

**Walking *Seven Walks*: solitaries, spirit-mediums and  
matrilineal influence in Lisa Robertson's poetics of soft  
architecture**

Emily Stewart

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## Statement of authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Emily Anne Stewart

31 March 2022

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## Abstract

“Walking *Seven Walks*” comprises a full-length manuscript of poems and an exegesis on Canadian poet Lisa Robertson’s poetics of soft architecture and her millennial poem *Seven Walks*. Entitled *Song of the Year*, my creative manuscript presents chronologically the results of a daily urban walking practice undertaken between 2017 and 2022. Informed by Robertson’s poetics of soft architecture, a counter-discipline that recomposes space via a feminist lens, my poems reconsider Charles Olson’s “composition by field” (1950), investigate open-form possibilities for reading poems, and pursue the lyric mode’s capacity for realising the temporary and everchanging constitutions of material space.

My exegesis makes a literary-historical argument for Lisa Robertson’s *Seven Walks* as modelling a collective, feminist practice of urban walking that converses with the hidden labours of previous generations of women and confers prophetic possibilities for world-building. I argue *Seven Walks*, published between 1999 and 2003, represents what I call the “climate *fin de siècle*” in Robertson’s deployment of baroque aesthetics and the poem’s registration of late-industrial crises.

Chapter One positions Robertson in a Romantic context, arguing that her figuration of the soft architect and guide as plural and gender-fluid walkers ironises Rousseau’s model of the “solitary walker” as depicted in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1782). I demonstrate that an alternative and collaborative matrilineal genealogy, via the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth, informs Robertson’s walking strategy, which registers and reflects on the effects of late-industrial capitalism, including accelerating financial economies and environmental destruction.

Chapter Two argues that spirit-medium discourse is a significant line of matrilineal influence in *Seven Walks*. I analyse two key mediumistic tropes at work in *Seven Walks*: the figure of the guide and the spatial unit of the room. I argue that the guide opens the text to modes of more-than-human relating. I also argue that Robertson’s use of the room channels the spirit and influence of Virginia Woolf in “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) and beyond.

**Part one:**

Song of the Year

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## Conglomerates

Myself I saw the first tender shoots of Gehry

    thumbnails planted two-and-a-half blocks from  
the beach, Sydney Eastern Standard Time.

    That good ideas pitch us forward  
is a mid-week provocation. This good idea makes  
    the same old view newly visible, think high relief,  
imaginative, if not imaginable. For example

    my tech friends pose like honest grammarians  
and yet the tinselled evenings lapse. All the heavy  
    furniture can be scrubbed back and sold on.

Just leave a cyclamen for me at the reception desk.

    Give a thought for other sprung apart things.

The network signal is too bad. I heard about a  
    to-and-fro, that the people in question  
are a phenomenon. And I saw the striking close-up.

    Some would argue we're in the midst of a tactical  
rainstorm, given the changeable

    definition of a rainstorm. But when will it rain?



I'm not blameless. The reception desk  
is overflowing with cyclamen. Have you ever  
attended a worse party. I didn't anticipate it.  
There aren't any crisps. That person in the corner,  
we started out as neighbours and were close for a  
time. Now we signal nonsense from across the park.  
The park represents absolute finitude. It's a sticky  
place; the infant years, childhood, adulthood  
– no matter what, this park has problems.  
Sydney Eastern Standard. I figured that one out.  
It's the conclusion of a novel I've already  
decimated. My novel about venue closures.  
But the people around me are looking  
more and more spirited, is it about posture.  
They move in a silent figure-eight. What kind of  
party. I'm fearful of nearly every decision, so  
I've altogether stopped opening my windows.  
That's personal. Day and night. Myself, I. Let's talk:  
Say I Do Say Yes, will I need to supply and carry  
my own bricks? I can heat up the bean mix. Leave

a cyclamen at the doorstep if there isn't any room.

After the heavy furniture get rid of the lighter  
items – table settings, cushions – especially get rid

of what's bulky. Please Forgive My No,  
if it happens. I'm a maniac. That bulk seriously  
contributes – rid yourself of bedspreads, yoga mats

– and really, all of your linen. What would you  
do now with a word like honesty? There aren't any  
crisps. I'll Probably Say Yes. I'd keep the wardrobe

pieces that can be worn in multiple configurations,  
like inside-out or back-to-front, or across seasons.

It's very good to plant out the seedlings, look how  
cramped the roots. Next time. That's something

I know about. Look how colourful the salad. Look  
how sequined the view. Look how dynamic they are

as a couple. Look at that little dog running.

I can fill you in about everything. Don't think

I'm so sensitive as to have not, or never.

It's not as if every hand holds another hand. That's  
a big blown-up idea. I noticed how parkland  
stitched together the southern parts of the suburb, which  
are not reasonably close to any beach; how every  
running dog barked like a rumour or made no noise  
at all. This was an anti-gravity novel in sepia  
cease-and-desist, a bull shark novel in cricketing whites,  
a novel for sale as a plan for a novel that might  
be kitted out with a spa or ensuite, or not. It was a novel  
renovated for the big screen. This fiction – gentrification –  
was the story of our city under various names  
“Salt spray” “Uniqlo” “Armoury” and extended out past  
river systems grasslands national parks massacre sites.  
Zooming in: there is a workaday hole in every single  
fence. I didn't know where to find characters  
with motive or how to make more appealing the rooftops  
mounted with solar and satellites. Fabric oddments lassoed  
across the heat of other dumped belongings.  
Tagging #philistine #khole #waspish. Faintly music  
from a bone-dry cupboard. Is that a Type A Pokémon

at the lawn farm. Giving up on character I tally the  
residuals and take my menu to order from inside the car.  
Panning shot: groundcover, tennis nets. Am I dining in  
on presentism? Was a different version  
of this televised from a clean apartment? Is my natural condition  
superior? And where else could my good  
mood have gone, except into this side-dish of edible flowers?

The plants are never quietened, in fact, they are  
always hyper-expressive, as busy as a whole  
torso of little hairs, pulsing as the world's chest.  
Their liveness makes slick panes of thinly sloping  
glass, makes wet concrete's sonic bounce. While  
I am private and furious, longing for the outside  
view: a total warp of elements. Someone is bound  
to claim the territory that arcs under the bridge,  
I add up the examples. They are unhappy with  
their salons of clean air. From my window  
I count the windows: fifteen at least, curtained in

daylight by sky and at night fluorescent. During  
the summer turn, heat becomes movement so  
we are left outside choreography. Everything  
is one hour away. This is not mysterious.  
Surprising is the pink air and how it will  
congeal. There are hornets in this house but  
the house itself is a happenstance thing, made  
real by their hum, no more formal than  
a throw rug; it is softness shelled. The bad  
news is this rain's odour, which is chemical.

Beyond and beyond road conditions  
precipitate local swell. Signs are arranged  
in a certain loop. More bad news: this postcode  
syncopates its residents. I am jammed  
in by multiple exceptions. Storm-water,  
bats in the trees, collapsed recesses, a serious  
tear in one socket. The plants continue  
their activities, cossetting a pathway spill,

hosting hours of shade for human anecdotes.

They are myriad and most often unobtrusive,

much in the same way that plastic is stuff.

I await the return of concrete's earlier echo,

outside hope but wishing still for clean irradiation.

## Northbourne Ave

How vulnerable my body's archive

reproduction and memory

a banner juts out

a banner juts out

pure vector

two or three mediocre feelings

*inscrutable*

protesters and their certainty and their tough white crosses

what life is like

scabrous raked-over pine

witches hats in bleached or shaded settings

place attaching to symptoms—is this bias?

is

is

*movement*      like air it's how we live

clouds floating on windscreens

one-liners

I'm interested in that



no airflow

*apology*

no airflow

Would you try again? Or give up?

no airflow

Ask for help?

Give and give?

no airflow

altered foliage

living memory, impression

realm

seems disinterested

*across* but never *to*: tentatively perceived

housing

aptitude—asset

The light eagling

decades

END

palms

effort

it happened, you were there

land*slip*, roaming, a detour

Well this is my theory

landslide (disambiguation)

the rise and the rise  
of devotional music

denialism skewers whole worlds

*my* vigorous denialism

this town of roundabouts / was once

I move like that, with a swerve

main is beyond

mantra

Marion

Marion

Marion

Marion

Marion

Marion Mahony Mystic

Marion Mahony Mystic

Marion Mahony Mystic

scent

pleasant and professional—dreaming has its finitude

the shock

I'm a teacher. "I need to coax the memory out of you"

switch

next trimester. Whatever I said isn't my ambition

sitcom?

all amenity is attitudinal. In a casual tone,

arousal

but ... no one talks

*surge*

love's stand-in

stockpile

screaming at the t v

chipped

it gets easier

violet sky

a walkthrough, with closed eyes

simmering

simmering

simmering

simmering

I am putting up my hand. I have built the most temporary beauty!

It was a lyric that moved me

/ through the door

double dream

spring

spring

warming

bump—bloom

as if you were born an angel

watcher

reader

this belief

what life is like

*temporary*

*what life is like*

read, travel—totally differently intense

super soft rayon

which year is it?

pale sky

symptomless, no clouds

argument—prose

a different scene

come on,

slog—the weather—*sensitive*

keep your story

promise—dialogue

catch the whole

forgive? venture

money—prestige



fond symbol,

that billowing plastic layer

let the            achieve its will

*wind*

held by the window bracket

ten years

my ego

restless retort, goes underground

no not unreal

inscrutable

the peeling month

Shhh shh sh

a spray of ideas I can't back

rerouting

I remember feeling very lost & certain

Sydneysiders don't miss

it was a kind of error ache

(The road manages its tilt At the crest a resin sun leaks out

Day's ordinary grease)

goof

a challenge for you

*dopamine rush*

a bad of shredded salad

bag

we're

a thrash of green

I move no comment

OUT OF HERE

who needs to know

(Emily puts on a different outfit)

the person of the place / everyone we knew /  
abetting / from here / *flat country*

invigilation  
of the public

bitumen  
*inland*, scrubby, day    day    day

turn back  
reports of an assailant

turn backs  
selection criteria

fate  
the wrong way

*recycling*

that memory

distractible

2000s

crime air

citizen

canberra

citizen

canberra

citizen

canberra

citizen canberra

citizen canberra

citizen canberra

citizen canberra

citizen canberra

citizen canberra

easy walking distance

easy colour falling asleep

gateway to

think thing

Personally,

what is in the air

now non

*fault*

in my head

*fault*

trapped in this ordinary way

how normal

brittle gums

low levels of nitrogen

pitch black

starching each visit

everything in a heap,

discarded      latent

(what is in the air)

I feel born      infinite

nothing much

stuck

to an asphalt strip



*now non*

life            like

“crazy quilt of other facades”

mostly private a little public land

Come on,

air quality data, I’m talking,

*fate*

the dot on the map

dashcam footage of a kangaroo

## Song of the Year

home for me is a question of prosperity

I don't think you can recycle that

not about an image or particular surface

brickwork

the nostalgic objects I remember

a welcome mat, a shark tooth

it's where I feel the blood rushing

I mean I'm not always safe, emotionally

does that feel true

\*

I'm beyond torturing myself

the prettier the sunset

the more poisonous

count up the packets of freeze-dried food

they're extremely lightweight

you choose to form relationships

with all sorts of people

is it enough

I want to be this quiet but also this open

I've certainly run out of reasons

I'm fresh as a sprig

\*

how many times have you fallen over

picked out the gravel from your palms

I have thatched skin over both knees

I see you / you see me

bad attitude

highly moral

hopeless

lug it in here and drop it by the door

strict about dairy

proper ventilation

my queasiness is genetic but minor

have you ever woken up with a cramp

help me choose

pass

so ask Google or Siri

pass

“pass”

would you miss the mountain or the spring

power's out

you'll be sleeping downstairs

my worry lines

ever imagine

musical sequence

tattoo on the left cheek

*slap me – hard*

it'll need replacing soon

what is our mantra

say it again

again and again

\*

ever imagine

every day

nikes

then home to snooze

balance is a neutral and not about beauty

per se

Siri look up geophagy

pull over at this rest stop

charcoaled ruins

there's nothing much above

whereas

glasses in the glovebox

wattle owns this patch of turf

it's an oven out here

watch that mouthy individual

why do I have this craving

from a distance those highway vehicles

look like semaphore

\*

pessimism

it has a lot to do with gut health

\*

winter Olympics

snap to make fluorescent

I saw a film about that particular historical moment

the long slumber

the lighter fluid will sting

worship me

misremembering now

we drank bottled water all summer

I snagged my jeans

it's unlikely

probably as old as that condiment jar

eventually the pipes were fixed

so this is the last photograph

\*

my generation

fearless

try again

boycott

watch the nitrogen levels the crops produce

skin in the game

do you mean excess

I mean lightning, fire, and the new arctic slushie

\*

I've been one of those bad people

inadequate hydration

\*

anything too sickly sweet

no-one'll cope

they were in there

vanilla

validating good intentions

watching videogames

now there's a game on

a reality game

not sport

I'm filling in for, her name,

I'm in control of what happens

sound travels in this house

I know who...

