Feminist City* as a theoretical guide to my analysis.

Understanding the City: Colonial Design

The city in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* is first described on a non-human scale by an omniscient narrator as "C'était une grande ville de cent mille habitants qui s'étendait de part et d'autre d'un large et beau fleuve." (BP, p. 167) The panoramic view of the city is simplistic compared to Suzanne's later experience of the same space, which is shaped by her gender, age, and social class. In *Feminist City*, Kern provides a critical framework for understanding how gender mediates our daily experience of space. This foundation is instrumental in elucidating the mechanisms, particularly within colonial contexts, through which young women are distinguished in urban environments, subjected to suspicion, and placed under heightened surveillance.

Duras's unidentified fictional city epitomizes normalized, implicit rules across the colonial world: "Comme dans toutes les villes coloniales il y avait deux villes dans cette ville ; la blanche et l'autre" (BP, p. 167). Comparably, Frantz Fanon outlines a blueprint for colonial cities in his book *The Wretched*

2 Marguerite Duras, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* [1950], Paris, Gallimard, "Folio", 2019, p. 21 (henceforth, page references will be provided in the text with the mention BP).

of the Earth that resonates with the "twoness" of Saigon described by Duras:

> The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. It is probably unnecessary to recall the existence of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans [...]. Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we will at least be able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering, and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be organized[3].

The phrase "system of compartments" metaphorically describes the organization of colonial cities as a tangible reality for the early twentieth-century native population of Saigon. The family fortune of Suzanne's lover, M. Jo, comes from land speculation following the construction of "compartiments pour indigènes", built on the margins of the sprawling metropolis. These cubicle-like dwellings constitute a liminal space characterized by an open/closed architecture: "Ces compartiments étaient mitoyens et donnaient tous, d'une part sur de petites cours également mitoyennes et, d'autre part, sur la rue" (BP, p. 63). The native population is confined to these dwellings on the outskirts of the city, which are "sans arbres [où] [l]es pelouses disparaissaient" (BP, p. 171), and where "l'expérience démontra d'ailleurs qu'ils se prêtaient très bien à la propagation de la peste et du choléra" (BP, p. 63). The colonial government is cognizant of the public health threat and does not act to prevent the spread of diseases but rather carefully circumscribes and relegates the native neighborhoods to the status of "the other" city.

In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, this "other" city is never named but is instead designated by verbal circumlocutions. Terms such as "l'autre", "pas blanche," "zone indigène" (BP, p. 170), and "faubourgs indigènes" (BP, p. 171), are offered to

3 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1963], transl. by Richard Philcox, New York, Grove Press, 2005, p. 38-39.

allude to the racialized nature of spatial segregation directly. Indeed, Suzanne never ventures into this "zone," even though she and her family reside at Hôtel Central, a nearby shabby hotel. According to Simona Crippa, the family is stuck in a grey zone:

> Géographiquement, l'hôtel se trouve dans une zone intermédiaire, entre les hauts quartiers de la ville blanche où les grands Blancs habitent, et les bas-fonds sombres, les faubourgs peuplés par les « indigènes » et la « pègre blanche ». […] L'Hôtel Central est l'antre du purgatoire, tous les voyageurs qui le peuplent n'espèrent-ils pas progresser, vers le haut ? L'Hôtel Central fonctionne en effet comme une gare de triage : nombreux sont ceux qui rejoindront à nouveau l'espace originel, comme le chaos originel, cette boue néfaste de la plaine ; peu arriveront au faîte de la montagne du purgatoire, pour atteindre le paradis colonial, illusion du progrès occidental[4].

Suzanne is once again located in a liminal space that serves more as a transition than a destination. Although similar to the land concession, the difference is that in Saigon, Suzanne can access the affluent colonial neighborhood. Kern elucidates how built environments, such as the "compartiments pour indigènes," predetermine the fate of their inhabitants, carving violence and exclusion into their inception.

"Stone, brick, glass, and concrete do not have agency, do they? […] No, but their form helps shape the range of possibilities for individuals and groups. […] In short, physical places like cities *matter*."[5] For Kern, cities continuously produce and reproduce inequity through social, economic, and racial dynamics, as well as gender-based violence, largely dictated by society. In Saigon, the colonial city is intentionally structured around spatial and racial segregation. French colonial

4 Simona Crippa, "Marguerite Duras, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* : géographie de la fuite", in *Problématiques identitaires et discours de l'exil dans les littératures francophones*, ed. by Anissa Talahite-Moodley, Ottawa, Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2007, p. 114-115.

