

**Beyond the Centre
Arts & Humanities Faculty Conference
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Women Who Walk

I'm here to talk about the Women Who Walk network, but before I do, I'd like to lay some foundations for how this network has come about, and why. And that necessitates a bit of background about my own walking practice, and walking practices at large.

I have what I have always believed to be a pretty straightforward relationship with walking. It's how I get about. I am wobbly on a bicycle. I have never genuinely wanted to drive a car. Most importantly, I am incessantly nosy and curious, and walking gives me access to places, situations and details that I would otherwise miss, and which are important grist for the mill as a writer.

In my early teens, I regularly set out on a Saturday morning with a flask, a sandwich and a notebook, and made off into the horizon. I grew up in the Fens, so horizons were a challenge. I took a map with me to reassure my parents. I often walked with a friend who wanted to get out of the house, away from her older sister. We would go in search of interesting buildings, ditches, causeways, ruins, churchyards, village greens with solitary tethered goats, friendly dogs and abandoned defences. I would scribble ideas in my notebook and my friend would sketch in hers.

I thought everybody did this. I didn't realise that my friend and I were walking artists in the making. That, unwittingly, we were *dériving*, drifting.

We were practising the noble art of psychogeography.

What is Psychogeography?

I have made several attempts at finessing an answer to this question, so forgive me if I quote myself in part from other papers¹.

The term 'psychogeography' is rooted in the radical experiments of the Situationist International and the Lettrist movement in Paris. Guy Debord – popularly cited as the grandfather of psychogeography – explained it as a practice which:

sets for itself the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals

Debord, 1955, p.8

Key to the practice of psychogeography is the drift or *dérive*, 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' (Debord 1959, p.62).

As a label, psychogeography has been through a repeated cycle of acceptance, rejection and popularisation over the last sixty or so years. Its practice has a role in the work of artists, writers, protest groups, performers and just about anyone who uses walking 'with attitude' in their work. In its broadest sense, psychogeography is a way of looking at place and our relationship with it. We are influenced by our surroundings, but rather than blindly following whatever directions we are given, and simply 'zoning out', a psychogeographer will question, refuse and occasionally disobey. Psychogeography is driven by curiosity and a desire to experience place more fully, on many levels.

Essentially, the *dérive* is attentive walking: it is more than a stroll and less than a march. It is not about getting from A to B, but about taking a route that suggests itself as the walk progresses. It encourages the walker to experience place, taking time to explore routes away from the everyday. At its most radical, the *dérive* is a form of pedestrian protest, thumbing its nose at the rules of urban planning and attempting to shatter the 'spectacle' of

¹ See my article 'Walking against the current' (JWCP 8.1, 2016) and conference paper 'The Walking Dead, or why psychogeography matters' (Re-enchanting the Academy, 2015, CCCU).

commercialised and municipal spaces. Primarily an urban pursuit, it can be practiced anywhere.

When I first came to Canterbury as a student, I walked the campus and city streets until I knew them intimately. I usually did this alone. I got a cheap map of East Kent, made a mark on it and walked there, usually becoming distracted by other places on the way. I followed my curiosity. I did a lot of hedgerow foraging. I noticed that when I walked, my ideas became clearer, and I often composed poems or passages of prose en route. I also discovered that when I was stuck on an idea, frustrated by my lack of understanding about a text or worried about an essay, walking made everything much simpler. It helped to unknot, as well as generate, ideas.

Hopefully you can see where this is going.

I have long been convinced that walking improves focus and ideation. For those in doubt, recent scientific studies carried out at Stanford University have demonstrated that walking in the outdoors increases our ability to think novel, creative thoughts. The researchers, Marily Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz, published their findings in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. Here are some key points:

Four studies demonstrate that walking increases creative ideation. The effect is not simply due to the increased perceptual stimulation of moving through an environment, but rather it is due to walking.

...Walking outside produced the most novel and highest quality analogies. The effects of outdoor stimulation and walking were separable. Walking opens up the free flow of ideas...

...Walking also exhibited a residual effect on creativity. After people had walked, their subsequent seated creativity was much higher than those who had not walked.

As soon as I started to teach creative writing, I naturally integrated walking into exercises for my students. I introduced - and continue to use - exercises based on dérives, over-mapping, contained walking and labyrinths. I was surprised to learn that this was unusual. From the theoretical base of some key writers - Guy Debord, Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Will Self - a whole world of contemporary walking practices opened up to me. The findings of Oppezzo and Schwartz lent credence to what appeared to be a marginal academic area.

I soon discovered that I was not so alone after all. Walking studies is a growing field. Segueing with Mobility studies, New Nature Writing and Site Specific works, walking – and psychogeography – is a burgeoning area, in both theory and practice. Following a London-based renaissance in the 1980s, British psychogeography appears to have come of age.