wannabe

that's an insult

yours truly

\*

the actual weather stinks

it was found on the street, not

calcium

strictly mine

I've known other kinds of relief

corkscrew please

It's not an assumption

many people would make

\*

I'm in control of what happens

catch me up

I have this thing about crocs

crocodiles

I mean, I love them

I love their open mouths

soft as a marshmallow, I'd bet

no-one else had that kind of sound

I'm speaking to the whole cohort

you, you

and you who will tell the others

that boy needs help with his shirt

help me pull the jumper

over, his name,

billeted to a different family

renewed yet again

\*

hey everybody

vocal training

exercises to strengthen my



lots of travelling

and then, during training

and now

I prefer the back seat or the bus

intelligent beasts

who greased things up

entitlement, you see it around

\*

I prefer not to drive

respect

sort of old school

be wary of shallow thoughts

try and be present

follow the guidelines

be present with me in this moment

yours sincerely

\*

watching videogames

little boy

I've got love in my heart

I made it big elsewhere

and it wasn't a dream

and it wasn't an accident

\*

I can tell you, love drips out of my pores

I'm a bored ancestor

my throat tingles, one antihistamine

did nothing

screw it back in

at the morning auction

seagulls were more well-versed

than the talent scouts

who were more well-versed

than the removalists

fringes are divine but hard work

laughing crying

who would want

a dining room

at the summit of the mountain

\*

*prettily*

I'll borrow the hatchback

glue it into place

I waited until

the completion of the auction

it's a trope

taking a phone call

I gave it away with my eyes

tell the whole room

celebratory dinner

the hammer did slam

then I saw a movie

recognisable

bind the two together

I guessed at it

trivia

let me up to your house

seagulls

\*

a tutorial

representing that level of violence

I'm a twelfth century liberal

perpetuates that same violence

probably more filament than weed

shook

I can do the task

my hands are more steady

bring along someone

aunty, cousin

all-purpose Vaseline

my Spanish is tarnished

don't ventriloquise

likewise

\*

I'm really happy for you

that silver slug

looks like tinsel

wearables

through thick and thin

I can't imagine

what's a better pharmaceutical

rest up

feet up

filial and pious

take me to Lake George

how about Hobart

how about the mini-mart

I'm an actress

shake it off

try non-drowsy

\*

your face is cinema

darling,

bon mot

beyond my means

taskforce

goalie

exception

\*

dump all objects and focus on pure sensation

this is plainly a narrative arc

can I ask you, what about if we did commit

add some grease to the camera lens

I guess now I'm emotional and this is all setting

*the new rules*

*are thus*

others are having this exact conversation

throatily

you're a goddamn trilobite

how far away is the full tide

the Pacific Ocean

dump those objects straight in the water

symptom checker

I'm an ordinary

I thought I'd have married a tree by now

of course, I want to feed you a whole tower of food

regular and social

It's a twist-top

see, it helps if you name your problems

I'm feeling very

crowded out, hot in the face, dizzy

hungry, excitable, furious,

homesick

what is that

aggressive: my heart is palpitating, buzzing, switching

on off

on off on off on

but what is your problem

this seafood is done for

laughing

my skin is on fire

I remember what it's like but don't go sideways baby

\*

I'm an individual

it was a local council decision, to paint everything

that shade of pink

table water

\*

as we move closer to the end

these sorts of generational differences will collapse

to win this we need to pick up the phone

just be chill

I'm anti that kind of travel

just be chill

I told you to dump everything

call it for what it is

just be chill

just be chill

aggressive, hot, my heart is palpitating

this is the song of the year



## Armies

sinner's army

duck, *viper*, hand sanitiser

carpark army

backpack, spare tyre, *oatmeal box*

*fashion* army

sand, second hand, museum membership

teacher's army

sound *card*, vertigo, twins

*nocturnal* army

raincoat, furniture, cello tape

sitting duck *army*

foot spa, green beans, ailment

restaurant army

flu shot, *corkscrew*, weather report

*councillor's* army

revenue, mattress, paw paw

children's *army*

milk, prime number, listicle

dancefloor army

permethrin, *back pocket*, unisex

cattle army

handbag, fingernail, perfect *pitch*

*rainbow army*

snowmelt, Washington, pebblecrete

reverse park army

*dashcam*, sewing set, percussion

future army

*potted palm*, cracked lens, effrontery

pissweak army

shoelace, thumbs *up*, miracle child

clotheshorse army

beverage, *armpit*, cyclone

*mathematical army*

siren call, iron ore, adagio

fossil fuel army

thorn, *tassel*, whisper

hallmark army

sequin, partition, *print error*

pervert's army

white out, bachelor, *glassware*

object oriented army

newspaper, Latin, *stock exchange*

planetary *army*

rhythm, apple orchard, stock exchange

party army

*fried egg*, home invader, truism

forgotten army

*book plate*, cable tie, intermission

friendship army

stutter, foam, *curio*

*weekend* army

almond, street address, grin

dollar army

ladder, *landscape*, sugar-free

font suite army

*backchannel*, corporate, ten out of ten

*philosophical* army

honk, chalk, weather system

bedside army

chamomile, namesake, *platitude*

moribund army

*shampoo*, *outtake*, trimmings

sister army

red bull, employee, *gear shift*

midseason *army*

toothache, wholefoods, strata

artichoke *army*

solipsism, rewind, fashion wig

*portable* army

trout, outline, caramel

*how long* army

finance, tapas, sentience

*private* army

soundtrack, pinstripe, stapler

revolting army

*muesli*, masonry, interview

contagious army

*carbon*, folklore, dubstep

*rhyming* army

afternoon, suture, lovely

prescriptive army

*sallow*, unamenable, postscript

sentimental army

garden hose, *passion*, Richter

cricketer's army

soulful, wedding ring, *ozone*

psychopath's army

worm, turncoat, *era*

educational army

*olive oil*, sound check, temperance

silent army

workaholic, *township*, freesia

court appointed army

*pattern*, head gear, suitcase

*serious* army

cyclist, hip replacement, manuscript

*clinical* army

amorous, toothache, *pinch*

corporate army

aspirin, *schooner*, *fence*

## On pause / windswept

aisles, aisles	an outdoors
off my face	what about a little treatise?
lizard trap	no longer on the fence
one afternoon	the missing analysis
a boat on a lake	just a tacky idea
crossing fingers	north of the city
being at home all day	voice breaking up
what about it (Spanish Influenza)	normal brand of accessory
that's my unsympathetic response	eyesore

\*

back to first principles	a reading high
grassy aura	back pocket sonnet
see you at the next venue	employee, sorry
dehydrated	write me back you bitch!!
I can't organise	pumped full of chemicals
rows of cars	rows and rows
overpassed	old friend
cycling this way	slowass movie
it's your turn	put some layers on

piece of fruit	we luv
ratting out	phone on speaker
leaning in to whisper	my sober regards
on the scrap heap	inherited drowsiness
click and collect	a pick-me-up
so mercantile	opportunist
commons sense	I'm feverish
dealing in somersaults	a wavy
	unlegislated

\*

at the mic	zeroing in
see you at the next venue	period tracking
recently	a strident example
it was early January	track and field
approximate	<i>the quivering arrow</i>
IOU	somewhat
just between us	restaurant quality at home
x on the lips	on Gadigal land

\*

sideswiped	pencil behind the ear
goings and comings	rio tantrum
green proxy	sock bunched under the heel
Census worker	plain cotton T-shirt



poor me poem	camping in the driveway
poor poor poetry	moss for your aquarium
artificial grass	stick to the rules
two-way mirror	friendship over pillowtalk
open tabs	device waking up
blasted	the record under our feet
dear fruit fly!	big boiling pot

\*

Mecca voucher	<i>politely</i>
school of fish	taking a quiz
hard nipples	a full tank of petrol
continental parsley	flyaways
shy song	“paying the excess”
complaining	the cheap way 2
two suburbs distant	negotiating the sliplane
have you checked	Supermale ego
one of yours	a hair
a breeze in a door	i.e.
e.g.	etc.

\*

you asked and I told you	so I did
a mix of numbers and letters	hop in the car
forecast, rain wind dream	streams, income
idk how it works	an alternative to,
Tues I had you over	freebies, stale and out of date
fleshing out	a horrific verb
I'm okay (age difference)	one thing / a single
fingertips and serums	woke up thinkin
like an allegory	firelight weird
maybe-ing	the math irreducible

\*

dirtbag left	straight from the tap
a fata morgana	a frightful year
true fait	mountainous prose
kidz sound	eschatological limit

triangulate this

boy o

the lust detail

my pov masc

thwart settle

essayism

horseradish in the fridge

piquant reduction

pot-set

\*

look sideways	all those years
stuck to your shell	there's a gap between
<i>since then</i>	reheatable container
meet you here	sound muted
millefiori	it's heating up
stopover halfway	higher reasoning
20s mistake	dots ... ellipses
...	subtle flex
changing plans – due to the weather	climbing over boxes
oh well	message received

\*

an invitation	standing in frame
phenotypes	rattling windows
it doesn't bother me	oxygen mask
making a promise like that	I can't always anything

\*

timestamped	lunch platter
photo of a driveway	oven mitt
“it's set in stone”	When the sun rises
reluctantly pulled along	I'll catch the train
rat's nest under the engine	architect of a scheme

\*

take a break	check some figures
yes I <i>like</i> you	give the money back
heatstroke – regrets	refusing to gossip
the heir abhorrent	hoping you are well
now the city's pleading with	risking a fine
seasonal swoop	
lamentable	
it bears repeating	it's been raining
buy me out	

\*

emerging as this total metaphoric	yes and no
stay a couple minutes	jetlag, gone
an envy spikes	a bite-sized dissolve
one of my first memories	pressing a spacebar
butt dialling	two sets of keys
muscle weakness	narutomaki
large print job	shaggy half mullet Woman 2020
go on your way	an ibis, another
brand of yoghurt	casualised

\*

dead drooping fleurs                      </3  
a talent for                                      lengthwise  
new pattern of idealism                      wither on the vine  
wrong gears turning  
ban the book!!

\*

luteal phase                                      one more theory and then I'll get out  
summarising hope                              whatever I said  
I did it yesterday                              the minor character's lament  
wilted    a talent for  
let's take it offline                              sooner dead than  
looking at my own weird game

\*

I can almost drive                              twinkle in the ear

\*

zinnia and police                              in the grip of love  
taking the car around back                      she fainted in the shade  
all of us together                              the what's-at-stake trope  
closed beach                                      autolysis

\*

dearest croc,  
contemporary yowl  
hesitant voice, answering the phone  
are you sickened  
salad tongs  
do you believe  
twentieth century values  
the radius cry baby child  
turning at this corner

do you feel lucky  
coming from the yard  
bye, good-bye  
not mine to spell out  
every night is a hot night

\*

you look see-through  
here comes another fact-based

it's from being inside

\*

feel free  
what's in your pocket  
worn out  
ask an editor  
sign your name  
t/b t/b  
he knows, the old fish  
pls stop worming in your chair  
waiting on confirmation

car in reverse  
I'm countenancing  
bloodwork  
to open the envelope  
make the approach  
the old formulae  
misfiring  
HELL

hayfever

source close to the family

stuck up a ladder

“tax time”

nothing to contribute

running late

the drain is just

*is just for rain*

## New Year's Eve Eve

I'm not the only mammal living here  
the question is

star achiever  
enduring theme

I've swapped cheese for nutritional yeast  
now if you could

friends with benefits movie  
develop the courage to ask her

where is the cyclone  
who is in the hammock

easy and natural conversationalist  
take into the next world

the banned Iranian director Jafar Panahi  
the original idea

the secrets I know about my friend's friends  
I see them occasionally at the cinema

malatang dinner  
where you choose



Gramsci and Keats, the graveyard in Rome

the new coronavirus

Pomodoro technique

turn right down Rose St past the tennis courts

enough water for three days

it wasn't a perfect film

no *Rosemary's Baby*

what did you learn this year

how to ocean swim

ethical banking

next visit I'll

say hi and pass on my love

pottery

am I on shaky ground

which bad habit did you kick

is that q too private

ACAB, ATIAB

serenade me

I want to believe the wombat shares its burrow

there was a cigarette box on Gramsci's grave

my modest savings

what do you know about grime

I smoked one of them

tiredness in the extreme

I gave the money to a family member

they're not the ones

looking for the right

1970s glass bead curtain

it will take an enormous amount of water

I gave the money to a friend

to mix the concrete

to build the wind farm

*loud*

if we move the holiday period

the colour of sand

being ordinary

small, dead marsupial

in an ALDI shopping bag

social fever

floating floor

say the same thing back at me

through the mirror

there are plenty of other problems

that person deserved to get dragged

comms person

this anger

insistent rhythm

ziggurat

say the same thing back at me

guessing

say hi arid love!