5 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

authorities deliberately built cities to segregate European settlers from indigenous populations.

In his introduction to the 1932 book *L'Urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux*, Edmond Du Vivier de Streel, the director of the 1931 *Congrès de l'exposition coloniale*, states the following:

> Tout l'effort des urbanistes doit donc tendre à favoriser l'immigration européenne dans les colonies et à procurer, à cet effet, le maximum d'avantages aux citadins de race blanche dans les cités qu'ils organisent. Il faut, pour leur plaire, créer des quartiers bien aérés, ornés de tous les attraits que la nature ou l'art mettent à la disposition des architectes et des administrateurs : jardins publics et privés, ombrages dans les avenues, portiques dans les rues [...] tout doit concourir à assurer le bien-être européen et à attirer les immigrants[6].

This description of ideal colonial urban planning is an uncanny portrayal of the fictional city described by Duras in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. All the desired elements cited by Du Vivier are replicated almost word for word in the novel: the air flow that obsessed Westerners at the turn of the century, "la périphérie du haut quartier [...] était la plus large, la plus aérée" (BP, p. 167); the sizable streets, "les rues et les trottoirs [...] étaient immenses. Un espace orgiaque" (BP, p. 168); and the manufactured landscaping, "bordé de trottoirs plantés d'arbres rares et séparés en deux par des gazons et des parterres de fleurs" (BP, p. 168). The quintessential colonial fantasmatic space is characterized by sexual language, implying that the conception of the space itself is imbued with pure fantasy. To ensure the "well-being" suggested by Du Vivier, the center of the exclusive colonial neighborhood reproduces a specifically French way of

6 Edmond Du Vivier de Streel, and Jean Royer, *L'Urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays tropicaux : communications et rapports du congrès international de l'urbanisme aux colonies et dans les pays de latitude intertropicale,* [Paris-Vincennes, du 10 au 15 octobre 1931], t. II, Les Éditions d'urbanisme, 1935, p. 12.

socializing: "à l'ombre des tamariniers s'étalaient les immenses terrasses de leurs cafés. Là, le soir, il se retrouvaient entre eux" (BP, p. 168).

Every detail in the European neighborhood's layout is highly artificial and fabricated, to the point where the colony could be mistaken for mainland France, were it not for the "indigènes […] déguisés en blancs" and "les palmiers des terrasses […] en pots" (BP, p. 169). The settlers are products of the colonial complex and comply with the following standards: "Les blancs aussi étaient très propres. […] ils apprenaient à se baigner tous les jours, […] et à s'habiller de l'uniforme colonial, du costume blanc, couleur d'immunité et d'innocence. […] Les blancs se découvraient […] plus blancs que jamais" (BP, p. 167-168). "Whiteness" is therefore performed in this space and experienced differently because of the colonial context. As explored by Richard Dyer in his book *White*, "whiteness" is not only a race but also a social construction. By examining the category of "white," Dyer exposes it as a symbolic category constructed within a system of differentiations from other racial designations[7].

For Kern, the racial category of "whiteness" requires further analysis through the prism of gender. Although writing about North American cities, the category of settlers applies to *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*'s depiction of the Indochinese capital. In *Feminist City*, Kern writes:

> Out here, the need to protect white women settlers from the menace of the "native" provided one rationale for the containment and elimination of Indigenous populations from urbanizing areas. […] These new fortified settler cities would mark the transition from frontier to civilization, and the purity and safety of white women would complete the metamorphosis[8].

7 Richard Dyer, *White*, London, Routledge, 1997.

8 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

In patriarchal colonial society, white French women were commodified and "protected" to avoid being "degraded" and "contaminated" by interaction with native men. This renders Suzanne's relationship with M. Jo especially scandalous, thereby justifying her exclusion from ruling-class society.

In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, whiteness is the exclusive privilege of the wealthiest and most successful settlers. Suzanne and her family do not belong to this elite category but rather to "les blancs qui n'avaient pas fait fortune, les coloniaux indignes, se trouvaient relégués" (BP, p. 171). The family may belong to the ethnic group "white," but they are excluded from the French nobility of the colonies. For critic Marie-Paule Ha, what the settlers present as "Frenchness" purposefully excludes a widowed mother like Suzanne's, a "[f]ille de paysans" (BP, p. 23) with humble roots:

> Obviously, the contradiction lies not just in being poor and white, but also having peasants embody a Frenchness that was constructed around bourgeois civilities. The cultural chasm separating the two classes that persisted until the First World War has been finely documented by Eugen Weber in his masterly work, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France 1870–1914*[9].