You may be wondering where women come into this. Well, so did I, increasingly.

As a writer, I have often been asked why I don't 'write like a woman'. My father-in-law once admitted to me that he never reads novels by women, but would make an exception in my case. A reviewer once referred to my prose as surprisingly muscular. In my twenties, I shared some work anonymously with a writer's circle, and listened with interest as one of the two men in the group addressed all of his remarks about my writing to the other man. Perhaps these experiences, and the dominance of male writers in literary fiction, have enabled me to build up a certain immunity. It was no surprise to me that all of the books and articles I read about walking were written by men. But guess what? Women walk too.

Tangible evidence of this is Rebecca Solnit's extensive history of walking, *Wanderlust*. In her chapter 'Walking after Midnight', Solnit neatly establishes why women walking alone have always been, and continue to be, targets of verbal and physical abuse. Walking and prostitution have become synonymous - we all know what kind of woman a 'streetwalker' is - and because of this, women walking alone are suspicious by association. Solnit reflects on her lack of freedom as a young woman living in Paris, where the men often propositioned and occasionally grabbed her in the streets, and how in San Francisco, she was repeatedly followed and threatened by men.

I was advised to stay indoors at night, to wear baggy clothes, to cover or cut my hair, to try to look like a man... to take taxis, to buy a car, to move in groups, to get a man to escort me ... all asserting it was my responsibility to control my own and men's behavior rather than society's to ensure my freedom. I realized that many women had been so successfully socialized to know their place that they had chosen more conservative, gregarious lives without knowing why. The very desire to walk alone had been extinguished in them – but it had not in me.

Solnit, 2014 [2001], p.241

This passage is likely to strike a chord with other women. Fear of assault is a principle reason why women do not walk as freely as men in public places. There are many factors that limit the mobility of different individuals, but fear is a powerful reason to stay at home. Like Solnit, I have been physically and verbally threatened and attacked while out walking, and like Solnit, these experiences have only served to make me more stubborn and determined to carry on.

The psychogeographical fraternity

The culmination of these thoughts, which led to me founding the Women Who Walk Network, came when I read a passage in Will Self's book *Psychogeography*. Here, Self has just met up with fellow walker and writer Nick Papadimitriou:

Nick points out that most of the psychogeographic fraternity (and dispiritingly, we are a fraternity: middle-aged men in Gore-Tex, armed with notebooks and cameras, stamping our boots on suburban station platforms, politely requesting the operators of tea kiosks in mossy parks to fill our thermoses, querying the destinations of rural buses. Our prostates swell as we crunch over broken glass, behind the defunct brewery on the outskirts of town) are really only local historians with an attitude problem.

Self, 2007, p.12

Self's phrase 'the psychogeographic fraternity' continues to ring loudly. Clearly, Self is poking gentle fun at himself and his circle here: there is something of the self-denigrating, shambling train-spotter about this picture of contemporary psychogeography. But from the first reading, I couldn't budge from my brain the notion that I have been on plenty of rural buses in search of catapults and short-cuts to obscure walks, that I carry a notebook everywhere, have been known to take photographs of abandoned car parks and bridges, would be very interested in a defunct brewery in a marginal landscape, and that I possess a thermos. I doubted that I was the only woman doing this kind of thing. Yet I felt as if I was - yet again - being excluded from a gentlemen's club. It's not that Self and co. wouldn't welcome women psychogeographers, but rather that they simply didn't exist.

Shortly after reading Self's book, I presented at a conference in Brighton on Place-Based Arts. The keynote speakers were, of course, men – including the great Iain Sinclair – but many of the practitioners, and both conference organisers, were women. And many of these women – artists, writers, academics – used walking in their work. I presented alongside a group of three women artists, and we were amused and reassured to find

several overlaps and shared references in our papers. We agreed to stay in touch and share among us any projects we thought might be of interest.

The Brighton conference, held in May last year, sowed a seed. I decided to see if there was scope for creating a network of women walkers and psychogeographers. At the same time, I discovered that many colleagues in the School of Humanities at CCCU were using walking in their work, and this led to the creation of *Peregrinations: Walking and Landscape Research Group*. An interesting spur was that, of my six colleagues expressing an interest in the research group, only one was a man. To add to this growing sense of synchronicity, an excellent anthology of articles about contemporary British Psychogeography, *Walking Inside Out*, was published, featuring writing by several walking women, edited by Tina Richardson. Another conference later in the year put me in touch with yet more walking women, and I realised that it was time to put my network plan into action.

I set up a Twitter account on 2nd November last year, and posted a call for interest online via the Walking Artists Network.