Keats's grave was in a charming position

take into the next world

that major theorist. no

fold down the sofa

I'm searching for practical advice

old horror, new horror

slip up, speculate and roam

total stocktake of foibles

cute clash – lemon and violet

I'll sip at your drain

counterstrike

there is great wisdom, beyond intellect

counterstrike

I'm entering a more hopeful period

counterstrike

but for the dimming world

bouillon

itchy

alive

invoking the letter of the law

a hand-drawn map

it will get worse

in what small way

can I help

my beautiful father

rainfall

non-violent direct communication

take a deep – “self-care poem” – breath

dinner party feat. Jerusalem artichoke

trying every day to cast irony aside

the tone of the interviewer

don't ask me to formulate a jury

an effect simply morphs

its form evolves

young talented baker

charmless lawyer

weekend hiker

buttressed

is it blowing over

breathing the same air

rising dough

bird book left by the ridge

initials on every page

cracked windscreen

Eton mess

I walked across that river you like

the epithet

guitar solo

a nice place to be

lie on the grass

at the top of the salary range

she is whole

still without power

tent and annexe

pieces of the puzzle

admonitions

sate my hunger

undo grammar

vulnerable position

climb the fence

love what you do

move towards forgiveness

stingers beneath

dreary little interior

a clean soul

if it's supernatural it's not reality

surround sound

hailstorm

money tree

I'm cosy in my second body

swimming cap

send for help

retreating further and further away

sing the phrase badly

watermark

what day is it

thrillseeker, orientation

in the open air

open-air ...

linen sky

alphabet

lying on the floor

handsomely

gossip

not chipboard, polished concrete

an eloquent cough might save us

limited shade

so willing to confide

the spirit of the system

debut

loading up on groceries, bags and bags

the edge that is softest

a gummy edge

prose afternoon

a sharp, sharp pencil

the architecture of the rose

recipient of a long generous letter

cutting the secret

every mark so well drawn



terrible glare

forthright

follow your interests

aerobic activity

protected from the wind

smiling eyes

large cactus

dress-code

sweep, knot

aura or shadow

aromatic

idea for a character and scene

hidden clause

earring, blood-sport

tacking out the pattern

principled

city and suburb

hibiscus iced tea lemon & mint

replace a door

away from the countryside

the sorrows of young Werther

faddish

that feeling of excitement

Casio beat

this will be remembered

reproduction pinned on the wall

theatrical sleeper

fluttering

tennis welcome

okay earth

we knew leisure, not catastrophe

the production of overtime

aggressor

uploaded to academia

I'll tell you what happened

terrible argument

model citizen

pass – fail

reimagining wealth

texting

I was in trouble but I was allowed my story

going for a run

comprising argument and evidence

picking up your rubbish

driving slowly, parallel to the main street

fibro emotion

furnished bedroom

untangled cords

climate change handbag

relaxed

I barely know which question, or what is –

a question

today is a leap day

I saw there was a diagram on the tree

eyes lighting up

it was likely that x substance

just quietly

pose savassana

my climbing vine won't climb

Hume Highway

that's what you get

the complete breakdown

world health

choir power

we killed an hour

trial period

here in my chest

small brushstrokes create texture

such enigmatic torpor

my metier

haptic

tit for tat

world id

the community's roaming fauna

*I'll go along with it*

a midnight fantasia

seeking comfort

human and impressionable

next gen

the legendary wall of sound

## Running time

## So contemporary and so likeable

every summer I doomscroll

every autumn I sigh and sigh

at the new pool

I dive into my cerebral offcuts

*the brain filled with shame cannot learn*

sluggish until touched

old time ago

troublingly sticky

I was hiding my seriousness

and glitched

Oh frightening oh chalice

whose okay am I seeking out

this financial year

I write and I say: take it easy

please outta

I walk sometimes I run

some of us like to take a subtler position

using compliments to force

attention

stop me about anything –

my garden is a worksite

I slowly realise the light is artificial

as afternoon fades

the stray at my door

how lean lively linear



the interior

is slapped together

wattle season outlier in

a vase

plates need washing

bare walls

handwritten note

blu-tacked

notionally

it's a scene anyone can draw

rough notes that phalanx

in company

the love thing is thinking

if you were cute

I was signposted

raising my hand

my elsewhere might be

a cold column dicing

the afternoon

or what's around

inner in outer

the present was forever lowing  
inside inside the room  
waiting for your voice on the phone  
guess what idiot  
formply  
it's not nothing  
knowing what I have  
I'm dead from this lack of tenderness  
none of this is easy  
I'm trying to get in front  
of the story

woe woe Woe

let's gather our inner resources

who was the sickest prince that year

here was some new genre of kid:

phone turns Woolf to woof

anybody else

how major is it

how major is getting a tooth removed

red herring

I'm clapping back

learning to drive

a sudden recovery of optimism

certain things must be understood

over and over

waking up low

the mind flashing

you can be sweet and love

everything

tell a bitch to be

I must look so relaxed  
so contemporary and so  
likeable  
part of the listenership  
who is leading  
what do you think  
and who follows  
standoffish

“the passage I’ll share  
is a short story  
about getting  
something  
right”

cloudy day hey

now I've figured out the formula

I can skip ahead

chasing my type of handwriting

musical

and muscular

a melody violates the set-up

what device

is really keeping you going

in this moment

a listening ear

hi to all my loved ones reading this

“bad attitude”

I always like that



forgive me my ethic

*and my intensity*

Toyota Echo (intrusive image)

an old vernacular

where I spent too much time

the counsellor is wearing all black

flummoxed

ruffling my circumspection

asking my opinion re

*the real work wives of publishing*

I fall asleep

my interest having waned

I'm bleeding from the nose  
a common malady  
she quips  
she rolls her eyes  
she moans softly  
she mimics slicing her own throat

pass me another  
handful of sea slugs

by the way

*I am here in particular*

“sounding the alarm”

at the council

of the municipality of Ashfield

installing a big salmon

oh chime in

thank

whoever you see first

this dream is environmental

so many competing tendencies

and powerlines

I'm getting back to  
the thing I'm not doing  
your camera is on  
stressed out glossy light  
spiralling outside  
feeling fine  
getting back to  
throwing a stone  
browsing privately  
dawdling a pebbled seam to its grate

I'm no longer planning a holiday  
the impulse trickling

give me your address again

and the trashiest flowers roses

## Loafing

Dear petitioner,

strawberries

so mercantile

rinse first

this isn't botspeak it's me talking

um

about

our lighthearted r/ship

am I not the gender you asked for

am I ... a bad bunny

psychosynthetic

she looks up at me with her headache

this is a courtesy

given everything going on

the air of a m\*n

a real teize / unfeeling type

of course the details matter

all those first names I call myself

temperamentally yrs x

well right now

I'm listening to Susan Sontag's

*The Volcano Lover*

on audiobook

I'm not stagnating at all

I am combusting

*flambé*

may I speak plainly

last decade was terrible

nothing decorative, nothing figurative

just

balsa balsa balsa balsa balsa balsa balsa balsa balsa balsa wood

lime sun

a piece of flashing tile

what do you think about

giving some control back

moving along

w a smile on my face

positive ions

I tend towards listing

showy concepts –



the brain's rewards centre

the wrong thing

the light – inadmissible

up-tempo upriver

the balcony

the gutters, orientation

the somniloquy

show the mark

the sticker on the apple

the Fool archetype

the public art frisbee

rushing towards seclusion

it's true that your edge will singe

I've been working king tide hours

maximising

and

from the bus window I see you

loafing

walking past king hot bread

*I'm in the wrong disguise*

as as as a parent

Pistachio, I say, before they ask

great star of my theme

perhaps the benefits are too hard won

throwing my phone across the room

who is Santa what is his sexuality

a Californian poppy

catch my enthusiasm?

every other animal is perfectly handsome

lots of neighbourhood in this trouble

I'm just at home listening to. Snakefarm

I'll find a job tomorrow

afternoon

my personal strengths

& what this economy will \$ for

I'm on antibiotics

are not the same thing

I'm currently beholden to

a strange file format

nothing is wrong per se

today I avoid catastrophe  
burning through  
quick sums  
dreaming of lava flows  
and sizzling (volume up)  
does maths help truly figure it

the calendar week restarting

a grassy corner of light a partly  
real place  
with an imagined  
underground  
I imagine it...  
and the middle hours  
writing standing up  
dolphin coffee table  
leaping back to the other hemisphere  
this is a child's wish  
I won't let go

towards newness all the time

reading each other's bit

synastry

I zip my jacket up

rain

showers

I like it here

looking at the waxing crescent

and kissing

night arrived in the middle of my dream  
will you look it up  
deepfaking literaturr  
on the computer  
let's swatch it out  
in the chaparral biome  
in the Nike fanny pack  
in the autofiction narrative  
in the *Survivor* season finale  
in the dilated eyes of their beloved  
their flecked irises  
things appear to be moving "in the right direction"

*their* dreamworld has its own fixtures  
spikes, pinions, residues  
showcasing the austerity of public life  
its permanent glare

pushing forward

conceding another day

the subtext overcomes me

flowing artfully stroke

after stroke

it's all too droll

inaction

plot hole

pulling out a weed

tiredly

trying to galaxy brain

it

setting a timer for 1 hour



I can say a lot about the opposite side of things

the alluring challenge

of the unprocessed event

a lush new vector

has its hold on the herb

garden

I believe in the chorus of us

and don't want to sit this one out

it's the middle of the week

once I saw the exit

I could take it

a way in

and a way out

and not quite

enough

what propelled me cut me off

## Facing the wall

I'm glowing up at my laptop

facing the wall

the vacant lot

it's one step forwards into

nothingness!

as I diagram my memory of events

and ask

what am I between

?

a great solid beam and particulate

it's not much of a test

it isn't scientific

I start on the recto

inscribing my relations

until caught out

the tarp is breathing in and in

on the other side of the street

I've been following this train of thought

for some time

it's the bluest trope available

I'm filled with gratitude

no

too American

I've been spending time outdoors

let's say

and my body is increasing

this pathos is my investigation  
the difference between goodness  
and passionate belief  
in the house of a person  
all the fantasies of our own making  
the ones that creep in  
perhaps I am thinking  
of some abstract The Red Shoes  
after all  
I wrecked my personality  
at book club  
and love picking sage  
from the commons of the street

I'm a lamb

just for this week

rising and falling sweetly

it's good practice

soon I'll be z again

building up rapport

shuffling cards  
hoping for a dare  
kids love animals first  
and learn their ways  
I know where I'm going wrong  
flicking between screens  
my mood is split  
and my meaning  
filling up the boot  
a hand in the pocket  
of last year's jeans  
or the jeans of the year before

it's been a while  
since I've felt a bassline vibrate  
where's the community chest  
crowd gathering to look  
at sleeping owls  
the weather is true  
enough  
don't probe



those places I can't look  
where a surge is felt  
I'm in luck not in love  
greedy for more heat  
absently stroking the microchip

the stars blister above me  
all the way to central

looking for sthing  
there's a spike on every page  
(what we expect)

Vitamin D glow up  
I'll know it when I see it  
*ginger snap*  
or green Sicilian olive  
my list of preferences  
do not sneeze  
swaying tall and temperate  
intense and alkaline  
antique and non-negotiable  
keep carbon in the soil  
choosy

is that posture mine?  
looking closely at the sigil  
a floodlight comes on, a curtain  
is swishing  
behind the intoxicated front lawn  
this time I'm an animal  
sleuthing among offspring  
jumping over  
and over the same fence

the curtains are twill

semi-transparent

wrecked at the hems

doubt is more private

than shame

which is worn on the body

nonsense flora  
an itemised list  
rapidly scanned  
and packed  
finishing up here  
I go roadside – I roam  
talking trash

it takes courage  
to furnish the outtake  
I've come this way  
by honest means  
snapping to make fluorescent

in the instant of wakefulness

known as the verge

image and text lies evenly

forming the shape

of what happens next

getting up and going to work

a quick nap a quick

dip

chartreuse blooming in waterways

escalating

my misread of the situation

is it road rage

I'm letting my genius ascend

drinking lots of water

don't at me

with my foot on the pedal

het sex dull origins piercingly

blue heather

out there between mountains

as feared I'm as ill

as in

a past life

having tried something on

who I wasn't

and with improved subtlety

walking through the carpark of a sports club

showing up and seeing what is

the construction work

continuing

I am so far away at this time

tied up?