In another layer of whiteness within the spatial organization of the city of Saigon, whiteness is not only a race or a class but also a *space*. Specifically, in the chapter "Geographic Romance: 'Errances' and Memories in Marguerite Duras's Colonial Cities" from *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*, Panivong Norindr analyzes how the configuration of a high-end colonial neighborhood creates a city:

> *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* conveys spatially the complex relation of dominance and oppression that characterizes French colonialism in

9 Marie-Paule Ha, "Durasie: Women, Natives, and Other", in *Revisioning Duras*, ed. by James S. Williams, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. 106.

> Indochina. Duras's portrayal of the colonial city and, more precisely, of the upper district in the "white city," demonstrates the spatial organization of power–a colonial power exerted not only on the natives but also on the dislocated poor whites who did not succeed in reaping a profit from the land or from its inhabitants. Racial domination and class hegemony are explicitly played out on the metropolitan stage[10].

"Whiteness" as a space refers to the deliberate spatial segregation of a neighborhood. Conceived as a fortress, the "white city" thrives on transportation inequities to prevent intruders from invading their sanctuary. The colonialist neighborhood is not accessible by public transportation to prohibit entry to "les indigènes et la pègre blanche [qui] circulaient en tramways. C'était même, en fait, les circuits de ces tramways qui délimitaient strictement l'éden du haut quartier. Ils le contournaient hygiéniquement suivant une ligne concentrique" (BP, p. 170). The trams determine the limits of the colonial neighborhood, thus creating an intangible border meant to preserve the "cleanliness" of the colons, "grands fauves à la robe fragile" (*loc. cit.*). The colonial imagination is populated with nightmares of tropical diseases carried by the lower classes, prompting colonial urban planners to create a quarantined space for white colonialists.

Having explored the spatial organization of Saigon through the lens of colonial urban planning, the following section turns to Suzanne's embodied experience within that landscape, further drawing on Kern's feminist geographical framework to elucidate how race, gender, and class intersect during the protagonist's journey in the city.

10 Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1996, p. 116.

Female Bodies in the City

This section demonstrates how Suzanne's transgression of the invisible boundaries of the city shapes her subjectivity. Her position as a white female born outside the mainland, the daughter of French colonists, and her impoverished class status together provide a unique insight into the racial, gendered, and economic underpinnings of the Indochinese colonial space. As she navigates the urban web, Suzanne suffers feelings of disorientation and alienation. She fails to understand the implicit codes and limits of the city; therefore, her movements are often equated with being "adrift" in urban space. Through Suzanne's wandering of the city streets, her experience of space is informed by what Certeau coined as "'another spatiality,' (an 'anthropological,' poetic, and mythic experience of space)" [11]. Suzanne's journeys in the city gesture toward a different relation to spatiality that delineates a space where her movements are both writing and being written by colonial mechanisms.

Suzanne suffers the painful experience of venturing into the "white city" alone on foot. She wanders into this urban framework without a clear understanding of its spatial order and codes. Her movements in this space can be analyzed by what Norindr defines as an *errance*, a potential "transgressive strategy used to undermine the discursive power of colonialist discourse that attempts to fix the subject in a position of intelligibility" [12]. Additionally, Norindr's idea of *errance* corresponds with the proposed corpographical approach, since it involves Suzanne writing her body into space and space equally "writing" her body: "Errance effects change and transforms the subject." Earlier, it was argued that "Wandering

11 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Every Day Life*, transl. by Steven Rendall, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p. 103.

12 Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

creates a different type of spatial relation and circumscribes another space where the subject both inscribes herself and is being reinscribed" [13].

As Suzanne wanders alone in the immaculate streets of the high-end colonial neighborhood, she experiences feelings of alienation, placelessness, and otherness. "Whiteness" is a space where she does not belong. The modifications made to her physical appearance, "Carmen la coiffa, l'habilla, lui donna de l'argent" (BP, p. 184), alter the way she conceives of and carries her body in space, especially in a foreign urban environment. In Crippa's reading of the scene, Suzanne feels "l'inadéquation entre son corps, son être, et le lieu qu'elle traverse. Ceci voudrait dire que, inversement, il y aurait pour elle un véritable lien avec un lieu autre et donc une adéquation physique et existentielle à cet autre lieu, et par conséquent à un milieu" [14]. Suzanne's absence of social belonging is directly translated and transferred onto the space itself. She crosses an open-air labyrinth filled with unmarked borders with which she collides: "Elle ne savait pas qu'un ordre rigoureux y règne et que les catégories de ses habitants y sont tellement différenciées qu'on est perdu si l'on n'arrive pas à se retrouver dans l'une d'elles" (BP, p. 185). In terms of space and society, her membership in the periphery disqualifies her from inclusion in the arena of wealth, whiteness, and coloniality.