I was stunned to see the reaction. The thread on the Walking Artists Network resulted in numerous email contacts from around the world wanting to sign up. The Twitter account rapidly accumulated followers. There was also a clear desire for more than the Twitter feed, and several potential members wanted to avoid a Facebook or Google group. As a result, I created a network website with an events calendar, through which I generate occasional newsletters, flagging up calls for papers, projects, open walks and member blogs. After a few technical hitches, the website went live at the beginning of this year.

The network now hosts a wide variety of women who use walking in their work: artists, writers, theatre practitioners, historians, archaeologists, labyrinth makers, social scientists, walking guides, pilgrims and assorted academics.

Following my initial call for interest, I was contacted by Professor Deirdre Heddon, of the University of Glasgow, who has published on women walking artists. Professor Heddon kindly sent me some of her articles, including a set of interviews from 2010 with women walking artists, produced in collaboration with Cathy Turner, a site-specific artist and member of Wrights & Sites. Their project, 'Walking Women', was inspired by the apparent dearth – or rather invisibility – of prominent women walking artists. Heddon and Turner's initial task was to seek out these women, and their enquiries led to what they have described as 'a deluge of e-mails confirming that there were indeed many, many women walking artists both in the UK... and beyond' (Heddon & Turner, 2010, p.15). I've since discovered that many of these artists are now members of the Women Who Walk network.

Heddon and Turner's research was intended as an initial investigation into walking women. Having interviewed a diverse selection of practitioners, they were able to conclude that:

...the diversity of the practice, and the women who make it, usefully prevents us from falling into easy essentialisms of 'gender'. Nevertheless, each of these women did recognise that she walked *as* a woman; though what that means is as variable as the women walking.

Heddon & Turner, 2010, p.21

As of yesterday afternoon (7th June 2016) the Twitter network has 115 followers - not all of them women - and the direct mailing list for newsletters has 54 addresses. Although many members are based in the UK, the network includes women from Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, Egypt and Argentina.

The network continues to grow. Many colleagues here at Christ Church are now members, and due to regular contact and geographical proximity, there is a strong local focus in Kent and London. The network has been useful in promoting local walking projects, including those led by members, such as *Walk Ways*, the Futures Initiative walks here on campus, and

a series of sensory walks led by a network member based in the School of Architecture at the University of Kent.

I am attempting to establish stronger links between members through synchronised walks: encouraging members to walk wherever they are on the morning of set dates, and to share their walking experiences live via Twitter, or in retrospect via the website. It's a slow build, but I'm hoping that finer weather for the next scheduled walk, on 1st July, will be fruitful.

Most promising is the continuing legacy of Deidre Heddon's *Walking Women* project, which will result in a series of events in London and Edinburgh this summer, bringing together women walking artists via the Women Who Walk network and the Walking Artists Network.

It's one thing to talk about walking and psychogeography, and another to do it. So, to make this paper more experiential – and more about you - I'd like to propose a brief psychogeographical experiment. There's no time for us to go for a *dérive*, but we can explore the unfamiliar in the familiar within the confines of Augustine House. So I'd like to propose that we take the next few minutes to leave this room and wander freely.

Normally when I set *dérive*-based exercises for students, I ask that they do not let their curiosity lead them to the pub. In the same spirit, please avoid using this as an unscheduled comfort break. Instead, go in search of the surprising. Here are some ideas to get you looking differently:

- Focus on a particular sense. If you are usually led by sight, try to navigate the building using smell or sound. Touch walls and surfaces.
- Look up, and look down. Look behind things. Don't just look into the middle distance.
- Open doors you wouldn't normally use. Follow stairs you tend to avoid.
- Trail a colour. If you notice something red, blue or orange, go up to it. Then look for the next instance of that colour, and continue.

Come back and tell me how you got on...

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Abstract: Women Who Walk

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Women Who Walk is a new network for women who use walking in their creative or academic practice. This short paper will outline the network's aims and current developments within the context of the Peregrinations Walking and Landscape Research Group. There is good reason to believe that women who walk alone are more vulnerable than men who do so (Solnit: *Wanderlust*, 2001). Will Self refers disparagingly to the psychogeographic fraternity of middle-aged men in Gore-Tex (Self: *Psychogeography*, 2007). Women who walk in this way, in Gore-Tex or otherwise, are behaving outside societal norms, putting one foot in front of another, asserting independence. The WWW network seeks to highlight and connect women engaged in walking-related practice and research, promote their work and share opportunities and projects within a supportive community. Established following a tentative foray on Twitter in November 2015, Women Who Walk has grown to a membership of over 120 walking artists, writers, psychogeographers, site-specific performers and academics (as of Feb 2016). Although many members are based in the UK, the network includes women from Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, Egypt and Argentina. The first network synchronised walk was held on 18th February, with another scheduled for early April 2016. www.women-who-walk.org