“shirt and tie” fortunate

spiking

sceptical worlds

a lost season

my fantasy is

*that crisis is revelatory*

that change is a process

I can trip the wire on



is it hard enough I am trying

my mode is mood but you can't

*I bring home epoxy filler*

truncate an atmosphere

so hard and so sorry candle in an alcove

signing in from

whenever

always

waiting a few moments to start

argh

## Silence is okay

I am in a ground floor turret the shape of a mood  
held together by a dream that can't withstand my focus  
a nice idea to let in some temperature  
the sultriest playlist  
sonic flex repeating a while  
where are my ideals?  
all these stacked books represent such need  
my particular difficulty  
I can't admit  
I'm free not thwarted  
  
use it or lose it  
the libido is surfeit self-generating  
habits are force-fields  
what I mean feels concussive  
invective as in  
imagined

here's what puts me to sleep  
wriggling out of a bad feeling  
another gaffe  
it's fear leading the posse  
while a leaf unfurls

this is not an Ave

I've wandered down before

look out for me

biting my thumb

*asking the same of you*

Seen

a dewy cosmopolitan mastiff

the fresh sign of my thinking

optimistic

I don't

believe so

if I may include my analysis of pure pleasure

the body

jogging itself

the car braking between two

trunks of certain distance

I won't soften today

sowing lettuces

visualising my intentions

I'll have to drawl

if it's air not jugular

where is my ribbon

always some new deal

seeding...

no response for ages

all those boys?

in the wrong

missing an enzyme

between the cut and paste

that last part is an indictment

walking after daylight

traffic rising

like a natural feat

location sensation emotional

So

I demand to be remade

much warmer than I feel!

sharpening my insidious streak  
I meet the medium of the page  
written in the hand  
of someone like who speaks here

I look out the window  
agelessly  
at seeds propped up by their network  
of aquamarine plastics  
what I'm giving off  
is a feeling not a lecture

writing after that  
the manner in me subsides

I take my books to bed with me

I pause I catch a breath

if we are all animals

how lovely

we cry and want to participate

raising shells to our ears

the tide speaks pure verbiage

sentences that twist

one-too-many times



don't backflip now

I'm aware I'm not everybody's

sound

*a vulnerable Flake*

it's a strategy but it's no way

to live

I'm tired of carrying around

such an old-fashioned symptom

letting go enough  
to surprise myself  
past images float by  
a fruit platter still-life  
and sandalwood  
coil

silence is okay  
so is unshaded sentiment

here's some slides:

dislodged brick

wraparound sunglasses

a toddler's sock

personal slight

Tasmanian Oak (5 planks)

rubber band

wrapper

stick

this rummaging this sorting

is a live consciousness

that never rests

or stops

moving even after

pre-filled daze  
dressed in periwinkle  
we arse outside  
in concert  
where sound carries

as far  
as I understand it

I'm flawless in my gratitude  
removing this outer layer  
but not above  
reproach

how I languish

asking for advice

apropos

an excruciating detail

over a zero alcohol beverage

I'm so good at it

the exclusionary burn

it gives me a way to get involved

fumes

blood stains

orange glow

wringing out

front and centre

of what's possible

break the rules today!

I keep stumbling prose

anticipating a total detour

something colossal needs

striking

out

with our wit we can point name index

and leave

but where to

*the building called Oceanic out near Mascot*

unfortunately            I tear it in half

what novelties gleam  
sensate at the day-spa  
mineral water  
a startlingly popular  
leitmotiv  
we float and it continues  
the group wants their barbarity known  
agglomeration of idle matters  
the more major the more insipid  
disturbing the neighbours  
let's switch places  
the neighbours must be  
disturbed  
falling backwards  
into  
the trust exercise

following some line

collegial congrats

having gone

abstract

you

turn up against my thigh

crash the site

there will be a day left

at the other end

to intuit



## This is a loving artwork

remove the lens cap  
a sheet of glam light  
each hesitant cloud ...  
after looking up I recede  
pollen dust on the lip  
an unlucky presentiment  
vibration and hue  
I shrug through it  
the crude discipline of waiting  
if you keep turning the pages –  
there's more  
day disease  
wanting to marry  
(bring together)  
all who are with me  
here  
in the middle  
I was facing an unlikely swarm  
an enthusiast  
innocently sneezing

then another thought struck

*jumbo*

the remarks

of a greenish pedant

disorganised no questions

how casually you comment

my way out of doing things

way out in front?

we share a common machinery

I encourage you to theorise

I speak as if to the class

clap, organise!

is glamour

style with substance

is the bread a pull-a-part

is glamour retro

now the trouble is authorised

does my face in profile

remind you

of the view inside

a fold in a slip of paper

Oval – thrown by it

agender software

the hole left by a piercing

tracing my fingers

while you chatter  
and convince  
  
stay there don't move  
this topic comes with a disclaimer  
puffed by an incline  
I reach for it  
cheaply  
edging out  
a singing shrub yes  
I reach out  
if you can imagine  
a surface study  
featuring  
show-through  
sticking points and  
itemised rebuttals  
why all this electric wire  
I have to be honest  
the shrub is jotted in the margins  
in soft lead HB  
I've made a copy for myself  
I'm letting my hair grow long  
in the wind  
I'm wearing a pair of velvet

pants velour

and I'm hogging

I want to say

*chewing gum*

“apply within”

we're not all one thing

imagine

what we can let go

that's what I want too

that's what I think about

what are you working on

in a scrawled hand

shy reasoning

going over to introduce

humming a piece of song

fashionable air

walking the dog!

what I'd have said

laying out the thesis

in your place

who are you

are you from next week

off-screen today

offseason  
letting a fly out of the room  
signing in a new cohort  
chopping and changing  
for as long as it takes

thrown by your prose

I “roll up my sleeves”

status drift

have you ever been

explained like that

pinned

during a discourse

with an imagined official

no bracketing out

yet

this isn't the city I once knew

free what I think

you we

should be doing

I'm inland

keeping the windows open

if no one knows

if the weather holds

that's who you are

I'm theatrical  
thick with sweat  
grass stains  
chilli oil  
other novelties  
swiped from the shelf  
my mantra indeed  
drives me mad  
self-administered  
I know the protocols  
so my hands answer  
and I go along  
  
a through-line  
an assault  
the provisions misplaced  
falling o and o myself  
how they – what they say  
charm offensive  
that time in the afternoon  
charged the full amount  
no great msg or reveal  
and all those small bits  
of paper feedback

of course it's more than that  
sandy, solipsistic and unfair  
suffering from a whinge  
what else in this scene  
footsteps past the foliage  
my offhand joke is callous  
well go on, go, go on

released into the public domain  
all kinds of windswept data  
pulse with me

## Acknowledgements

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**Part two:**

Walking *Seven Walks*: solitaries, spirit-mediums and matrilineal influence in Lisa Robertson's poetics of soft architecture

## Show the mark / the sticker on the apple

This creative project first began with images: when I moved to Sydney in 2016, I started taking iPhone photographs around the streets where I lived. Precipitated by the change in my environment I felt another sense had opened to me. Everywhere I looked, details I'd previously failed to notice came into focus. I set about discovering my own style of seeing.

Walking, taking photos, writing down fragmentary lines: over weeks, then months and then years, I found a rhythm, a process.

Lisa Robertson's small volume *Occasional Work* (2003/2011) and her poetics of soft architecture entered my life early on in this process, at the recommendation of a friend. In her writing I recognised at once a spirit in *sympatico*.

What caught my eye? Material flourishes left in the wake of activity: paint swatches on drywall, knotted ropes, tarpaulins and brick-work, strewn leaves, obscure signage, fences and gates, the movements of the street reflected back in glass ...

And things, cast-offs and junk. Colourful piles of hard rubbish. Furniture left in the light of the sun. These were the traces of a neighbourhood rapidly gentrifying, but also signs of simple and ordinary change, the gradations of time.

\*

Over time the relationship between walking, image-making and poetry has formed its own symbiotic register. At the start I tried to bring poems and photography together, but these were failed experiments – instead, the photos have come to invisibly scaffold the work, providing a set of orientations, from which the poems emerge.

Lisa Robertson's soft architecture project began with images too, although not her own. Looking at the Parisian interiors captured by Eugène Atget in 1910 caused her to reflect on how the vagaries of habits and routines can be intuited by studying the details of interior surfaces. This led her to consider more broadly the architectural surfaces of the city of Vancouver where she became a poet. "We are furnished by our manners and habits", begins Robertson's essay on Atget. "We can't knowingly possess our own ways" (Robertson, 2011, p. 168).

The poems presented here are a chronological record of what has developed via this process of daily walks and image-making in the places where I live and travel. Earlier works reflect my reading of Charles Olson and related experiments in composition by field (1950). The middle section reflects an interest in poems-as-scores, in the conversant potential of poems to open new forms of public space. These poems offer open-ended possibilities for readers regarding how they might be read or spoken. The final poems return to a subjective first-person persona and a reconsideration of the lyric mode.

The first poem "Conglomerates" was drafted in 2017, the initial year of my doctorate, and the final poem, "This is a loving artwork", was written over the summer cusp of 2021–2022.

## **A note on style**

This exegesis has been referenced in accordance with APA 7<sup>th</sup> edition.

Robertson's poem *Seven Walks* was originally published and performed as a series of individual poems under her pseudonymous moniker, the Office for Soft Architecture. For clarity, throughout this text I refer to Robertson, rather than the Office, as the author of the text.

However, I do refer to the Office when citing other texts written under this pseudonym.

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## Introduction

“Objects and words also have hollow places in which a past sleeps, as in the everyday acts of walking, eating, going to bed, in which ancient revolutions slumber.”

— Michel de Certeau, “Walking the City” (1988, p. 108)

“Only slowly did we come to see our own strolling as a layered emergency: we recognized that we were the outmoded remainders of a class that produced its own mirage so expertly that its temporal distance went unnoticed.”

— Lisa Robertson, *Seven Walks* (2003/2011, pp. 96–7)

Today as I sit at my desk, I’ve returned from a brief walk to pick up a coffee from my local café. Outside my apartment an Illawarra flame tree has dropped new castings that pop brightly against the grey concrete, and its batlike seedpods hang with an auratic suggestiveness that transports me to a childhood where I clamber up the tree’s massive branches, cajoling my younger brother from on high to do the same. Back in this reality, in the stairwell opposite, a tired parent tries to soothe their newborn to sleep. A pigeon draws what benefits it can from a puddle of fresh water that has formed in a patch of artificial grass. At the café I stand outside with some of the other regulars, social distancing maintained. Other details, the sounds of the peak hour trains slowing and speeding up, the echoing bells of station signals and announcements, barely register. I have been living here on Wangal land in Ashfield, Sydney for over a year now and much of what initially figured in my noticing has become a kind of background texture, a rhythm I embody.