Upon entering the "white city," Suzanne is immediately confronted with the gaze of the residents of the high-end colonial neighborhood:

> Tous ceux qu'elle croisait maintenant semblaient être avertis, la ville entière était avertie et elle n'y pouvait rien, elle ne pouvait que continuer à avancer, complètement cernée, condamnée à aller au-devant de ces regards braqués sur elle (BP, p. 186-187).

13 *Ibid.*, p. 112 and p. 109.

14 Simona Crippa, "Marguerite Duras, Un barrage contre le Pacifique : géographie de la fuite", *op. cit.*, p. 117.

She becomes self-conscious of her presence, her body, and her walk, and sees herself as the "other" for the first time. Kern asserts that the city does not constitute solely a brick-and-stone physical environment but, rather, an affect-prone and embodied space, produced through social norms and "Certelian" quotidian practices. Kern demonstrates that our experience of a city is mediated through our bodies, which are simultaneously shaped by the urban environment and actively shape it.

The wide streets paved with flowers accentuate her feeling of being seen, objectified, and violated by the residents' gaze. There is no place for Suzanne to hide in the urban panopticon:

> La ville redouble l'effet de panoptisme. C'est un lieu de résonance "où les techniques qui permettent de voir induisent des effets de pouvoir" (*Surveiller* [*et punir*]). Confrontée au regard du haut quartier de la ville, Suzanne, persuadée "qu'elle était scandaleuse [et] un objet de laideur" […], subit les "trous noirs" du pouvoir ou encore ce que Deleuze nomme le "grand dégoût" [15].

Not only does Suzanne feel the stares of the residents, but she also feels as if the white space is staring back at her. For Kern, this feeling can be explained by the idea that ease of circulation in a space is closely tied to a set of privileges:

> The extent to which anyone can simply "be" in urban space tells us a lot about who has power, who feels their right to the city is a natural entitlement, and who will always be considered out of place. It reflects existing structures of discrimination in society and is therefore a good indicator of the remaining gaps between different groups [16].

---

15 Martine Antle, "Panoptisme et bureaucratie coloniale dans *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*", *L'Esprit créateur*, No. 34/1, ed. by Lawrence R. Schehr & Philippe Desan, Spring 1994, p. 87; Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975; Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie, t. II : Mille Plateaux*. Paris, Minuit, "Critique", 1980.

16 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

In this case, Suzanne is infringing upon a delineated white space "owned" by the rich settlers. "Il n'était pas donné à tout le monde de marcher dans ces rues, sur ces trottoirs […]. Tout le monde ne disposait pas des mêmes facultés de se mouvoir. Eux avaient l'air d'aller vers un but précis, dans un décor familier, et parmi des semblables. Elle, Suzanne, n'avait aucun but, aucun semblable" (BP, p. 186). The emphasized repetition of *tout le monde* signals her exclusion from the spatial order, and by extension, from whiteness itself. "Elle, Suzanne, n'avait aucun but, aucun semblable" (*loc. cit.*), as constructed by the "white city." In a subsection of her book *Public Body*, Kern discusses how women in public spaces can feel dispossessed of their own bodies due to the surrounding patriarchal structure: "It's impossible to blend in when your body has suddenly become public property" [17].

In the colonies, young white women are never unaccompanied. There are two reasons for this unspoken rule: fear of the colonized "other" compromising their "purity," and a suspicion surrounding the morality of an unattended white woman who could endanger the white colonialist status quo. Venturing into white territory by herself is Suzanne's first *faux pas* during her journey to the settlers' neighborhood: "Aucune jeune fille blanche de son âge ne marchait seule dans les rues du haut quartier. Celles qu'on rencontrait passaient en bande, en robe de sport. […] Elles se retournaient. On se retournait" (BP, p. 185). Suzanne's socioeconomic status as *déclassée* places her in the latter category. Her very presence in the upper neighborhood is enough to present her as "scandaleuse" (BP, p. 186), as she is dressed in her "robe d'Hôtel Central, trop courte, trop étroite" (BP, p. 187). Instead of being read as a simple wanderer, she is immediately associated with the figure of the young prostitute, roaming the

17 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

streets of the wealthy neighborhood and disrupting the "paix sans mélange" (BP, p. 169).