Today I walk alone and it is a relaxed, no-big-deal kind of strolling. I am healthy and I feel safe. Walking happens with physical and psychological ease. But on my mind are other kinds of walking I’ve participated in recently, the collective walking of recent Black Lives Matter protests, a walk that felt, in the era of Covid, like a way to connect meaningfully with a shared public consciousness during an otherwise solitary period. On my mind, too, is the period right before this, when “we” first started wearing masks: the bushfires of 2019. From November 2019 through the summer, the dun sky colour

settled and stayed, and the sinus ache of smoke passed through us, whether we were outside in it or not. Documenting this still-unfolding stretch of time, fellow Sydney walking poet Pam Brown has written:

in the pandemic  
we didn't take any photos  
of our infrequent  
endings spacings  
&  
get togethers  
we'll have to  
make up for it  
maybe (2020, p. 69)

What I continue to find so interesting about the simple act of going for a walk is its inherent sociality. A walk marks the threshold between the public and the private – in stepping out from our homes we accept that we will encounter the world, and we open ourselves to the unknown. The “maybe” here – which is the poem’s, and in fact the book’s concluding line – offers the idea that collectively, we have all walked somewhere new during this transformational time, and that earlier strategies of sociality are due for revision.

In this passage from Brown, where the words meander at a walker’s pace down the page, she also signals a second quality to walking, which is the desire to document – to take photos. This documentary impulse is something I share with Brown – and curiously I also found that when the pandemic took hold my desire to mark these traces of a walk in my usual way disappeared. I kept walking but the phone stayed in my pocket. When, after six months, I logged back into my Instagram, I found a document waiting of shared Covid-time, signs from this global local experience, posts of flowers and dogs and humorous numberplates. From necessity as our worlds shrunk in physical scope, more people have been out walking, and this has generated a curiosity towards the local, rejuvenating an interest in public spaces, parks and reserves. I see this during late afternoon sojourns at the Cooks River, the once-quiet pathway spiked at every turn with dogwalkers, joggers, groups of kids and teens on bikes.

Cooks River rounds the edge of my neighbourhood and is a major colonial fracture point. As the local community group Cooks River Alliance advises, while the river is

sometimes referred to as “Goolay’yari” meaning “pelican” this hasn’t been corroborated among Aboriginal people (Irish, 2017, 38). The river mouth opens into Botany Bay, where Captain Cook landed the first fleet. Since colonisation, the river has undergone constant “renovations”, where “new layers were added to the landscape, in a series of projects designed to realise certain environmental dreams” (Tyrrell, 2018, p. 9). The Covid influx of walkers along the river’s trails is a plot point in a cumulative narrative of settler-colonial occupation. For a much longer period, the river has been significant for numerous Eora clans, including Gadigal, Bidjigal and Kameygal clans (p. 22). To walk on Country is to walk as a guest, and requires an ethic of attention that foregrounds practises of listening and reciprocal care, about this place and its stories. It also requires, for white settlers, as I am, what Jeanine Leane describes as a “walk[ing] back over”: a continual reassessment of the historical and social record and (our, my) own participation in the regime of white denial. Addressing the chasm between acts of white paternalism and Aboriginal sovereignty, Leane writes:

they like building things –  
whitefellas! When they’ve built that span,  
they should walk back over it again,  
make sure its solid – not just tell us it’s so. (2018, p. 55)

In the quote above, what Leane suggests is that a re-evaluation of white-centred epistemologies is essential groundwork for decolonial and anticolonial practices. It is an appeal to white colonial settlers in particular to undertake honest reassessment and reflection about the structural principles that have ensured the ongoing colonial violence that still remains manifest. Leane writes against performative gestures, against wilful ignorance and against gaslighting. To take a walk back over is to actively challenge the damaging teleology of “progress” by engaging with how colonial power continues to be woven into the social and cultural structures that condition our lives.

Leane’s request informs the key questions asked by this doctoral project: What is the value of urban walking as a form of individual and collective action at this juncture in the twenty-first century? And: How does walking function as a literary method and metaphor, as an allegorical strategy for documenting real-world encounters, and as a corollary for thinking itself, and the thinking-through of human and more-than-human experiences? To draw this question out further: When we walk, what kinds of noticing takes place, what forms of embodiment and relational encounter do we observe and



experience? What is the legacy of literary walking as a bounded practice of physical movement and phenomenological process? As we walk – individually and collectively, physically and conceptually – what are we walking back over and what kinds of futures are we walking towards?

In my creative work, I offer a practice-led response to this set of questions based on an ongoing practice of everyday walking. By “everyday walking” I simply mean that the walking I undertake isn’t site or project-specific, rather, it is a walking that is shaped by and around the commitments of daily life, a practice that maps closely to the area within walking distance of my home, but which at times takes me further afield. In my bridging note I draw an arc between Lisa Robertson, the subject of my exegesis, and Charles Olson’s notion of “composition by field” (1950/2009). Part of his broader concept of “projective verse” (1950/2009), Olson used this term to expand poetry’s frame beyond the conventional traditions of rhythm or line. Olson’s “composition by field” moves away from the impetus of line-by-line recitation and instead considers the space of the page in its offering of possibilities for textual combinations, repetitions and improvisations. Harriet Tarlo, revisiting the field in her paper “Open Field: Reading Field as Place and Poetics”, writes that “a field then is worked language in a page or, latterly screen space” (2013, p. 14). This emphasis on *worked language* is important: a field poetics doesn’t imply a totally random placement of elements but rather an organised rhizomatic relationship where sounds and meanings can invite interpretations based on spatial rather than rhythmic or linear connotations. Developed across the late 1940s and into the 1950s, Olson’s ideas are significant in this contemporary moment of ecological crisis because a composition by field is nonhierarchical and deeply relational. The poems I have presented in my manuscript are experiments in working with elements of walking that I consider transformational: the enactment of a porous public/private threshold, the walking-subject’s sense of contingency, and the fact and fluidity of movement – the body and mind in a state of flow.

There has been a revival of urban walking as a documentary practice over the past twenty years, and my exegesis argues that this practice – or rather, this cluster of interrelated practices – holds significant ecological value, for two reasons. First, urban walking offers a metabolising function: in a broad sense, walking is an embodied practice that allows us to give shape and “process” to the jumble of our inner thoughts and emotions. It is also a practice that brings our environment into focus: it is a form of paying attention to natural and built systems, a process that leads to a generative

“upcycling” of ideas, and which is personally and socially restorative – in part because walking restores us to embodied animal perspectives, tempos and rhythms.

Second, walking is ecologically significant as a relational practice that brings into being correspondences with the past, via the material traces and atmospheres that the attentive walker might register, and with the non-human, the ecosystem of beings and materials with which “we” humans share the world. Walking connects us to other made and unmade things: we are brought into real communication with the hidden unconscious of the materials that structure our lives.

In drawing out these claims I focus on Canadian poet Lisa Robertson’s serial poem *Seven Walks*. Written across the turn of the millennium, and originally published under her pseudonymous moniker the Office for Soft Architecture (“the Office”), *Seven Walks* is a poem that includes documentary elements arising from a practice of walking the city of Vancouver. Loosely following the arc of a day, over seven poems a walker and their guide traverse various corners of the city’s “lost parts” (2011, p. 210), embarking on a poetic site study with the intention of mapping the ways in which the city was disappearing and transforming, during what Robertson describes as “a period of accelerated growth and increasingly globalizing economies” (2011, p. 231).

“Soft architecture” is a term invented by Robertson to characterise a poetics of walking where attention is paid to the contingent, temporary and constantly evolving features of built environments in an ongoing temporal flux: building, painting, decorating, decaying. This method of reading the city is responsive to what architectural critic Sylvia Lavin theorises as architecture’s “contemporary” turn in the wake of Modernism, the emergence of a style of architecture that “want[s] to be with time” (2014, p. 14). She writes:

The contemporary was a style that announced itself as such by foregrounding its temporary features. Fashion became the logic to follow rather than the menace to avoid, and the key characteristic of fashion is change – to be of the moment is also to be inherently fleeting. And so the contemporary is necessarily constructed through temporary features: its decorative patterns, its collectibles, its very stylishness. (2014, p. 14)

Where Modernist architecture sought to arrest or control time, Lavin argues that in the “temporary contemporary” (p. 12), time is embraced as a “dynamic/fluid state” which then allows the effects “inhibited” under Modernist principles to reveal themselves. Among these effects, Lavin lists “the treatment of lighting, of decoration, of objects, of

surface, of geometry, of beauty, of ‘delight’” (p. 14). It is these traditionally feminised qualities that Robertson also attends to via the soft architecture lens, which expressly matches a phenomenological attentiveness to the city’s decorative and ambient features with a “stylish” baroque literary aesthetic. The inclusion of “soft” in Lisa Robertson’s formulation issues a challenge to a masculinist aura associated with architectural histories.

An additional point of focus that soft architecture responds to is the social, world-building function of architecture. Architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez notes that “historically ... it was the architect’s job to make you feel at home in the city, to intensify your sense of purpose and belonging in public, through the institutions that framed daily life” (2016, p. 3). In reconsidering architecture’s function within the context of contemporary Vancouver, Robertson’s soft architecture lens critiques how public space is constructed and who can feel at home there, pursuing forms of recomposition that offer possibilities for urban spaces that can be ecologically balanced and expressive of feminist and more-than-human needs and desires.

Throughout this exegesis I use the term “soft architect” to denote the primary speaker within *Seven Walks* who engages with the city via this soft architecture lens. The soft architect is a walker who is particularly attentive to details of urban material life that have been overlooked or disregarded, material details and textures, particularly decorative features of urban environments. Soft architecture also recognises that a city isn’t simply an assemblage of hard structures – it is composed of bodies, of walkers – so soft architecture captures the movement of the walker themselves as part of this system-in-flux or textural surface. In an interview with Julie Carr for *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, Robertson writes:

At that time the way I conceptualized that style was through the gendering of surface, the call within Modernism from imagism on up basically for a reduction of surface effects in favour of structural traits. A minimalization. Even in writers who are working with a sense of orality or vernacular the work is quite stripped back or pared back – thinking of Creeley for example. So I wanted to face the opposite direction and go toward a florid excess, and to present a written text as a decorative object. (2013, 2)

Robertson writes in a richly baroque style where “bleached textiles quiver” (p. 204) and “drape of ineluctable cloths framed the specificity of gait” (p. 214). This is an aesthetic strategy invoked to challenge a “gendering of surface” that has favoured masculine figurations. In *Seven Walks* (as well as in the Office’s writings more broadly), soft

architecture also becomes a conceptual frame that restructures ideas of canon and literary value. As the scholar Sina Queyras observes, Robertson's aesthetic tactics:

conceive of the poem as a collaborative and inhabitable public space, one that reveals much about the structural integrity of language and rhetoric while reflecting the actual experience of navigating contemporary urban cultures and infrastructures. (2012, p. 365)

What Queyras is emphasising here is the two-fold application of soft architecture as a lens. Robertson recomposes ideas of public space, often with descriptions that have an uncanny or fabulist quality: "Now, on the strewn pavements, our urgency increased in proportion to the luxurious withdrawal of light from the greased sky. We ignored the crowds that we resembled. This was a journey of hurried, determined steps, of distant irregularities, of involuting grammars, of tumescence and slurried rain" (p. 213). At the same time, *Seven Walks* isn't purely imagined, its composition relies on the data of phenomenological experience. Soft architecture is a poetics grounded in the act of walking, and significantly, this walking is constituted as a collaborative, collective practice, signalled in the first instance by the presence of the guide, who accompanies the soft architect throughout the poem.

In considering and unpacking the contemporary usefulness of walking as a creative and ecologically engaged practice, I am indebted to three scholars in particular. I draw on Rebecca Solnit's survey volume *Wanderlust* (2000), which engages strongly with the political power of walking as an enduring act of personal and collective resistance. I also draw on Kerri Andrews's recent book *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (2020), particularly her observations about the twin practices of walking and writing as a power mechanism for women's survival and endurance in difficult circumstances (p. 21). Finally, I draw on the ideas of Michel de Certeau, whose influential sociolinguistic investigation into what he describes in "Walking the City" as the "long poem of walking" (1988, p. 101) foregrounds ideas of improvisatory movement. Certeau's account, which discusses walking as a spatial practice where a "swarming mass" of an "innumerable collection of singularities", presents a truer "way of being" than any mapped trace can allow for (p. 97). Like Certeau's rendering of the urban walker, the assays of the soft architect are both material and linguistic in emphasis. To Certeau's observation that there is a "rhetoric" of walking, where different modes of pedestrianism are as variable and characterful as "turns of phrase" (1998, p. 100) the soft architect might respond: "It was as if at this hour we became strands of attention that spoke. In this way we tethered our

separate mortalities to a single mutable surface” (p. 211). Where the city is often rendered as primarily a physical structure, Robertson and Certeau both explore the possibility that the city is spatially composed and brought into language via the transformative act of urban walking instead.

One of my main assertions in this exegesis is that Robertson’s literary invention of the soft architect is a significant, twenty-first century contribution to typologies of literary walkers. Of the many typologies one could name – from the broadly Romantic walking of Rousseau, commonly cast as a figurehead of the walker-as-philosopher and public intellectual (Solnit, 2000, p. 4), to the poetically inflected walking of the Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, to the emergence of the flâneur, to the nightwalking and street haunting of Modernist women, to the dérives of the Situationists, to the interdisciplinary challenge of gender and spatial theorists – the soft architect emerges as a distinctive contribution. It is significant to note that the inheritances of these earlier types are embodied and readable in the soft architect, coded into their figuring throughout the poem. At the turn of the millennium, Robertson is undertaking a formal reckoning with these literary traditions. Early in “First Walk”, the soft architect observes, “Ours was a *fin-de-siècle* hopefulness, which bloomed in tandem with its decay” (p. 192). This captures the paradoxical processes of revival and departure that give the poem its unique tension. The soft architect wears the tattered waistcoat of the Baudelairean dandy, is emboldened by the flagrant desire of the protagonists of Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes, and embodies space rhizomatically where rooms open ad infinitum into rooms. One significant way in which the soft architect marks a formal departure from these earlier typologies is in their dissolution of the gender binary – I use the “they/their” pronouns in reference to the soft architect because throughout the poem their gender is purposefully indeterminate: “Or let us say that we were the scribbled creatures who received the morning’s pronouns and applied them quixotically to our persons” (p. 193). The narration of the poem also moves back and forth between singular and plural first-person, shifting between individual and collective subject positions that, in this pluralism, resist the limited authority of the single lyric “I” subject.

Going further, I assert that the figure of the soft architect is informed and shaped by a secondary literary typology – the figure of the spirit-medium. A definition for a spirit-medium is one who corresponds with the dead and translates their messages to the living, in writing or in speech. Mediumship was an enormously popular cultural practice and public spectacle during the late-Victorian era, when women were gaining property

rights of their own and increased access to public space. Mediumship made its resurgence during the Modernist period, in no small part due to the impact of the First World War. In her book *Ghostwriting Modernism* (2002), Helen Sword emphasises the close correspondence of mediumship as a hugely popular cultural practice with the literary preoccupations of Modernist writers. In her Introduction, Sword notes:

the figure of the spirit-medium – with her multiple perspectives, fragmented discourse and simultaneous claims to authority and passivity – offered a fertile model for the kinds of cultural and linguistic subversions that many authors were seeking to accomplish in their own poetics. (x)

Robertson has drawn on aspects of the spirit-medium in the soft architect's own phantasmal inhabitation of space. As they walk, they periodically question their attachment and sense of solidity to their environment. They acknowledge they are “radically inseparable from the context [they] disturbed” (p. 196) but they also “pass through sheer facades” (p. 204) and “open an anonymous door, cross a rough threshold” (p. 206). In Robertson's updated rendering of the spirit-medium figure, the soft architect also seems to receive and transmit affects and memories as they encounter different segments of the city, rising as ghostly vestiges ensconced in *things* – materials – themselves: on entering a park the soft architect observes that “dandering here, a vast melancholy would alight upon us, gently, so as not to frighten, and the pigmented nuance of a renaissance shadow eased its inks and agitations beneath our skin” (p. 200).

Historically, it was common for a spirit-medium to perform her work with the assistance of a guide, through whom access to the spirit realm is achieved. So too in *Seven Walks*, the soft architect proceeds with a guide of their own, a mercurial figure who offers the soft architect an expanded means by which they can reflect on and understand the scenes they encounter. The guide signposts both the writers and wanderers who have come before, and is also an Orphic signalling of a foray into a past which is no longer, an underworld or afterlife. This richly suggestive set-up further comes to life in the quality of those material details espoused by the soft architect. In one passage, the affective qualities of the city visit upon the soft architect in the manner of a spirit:

In this landscape the affects took on an independence. It was we who belonged to them. They hovered above the surfaces, disguised as clouds or mists, awaiting the porousness of a passing ego. By aetherical fornications they entered us. (p. 200)

And in another scene, musing on the experience of diners in a restaurant, the soft architect and the guide present themselves as travellers from an alternate reality, writing:

We cannot discern whether we have entered a microcosm or a landscape or a lackadaisical simulation of time. Pleasure is a figured vacuum that does not recognize us as persons. We stand annulled in our ancient, ostentatious coats. (p. 207)

Whereas the spatial realm of the urban walker is symbolically recognised as the street, for the spirit-medium, the room is the dominant symbol. Mediums and their audiences would gather in the darkened room, and the heightened atmosphere of this intimate environment – achieved via theatrical and decorative aesthetics of lighting, curtains and props – prefigures the transportive spectacle that is the spirit-medium's performance.

In this exegesis I will demonstrate that soft architecture's melding of walking and spirit-mediumship extends the bounds by which literary walking is typically demarcated. The lens of soft architecture is equally concerned with the private space of the domestic interior as with the public space of the street: in its focus on the decorative, it could even be framed as a domestic interior turned outwards, a practice of viewing public space as domestic *exterior*. We will follow where the walker goes once the walk has finished, once they step inside, unpacking the significant intersections between this dynamic interplay – the *street* and the *room* – and its literary subtexts.

Across *Seven Walks*, the soft architect, leisured, phantasmal and gender-fluid, operates as a counter-canonical figure that undertakes ecological, racialised and gendered repair work. They connect the creative practices of women who have been structurally overlooked within the genres of literary walking, and mobilise literary effects, particularly via the production of images, in a utopian re-visioning of posthuman potentials. All this makes for a significant contribution to the tradition of literary walking, one that is attuned to twenty-first century questions of planetary survival. Can a healthful world be walked (back) into being?

In my first chapter I focus on Lisa Robertson's Romantic inheritances in order to demonstrate how the soft architect continues in a tradition that can be traced, perhaps unexpectedly, in the walking and writing of female Romantic-era writers Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth.

First, I examine the relationship between *Seven Walks* and Rousseau's influential *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, arguing that Robertson's poetic strategy serves to ironise Rousseau's exalted place in the canon by offering a more expansive concept of the walker as a "solitary" figure. Robertson's soft architect and guide respond to the notion of the 'solitary' with the collective offering of 'solitaries': they practice a feminist and collaborative mode of urban walking that allows processes of reflection, metabolisation and creative production to take place.

Next, I draw out the affinities between Robertson, Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth, namely the ways in which walking leads them into public encounters that generate prophetic social reflections in their writing. I explore the ways that walking itself forms a method of textual transmission, precipitating a live and responsive network of literary correspondence, and discuss similarities in how all three writers have represented environments – each woman mobilises the fragment in encoding a sense of the uncanny or unearthly within the ordinary.

Finally, I connect the nascent beginnings of fossil-fuelled industrialisation in the Romantic period with the late-industrial vantage point of Robertson writing at the cusp of the millennium. I argue that *Seven Walks*, in its combination of baroque aesthetics and the registration of late-industrial crises, represents what I'm calling the "climate *fin de siècle*". I draw out key scenes two scenes in the poem where the soft architect and guide reflect on their own position and complicity with the city's ongoing settler-colonial operations.

Chapter Two focuses on the soft architect's adoption of mediumistic tropes as a way of corresponding both with literary traditions and with the city of Vancouver's embedded histories and material residues. This builds on Tatiana Kontou's provocative claim that spiritualism "can be read as a kind of resistance to 'realist' narratives, as a form of opposition to teleological, selective and elitist histories" (2009, p. 2).

First, I demonstrate how mediumistic tropes are deployed within *Seven Walks*. I argue that *Seven Walks* engages with mediumistic discourse on two fronts, building on its history as a richly performative phenomenon, and evoking the tropes of "literary" mediumship in Robertson's engagement with the challenge of reproducing experience in language.



The second and third sections of Chapter Two consider two key mediumistic tropes, the guide and the room, as they pertain to *Seven Walks*.

I analyse the relationship between the soft architect and the guide, arguing that the presence of the guide allows for a temporal dissolve, where (as we have begun to see) the walker travels alongside early genealogies of (female) walkers. This contributes to the expanded sense of “solitary” walking, as outlined in my first chapter. I show that the guide has a multivalent function within the text, and showcase some of the figures the guide evokes. In particular I look at one transformative scene in which the guide’s shapeshifting opens the poem up to a new set of questions regarding the relationship between human and post-human worlds.

Finally, I examine how Robertson draws on the room as a metaphor for sites of potential, a utopian space that allows for reverie and creative freedom, as well as a device for structuring the act of thinking itself. Here, I detail the close relationship between Robertson’s room and Virginia Woolf’s “room of one’s own”, arguably the prevailing twentieth century metaphor for women’s creative autonomy. I argue that Robertson, via the soft architect, becomes what Kontou describes as a “phantasmal historian”, where “the medium ‘channels’ historical information but leaves it undistilled (a mixture of public and private, precise and ambiguous)” (p. 7). I put forward the case for the room as extending the street’s capacity for creative expansion and social expression, returning to my argument that the soft architect operates as a unique typology of feminist, collaborative, urban walker.

## **Part one: walking**

## Introduction

Everything is in constant flux on this earth. Nothing keeps the same unchanging shape, and our affections, being attached to something outside us, necessarily change and pass away as they do. Always out ahead of us, or lagging behind, they recall a past which is gone or anticipate a future which may never come into being; there is nothing solid there for the heart to attach itself to.

— Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*  
(1782/1979, p. 87)

Soft Architecture will reverse the wrongheaded story of structural deepness. That institution is all doors but no entrances. The work of the SA paradoxically recompiles the metaphysics of surface, performing a horizontal research which greets shreds of fibre, pigment flakes, the bleaching of light, proofs of lint, ink, spore, liquid and pixelation, the strange, frail, leaky cloths and sketchings and gestures which we are. The work of the SA, simultaneously strong and weak, makes new descriptions on the warp of former events.

— Lisa Robertson, “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto” (2003/2011, p. 21)

When I arrive at the park the sun is already setting – I’ve left it a bit late in the day. Bird chorus erupts from the heritage palms clustered at the park’s entrance as I walk through, and on the field, I notice a teen striker practising her goal kicks. At the other end of the oval a family throws a frisbee round, and a group of friends, whose faces seem familiar to me, are walking and talking around the perimeter. Come in the evenings and there are the dogs and their walkers who congregate at the park’s far side. Come a few hours earlier and there is the man with his antique kite, set up by the pavilion most days. Sometimes people improvise a picnic here, rolling out their jumpers on the slope at the park’s edge. But not today. Sydney’s second major lockdown has been announced this afternoon and as I observe the park’s inhabitants, I imagine a subdued atmosphere. I started visiting this park during the first lockdown, over a year ago, and have kept up the habit.

Built in 1912, over a century ago, Pratten Park was initially designed as a rugby league club but these days it seems to transform season to season depending on need. Across this year of frequent visits I've noticed the soccer goals going up then coming down, the cricket pitch prepared for the summer season and then left to fallow. A small playground is tucked next to the carpark and one edge skirts the requisite bowling club. Pratten Park however is ostensibly a functional recreational field – there are no barbeques or rose gardens on offer here. In this suburb, that role is played by the more officious Ashfield Park down by Parramatta Rd.

I am seduced by Pratten Park's strange dramaturgy. Rows of wooden bench seating, surrounding the oval on two sides, turn this place into a minor spectacle, especially at sunset when the park's clear surface showcases the endlessly various sky. There is also the oval's arresting verdure. It relieves my eyes to look across its green plane, too expansive to take in in a single glance, a welcome break from a life lived at medium density and the close focus of my small apartment. In the psychogeographic novel *Coach Fitz* by Sydney writer Tom Lee, the protagonist Tom speculates that his emotional equilibrium is set to the formative landscape conditions of his childhood in the central-west of the state – “relatively open, sparsely populated bush landscapes” (2018, p. 6–7). Lee's character observes: “in order to settle myself in a place I needed to regularly move through an open landscape of abundant and varied vegetation” (p. 7). Artificial and preternaturally flat as it is, I wonder if the oval asserts some similar magnetic power, because no matter what, the park's walkers are always drawn into the same counter-clockwise movement around its perimeter. Here there are two options: to skim along the outer edge of the cricket fence, through the seating banks, or else to unlatch the white gate and join in with the fray on the field itself. On the field serious runners lope past idlers, some walk backwards or barefoot, but no matter the day or time all who visit seem to fall into the same circular pattern of movement.