Prostitution, whether an accusation, a practice, or a threat, is a recurrent theme in the *Cycle Indochinois*. Real or imagined prostitutes populate Duras's colonial imagery. In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, the Hôtel Central, where the family is staying, is a den for prostitutes. For the manager, Carmen "disait qu'elle aimait bien les putains, qu'elle-même était fille de putain mais que ce n'était pas seulement pour ça, mais parce que c'était encore ce qu'il y avait de plus honnête, de moins salaud dans ce bordel colossal qu'était la colonie" (BP, p. 198). According to Leah Hewitt, Duras "extends the definition of prostitution so that it becomes an apt metaphor for all social transactions" [18]. The core of colonial life is the exploitation of bodies, goods, and workers, and the narrator designates the rich white neighborhood as a "bordel magique" (BP, p. 169). Carmen encourages Suzanne to explore the high-end colonial neighborhood, with one condition: "Elle lui conseilla de se promener dans la ville en lui recommandant toutefois de ne pas se laisser faire par le premier venu" (BP, p. 184).

Suzanne does not explicitly conceive of herself as a prostitute. Nevertheless, she engages in a transactional exchange with M. Jo earlier in the novel. She agrees to expose her naked body in exchange for a brand-new phonogram: "C'est ainsi qu'au moment où elle allait ouvrir et se donner à voir au monde, le monde la prostitua" (BP, p. 73). This act, in which she becomes a passive agent for the commodification of desire, propels her into the colonial economy of the "circulation des villes, des routes, du désir" [19], and alienates her from her family.

---

18 Leah Hewitt, *Autobiographical Tightropes*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990, p. 116.

19 Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant*, Paris, Minuit, 1984, p. 13.

To the external colonial gaze, Suzanne's movements within the white neighborhood are not the innocent walk she envisions, but rather a threat to the purported superiority of upper-class territory. A woman walking alone is never perceived in the same way as her male counterpart. For example, in Ancient Greek, περιπατέω is defined in the Bailly dictionary as "to move around, to come and go, to walk." In French, when the term *peripatetic* is applied to men, it refers to Aristotelian philosophers who, as part of their philosophical practice, would walk (πατέω) around (περί) while conversing about metaphysical subjects. However, when applied to women, *péripatéticienne* designates a prostitute touting for customers. Here, Kern underlines the common assumption made against female-gendered bodies moving through a city alone on foot: "Women walking in public were more likely to be read as streetwalkers (sex workers) than as women out for another purpose" [20]. Indeed, instead of falling into the category of the *flâneur* as many of her male counterparts would, Suzanne is perceived, and, more importantly, perceives herself, as a trespasser. Here, parallels can be drawn with Lauren Elkin's *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (published in 2017). Elkin posits that the female *flâneur*, the *flâneuse*, is a challenging figure to the male-dominated urban environment. Suzanne's presence in *Un barrage* is transgressive because her journey in the city is framed through the lens of desire; she is therefore met with suspicion, objectification, and attempts to regulate her behavior. Her body morphs into a site of negotiation between her mother's Sisyphean ambitions, colonial patriarchal structures of power, and her budding subjectivity. Suzanne embodies Elkin's *flâneuse* precisely because her undesirable presence and awkward appearance constitute a form of resistance:

20 Leslie Kern, *Feminist City*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

by walking, looking, and existing in a place that attempts to exclude her. Suzanne's journey through the city constitutes, for Elkin, a "mode of self-invention."

Suzanne's movements in the city are mapped onto Duras's geography of desire. For Norindr, it is desire that determines geographical markers: "These landmarks, in Duras's narratives, deviate from their literal signification. They constitute not only fiction; they also circumscribe an imaginary geography marked by a different type of spatial economy. They delimit a different space, a space of desire which is inhabited or occupied by the young girl" [21].

If the plains surrounding the land concession are always associated with financial, environmental, and mental struggles, then the city of Saigon will always be a stimulating city of desire in Duras's geographies.

A rereading of Duras's urban geography through the scope of Kern's feminist geography reveals that space in Duras's novel is neither an objective, neutral construction nor a merely personal, subjective experience. Instead, space emerges as an embodied concept formed through the interactions between bodies, architecture, and the sociopolitical forces that structure a city fundamentally shaped by colonialism. Kern's work enables a critical reassessment of the relationship between Suzanne and the city as a continuous struggle to assert agency within an environment that actively seeks to suppress it. *Feminist City* highlights how much of our experience of the city, whether in real life or fiction, is shaped by it.

Alicia Rodriguez
University of Massachusetts Boston
alicia.rodriguez@umb.edu

21 Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.