I start factoring in my visits as a way of marking the end of the working day, pausing to observe the park's activities from the bench or else lying back to cloud gaze on the slope. Rebecca Solnit offers a definition for the solitary walker as one who “is in the world, but apart from it, with the detachment of the traveller rather than the ties of the worker, the dweller, the member of the group” (2001, p. 8). Most often I come here on my own, and for a good while, Solnit's definition seems to fit. Yet the more I visit, the more recognisable the park's regular inhabitants become, and as the park's rhythms start

to register as legible rather than obscure, my sense of detachment dissolves. Suddenly I am involved with the contents of the scene.

One day I open the small gate, remove my shoes, and for the first time notice the cold current rising from the earth. I join my place walking the inner circuit.

Across seven distinctive walks, Lisa Robertson's soft architect and guide stroll through Vancouver cloaked in a nineteenth-century aesthetic out of which fragments of contemporary life occasionally flash recognisably and then dissolve. In their "rigged" Romantic vernacular, they observe: "We now called our garments shifts or shells or even slacks. As the lyric class [...] we pertained to all that was lapsed or enjambed" (p. 197). The style of their walking recalls Michel de Certeau, who writes of urban walkers that their paths form "intertwining, unrecognised poems in which each body is an element signed by many others" (1988, p. 93). The understanding that the walker is simply one "element" within a network of broader relations, and that this multiplicity is walked into a larger conversation with the city itself and its fellow inhabitants, is richly considered by the soft architect and guide as their walks unfold. Each of the walks in *Seven Walks* is a poem, attending to various contours of the city and of urban experience, from the "lapsed" shipyards of industry (p. 192), to the sociable hum of restaurants (p. 204), to the twilight "blue-green green-gold" (p. 225) shades of evening on the streets. The "manifold stor[ies]" (Certeau, 1998, p. 93) told by these walks, which also "lapse" across each other, roughly proceed across the arc of a day but collapse notions of linear time by frequent excursion into reverie. Always, in the end, they remain enjambed, each walk generating new ways forward that may or may not be taken up by the walk that follows. Such a schema sounds perhaps more obtuse than it is, for it doesn't differ so much from the way Certeau describes urban walking's "ordinary practitioner", one whose movements "elude legibility" (p. 93). When we walk with the knowledge in mind that the city leads us first, that we're less in control than we imagine, we can never anticipate the course our direction and feet might take. Plus there's all that goes on underneath, the life of the mind and where, in step, it turns.

In her invention of the soft architect, Robertson aims to address the crisis of urban space underway in Vancouver at the turn of the millennium, presenting a reading of the city that draws on documentary and imaginative processes, through which the city's material histories speak. The soft architect walks as a form of creative labour, where

writing, and particularly the task of description, is highlighted as a method of phenomenological self-expression that moves beyond the bounds of the self. In my second chapter I examine more fully the thresholds between self and world, self and other that are suggested here, drawing out the influence of spirit-mediumship as a parallel tradition central to the soft architect's persona. In this chapter however, I show that as a walking subject, the soft architect is not an ahistorical manifestation, but is scaffolded by a rich set of literary traditions. I also show that the soft architect models strategies for ecological repair, which, twenty years on from Robertson's poem, have become gravely urgent concerns in the context of planetary health. This chapter charts a journey across Romantic ecological entanglements, from the period of early industrialisation in a Western context, to the early twenty-first century's late-industrial quagmire.

First, I demonstrate the influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* on both the design of *Seven Walks* and the attitudinal spirit of the soft architect. Rousseau's solitary walker is presented as a figure at odds with society, where the ultimate prize of the solitary condition is centred on shoring up the walker's own self-image. In Robertson's revisiting of the Rousseauian model, she draws out certain features – including the idea of walking as an experimental practice, and the idea of walking as an interface or threshold between public and private worlds. But in Robertson's poem – and this is reflected by the use of the dual protagonists, the soft architect and guide – there is no single “solitary” but rather a coalition of “solitaries” (p. 224) oriented towards a collective reinvention of the city. I argue that Robertson expands Rousseau's enduring concept of the “solitary” walker into a model for literary walking that is explicitly feminist and relational, rather than a self-interested inward engagement.

Next, I argue that an alternative Romantic inheritance can be drawn out by examining the writing of two female Romantic walking subjects: Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth. I show that key characteristics of the soft architect's methodology are seeded in the works of these women. My focus on this legacy advances two objectives: it furthers Robertson's poetics of soft architecture by centring the creative production of overlooked female subjects, and it offers a window into Robertson's work that complements the growing body of Robertson scholarship that tends to foreground the influence of Modernist and Postmodernist discourse (see, for example, Collis (2002) and Joseph (2009)).

Finally, I examine how Romanticism's long reach resurfaces in the soft architect, as Robertson attends to what I will come to define as the “climate *fin de siècle*”. Here I argue

that in key scenes across *Seven Walks* the soft architect is positioned as a political actor engaged with Vancouver's ongoing settler-colonial struggle and the impacts of environmental damage.

## **Walking with Rousseau**

In publishing *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* in 1782, Rousseau inaugurated walking as its own literary mode in the form of the lyric essay. *Reveries* is a series of connected personal essays that self-consciously marries the structures and tropes of walking with a heightened account of Rousseau's own interior life. As Rebecca Solnit notes, *Reveries* both is and isn't about walking; each of the walks – appearing in chapters as “First Walk”, “Second Walk”, and so on – “resembles the sequence of thoughts or preoccupations one may entertain on a walk, though there is no evidence they are the fruit of specific walks” (2000, p. 6). Rousseau's innovation was less about providing a representative account of any particular walk and more about translating walking's rhythms, digressions, and absorbing objects into a literary genre on the page. His account of the solitary walker in particular, which prefigured the image of the (male) Romantic poet as aloof, melancholic and emotionally tortured, has led to his enduring citation among subsequent generations of writers and scholars interested in the twin practices of walking and creative production.

In the first part of this section, I examine the context and influence of the “solitary walker” principle, teasing out some of its key characteristics: the way the concept is gendered, and the way it responds to the emergent development of fossil-fuelled industrialisation, as well as its relationship to the intellectual climate of the period, especially to philosopher Edmund Burke's ideas of the sublime. I also identify, following Solnit, Rousseau's troubled position in relation to shifting ideas of the public and private.

In the second part I address the question of what remains compelling about Rousseau's ideas for Lisa Robertson at the turn of the twenty-first century. I argue that via the soft architect, Robertson attends to many of the ideas Rousseau expresses in *Reveries*, including the idea of walking as a form of experiment, and its relationship to notions of leisure and labour, while at the same time ironising his position as “severed” and alone in the world. Robertson's model for the solitary walker is relational rather than

individualistic in its coding. Across *Seven Walks*, the solitary attains a plural form as a coalition of walkers pursuing knowledge as a collective endeavour.

*Reveries of a Solitary Walker* begins vividly with an evocation of the self as painfully cast away from society. In the opening lines of “First Walk”, Rousseau writes:

So now I am alone in the world, with no brother, neighbour or friend, nor any company left me but my own. The most sociable and loving of men has with one accord been cast out by all the rest. With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruellest torture for my sensitive soul, and have violently broken all the threads that bound me to them. (p. 27)

The solitary walker depicted in *Reveries* is built in Rousseau’s own self-image. From the outset, the concept of the walker as one *set apart* from the social group or scene is presented as a point of friction, approached as a torment or bitter tonic rather than a preferred or chosen state of affairs. We are given a portrait of the artist as a *loner*, in scholar Barbara Taylor’s words (2017, p. 212). Rousseau’s first move is to orchestrate a defensive appeal to readerly sympathies for his suffering of what seems to be the worst of fates: complete isolation. The neutrality of Solnit’s notion of *apartness* is substituted for the heightened charge of *aloneness*.

The emotional pain Rousseau describes here is existentially acute, if not totally accurate. As is well-established, he had a decades-long partnership with Thérèse Levasseur, a seamstress, and, throughout the Walks, he is anything but short of company, often sharing in the intimate daily activities of whole households of friends and acquaintances. Rousseau’s relationship to the solitary, then, is textured and requires some teasing out. For one thing, while the posthumous success of *Reveries* promoted in particular the notion of the “solitary walker”, the idea of the solitary as a figure within society was already circulating prior to this time. Scholar Martina Domines Veliki argues that the solitary “was often a religious figure, ridiculed by the new philosophy of the Enlightenment” (p. 99) and that Rousseau challenges this image in *Reveries*. Rousseau’s conception of the solitary follows two main thrusts: he presents the idea of being solitary as a retreat into the natural world, where the anguishes of life can be repressed: “I scale rocks and mountains, or bury myself in valleys and woods, so as to hide as far as I can from the memory of men and the attacks of the wicked” (p. 116). He also presents the



solitary as an unwelcome condition within social life that he alternately rallies against and tries to make the best of, and this vacillation is the prevailing sentiment of the text.

Barbara Taylor also showcases the amplitude of the solitary figure prior to Rousseau. In her articulation, the term “solitary” rarely referred to “total aloneness” as such, but a repertoire of positions and pastimes, among them “country retirement, religious devotion, scholarship, leisure, introspection, daydreaming, a melancholy disposition” (2017, 219). Both men and women, she notes, published “richly sociable” poems during this period that “celebrated the delights of leisure and companionship in tranquil rural setting” (p. 219). The designation of the solitary was afforded to those with the appropriate status, circumscribed to a privileged few along the lines of gender, race and class. This was in a large part due to the larger cultural context from which notions of the solitary developed: the London of coal-fuelled industrialisation, its polluted air, crowded streets, and as William Blake famously describes in his “A Preface to Milton” (1810), its factories or “dark satanic mills” (2022, The Poetry Foundation). All this drove the Romantic turn towards nature, solitude and the imagination as modes of both retreat and reflection.

The concept of the solitary was also strongly gendered. As walkers, figures like Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth were bold outliers at a time when walking outside as a woman for pleasure was an alien concept – where to be seen walking alone was a sure sign of madness, or in the case of urban walking the remit of the sex worker. To walk alone by choice was a socially stigmatised mark against the reputation of a middle-class woman. Representations in popular literature from this time suggest and explore this gendered circumstance. Early on in Ann Radcliff’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794/2015), Emily, the novel’s protagonist, enjoys the relative freedom of being able to walk in nature, albeit under the socially sanctioned cover of her quietly radical father. But upon his death, rather than gaining further freedoms, her capacity to walk and live more broadly as an independent woman is quashed by her aunt, who views this desire as evidence of sexually deviant behaviour: “I do not approve of these solitary walks,” she states (2015, p. 108). “A young woman [...] is not to be trusted with her inclinations” (p. 109). In Jane Austen’s novels, the walking of her female protagonists is often aligned with exhilarated states of free expression and the capacity for healthful emotional release. But it is also taboo, perceived – usually slightly more generously than in Emily’s case – as a sign of troubling eccentricity. Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* (1812) conceives of walking as a precious moment in the day where she can experience some relief from

the strictures of social decorum: “Reflection [...] must be reserved for solitary hours [...] not a day went by without a solitary walk, in which she might indulge in all the delights of unpleasant reflections” (2020, Chapter 37). As Taylor notes, Elizabeth Bennett’s walking is interpreted as “conceited independence” from a scolding Mrs Bingley at Elizabeth’s return from one of her energising rambles (Taylor, 218). In these more permissive circles, where walking still remained ultimately circumscribed by protocols of family surveillance, walking was frowned upon; in the broader culture, the solitary woman remained very much a “deviant figure” (Taylor, p. 8).

As the centrality of walking to female protagonists in popular novels of this period suggests, while the status of the solitary walking rose and continued to rise for men, women were walking too – and for some women walking and writing were co-constitutive practices. As Kerri Andrews points out, Dorothy Wordsworth herself undertook walks in groups with the women in her extended family, Mary Wordsworth, her sister-in-law, and Mary’s sister Joanna Hutchinson. Notably all three wrote about these walks (2020, p. 18). Such accounts have suffered until recently under the self-perpetuating cycle of male privilege in literary-historical representation, largely hidden from view. Writers like Solnit and Andrews more recently have joined feminist scholars of the late-twentieth century who helped to bring the stories of such women into cultural circulation (see for example Gilbert & Gubar (1980)).

Although Rousseau, the “author of paradoxes” (Riley, 2001, p. 1) was invested in a version of the solitary as one set apart, *Reveries* is in fact a text cut through with notions of the social and sociability. This leads scholar Bernard Kuhn to observe that “so frequently regarded as the work in which Rousseau finally takes leave of his age to live in solitude, [*Reveries*] emerges as the work in which he is perhaps the most deeply engaged in contemplating the nature of the social” (p. 2). What Robertson brings into focus in her revisiting of Rousseau’s longstanding trope of the walker is exactly the solitary’s inherent sociality, its potential as a highly relational figure that is plural, embodied and engaged in placemaking.

Rousseau’s conjuring of the solitary is also interlaced with aesthetic discourse, especially Edmund Burke’s theory of the sublime, which contributed to the emergence of the solitary walker as a shorthand for the creative practices of the Romantic poets. In one of his most famous passages from *The Prelude* (1850), Wordsworth writes:

There was a darkness – call it solitude.  
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes  
Of hourly objects, images of trees,  
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,  
But huge and mighty forms that do not live  
Like living men moved slowly through my mind  
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams. (1995, p. 11)

As with Rousseau, solitude here is similarly conceived as a severed state, as “blank desertion”. This is a state which “troubles” form, raising for Wordsworth a perceptible difference between the familiar images of trees, sea, and sky and “huge” forms of an invention Wordsworth can’t place or fully describe. He has stumbled here upon what Edmund Burke, in his treatise *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/2015) formulates as the limits of the imagination, a creative power that can represent prior experiences and conjure strong feelings, but which is “incapable of producing any thing absolutely new; it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses” (2015, p. 17). The “forms that do not live” occupy the realm of the sublime, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”, which tests the capacity for aesthetic representation (2015, p. 33).

In Burke’s theory, the sublime sits alongside “the beautiful” as major aesthetic categories shaped by phenomenological experience. Burke argues that the sublime is motivated by terror, which yields to a feeling of astonishment. Such a state is possible, he argues, when the subject is confident of their relative safety or distance from the object of terror.

The beautiful, by contrast, is aligned with what Burke calls “positive pleasure” (p. 29) or feelings of “love” – he develops a taxonomy to determine which objects are indeed beautiful based on conditions of texture (smoothness preferred), size (smallness preferred), colour (clear and bright, but not glaring), and constitution (delicacy over strength) (p. 95). Burke’s distinctions are highly gendered: by contrast, the taxonomy of the sublime compels descriptions such as “rugged and negligent”, “dark and gloomy”, and “solid, even massive” (p. 100). In addition, where terror and the sublime orient the subject towards self-preservation, the beautiful orients the subject towards the social and its economies of domestic provision.

In *Reveries* there is a distinct lack of sublime objects as such – Rousseau’s observations, on the rare occasion he tends to the environment around him, tend more to manifestations of the beautiful. Yet his solitary condition is bound up with the force and intensity of the sublime experience, as he reckons repeatedly with the contents of his soul in the search for peace, a goal readers soon deduce will never be attained, given Rousseau’s frequent and contradictory flashes of passion.

Rousseau’s particular expression of solitude is experienced as profound alienation and spiritual rancour. “Everything external is henceforth foreign to me”, he writes. “I live here as in some strange planet on which I have fallen from the one I know” (p. 31). Rousseau was a celebrity at the time he wrote *Reveries* – and in fact it was to be his final book, incomplete at the time of his death. Seven of the walks were finalised; a further three were unfinished. He catalogues reflections that stem from his (both real and imagined) banishment from cultural and intellectual life after condemnation from the French and Swiss governments for his views on religious tolerance. His drive towards the solitary must be understood in this light – shy in the glare of public opinion, Rousseau understood the solitary to represent less a vision of tranquil solitude, and more a forced retreat into the private. The alienated Rousseau is nonetheless not so disaffected as to be indifferent about his legacy. He notes that “I hoped that a better generation, examining more closely both the judgement pronounced against me by the present generation and its conduct towards me, would find it easy to unravel the stratagems of those who control it and would at last see me as I really am” (p. 30). As scholar Jason Niedleman puts it, while Rousseau sought to abandon public life, he did not abandon his “quest to extend his being” (p. 8). In this quest Rousseau overlooks the company and labours of others – especially Thérèse Levasseur – who materially and emotionally extends his being.

In considering Rousseau’s radical legacy as his decision to “document [...] the circumstances of his musing” (p. 22), Solnit writes that “his most profoundly radical act was to revalue the personal and the private, for which walking, solitude, and wilderness provided favourable conditions” (p. 22). It is useful to consider how his intense subjectivity, in *Reveries* and across his oeuvre broadly, whipped up a public culture of letters – by retreating into daily walks he paradoxically underscores the generative sociality of the practice itself, amplifying its appeal. Walking frames his performance as an outcast, and this in turn is conditioned by his status as a public figure – as a celebrity – and his awareness that there will be an audience for his sentiments.

In *Reveries*, Rousseau is initially motivated by this desire to set the record straight and preserve an image of himself for future generations. Yet his mind wanders, less like Wordsworth's lonely cloud (2022, The Poetry Foundation), and more like a storm cloud precipitously lingering in one place before blowing elsewhere. He subsequently revises this position, favouring the pathos of extinguished hope over the drive for public acceptance. What he comes to settle on as his purpose for walking in *Reveries* is simply his own pleasure: "Let me give myself over entirely to the pleasure of conversing with my soul, since this is the only pleasure that men cannot take away from me" (p. 32). Reading into the contemplative poetics of William Wordsworth in drawing out the ecocritical potential of contemplation, ecocritical scholar Kate Rigby notes that contemplation has a loosening effect, freeing the subject from fixed social identities so they are free to "become otherwise" (p. 28). By documenting his daily walks, Rousseau writes, "I shall gain new knowledge of my nature and disposition from knowing what feelings and thoughts nourish my mind in this strange state" (p. 32). Yet the possibility of "becoming otherwise" proved elusive for Rousseau: instead, walking is figured as a contemplative model for the shoring up of his own private sentiments, a closed system focused on the preservation of his "original pleasure", memories and sensation otherwise unrecorded and lost (p. 32).

Rousseau's precis in his first walk also outlines something akin to what we might today call an *experimental walking practice*. This practice takes the form of daily walks, during which he gives "free rein" to his ideas and lets them "follow their natural course" (p. 35). Comparing this ritual to the scientific experiments of physicists monitoring the weather leads him to comment that "I shall take the barometer readings of my soul, and by doing this accurately and repeatedly I could perhaps obtain results as reliable as theirs" (p. 33). As we will see, this is an aspect of Rousseau that Robertson draws on favourably in *Seven Walks* when she implicitly aligns Rousseau as among a tradition of "natural philosophers" (p. 210), autodidacts and iconoclasts who sought to determine truths about the world as informed by their senses.

Rousseau is less interested in walking as a means of engagement with the world itself and more interested in its usefulness as a metaphor for internal rumination and self-scrutiny. So much so, he wishes to abandon his body completely, and fancies this as a precursor to his earthly departure: "My body is now no more than an obstacle and a hindrance to me, and I do all I can to sever my ties with it in advance" (p. 33). Once

again, Rousseau's solitude holds the quality of a knife-edge: violently cut off from his social world he stalks his wound.

In the early twenty-first century, abstract divisions between the public and private are dissolving at an accelerated pace. Technology has frayed earlier demarcations such as home/work while intensifying others, while the instant and outsized responsiveness of Twitter transcends the local adjudications of the town square or mob. Rousseau is framed by scholars as exemplary of the modern system of celebrity production, in large part due to the immense popularity of his autobiographical writing mode (Arnold, 2014, p. 1). His torment about being in the public eye can be seen to anticipate a rise of the individual in mass culture that would develop with increasing intensity. Kuhn observes that "the text, despite its emphasis on solitude, reaches out to a community of readers asking them to identify with the detailed forms of a consciousness in perpetual motion" (2006, p. 7). There is a performative component to Rousseau's endeavour, where even though he is taking on his own example as a philosophical enquiry into the potential usefulness of solitude, this is by no means a private undertaking – Rousseau is aware his text will circulate within the public sphere. In contextualising Rousseau's relationship to the public and private, Judith Butler, via Hannah Arendt, offers a useful key:

The public sphere in which the speech act qualifies as the paradigmatic political action is one that has already, in [Arendt's] view, been separated from the private sphere, the domain of women, slaves, children, and those too old or infirm to work. In a sense, all those populations are associated with the bodily form of existence. (2015, p. 45)

In this articulation, the relationship to public and private is mapped onto systems of power that instates a binary across gender, class and race lines. The struggle that Rousseau documents in *Reveries* can be viewed in this light as a perceived loss of power; cut off from the public, he can't imagine a place within the domain of the private – within the burgeoning logic of industrial-era patriarchy, his perceived ousting from his side of the binary can only be viewed as severance and cannot be reconciled. Butler's emphasis on a "private" as demarcated by those associated with "a bodily form of existence", manual labour or care work, is especially revealing in light of Rousseau's own bodily repudiation, outlined above. He struggles to countenance a private existence, but with the public sphere closed to him he has nowhere to retreat. So it is with some irony that he finds recourse to the metaphysical as the solution and not as the endpoint of the problem. This public/private trap is the unreconciled conflict that drives the text and

propels his innovations at the level of the imagination. As *Reveries* unfolds, walking becomes *leisure*, a pleasurable but unstable interface between the public and private, attuned to social and labour economies. This is visible in the famous scene in which Rousseau is knocked down by a great dane while out walking in the street. Rousseau recounts that “the flow of my reveries was suddenly interrupted [...] [by] a Great Dane rushing at full tilt towards me, followed by a carriage. It saw me too late to be able to check its speed or change its course” (1979, p. 38). Rousseau acquits himself of blame for the accident; he is *interrupted*. Arguably, leisure for Rousseau became a pastime requiring an obliviousness to the paths worn by other bodies, and a practice that can mistake the private for the personal.

### **Robertson and the solitary walker**

We have seen that since Rousseau’s time the idea of the solitary has also been indexed against notions of the public and private. The masculine walker modelled in *Reveries* is interested in the generative effects of walking for the ordering of his own consciousness. Walking in the outer world occasions an inner journeying and an enrichment of the self. The dialectic of the solitary walker in the Rousseauian model brings energy from the outside in, reliant on “nothing external to us, nothing apart from ourselves and our own existence”, where “as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God” (p. 53). The “solitary” becomes defined as a subject “severed”, to use one of Rousseau’s terms, from the world at large.

In turning to *Seven Walks*, Robertson’s millennial rejoinder to Rousseau’s longstanding trope, we will see an articulation of the solitary that is markedly different in its expressiveness and attachment to forms of life beyond the self. But we also see the trace notes of Rousseau’s formulation: the framing of walking as experimental practice, and close engagement with pleasure and the body, as well as with leisure and its contemporary shadow, the bystander.

In writing *Seven Walks* Robertson draws strongly on *Reveries* as a template, structuring her text in the same manner as Rousseau, as a series of walks (based numerically on his seven completed rambles) written in an essayistic prose style. This move is in keeping with her formal interest in reworking literary structures: earlier in her career she had

modelled three volumes of poetry on Virgilian classical forms (*Xeclogue* (1993), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997); and *The Weather* (2001)). Since the publication of *Occasional Work*, Robertson has continued to closely engage with Rousseau's ideas: she published a chapbook *Rousseau's Boat* in 2004, and a full-length collection, *R's Boat* in 2010. A new book, *Boat*, is due for publication in 2022, which will gather the two earlier works in a new volume along with new poems described by her publisher as "bringing fresh vehemence to Robertson's ongoing examination of the changing shape of feminism, the male-dominated philosophical tradition, the daily forms of discourse, and the possibilities of language itself" (Coach House, webpage). Robertson's long engagement with Rousseau is seeded in *Seven Walks*, and a key reason for Robertson's close engagement in his work is the contemporary endurance of the patriarchal logic underpinning Rousseauian structures and discourses.

As Stephen Collis observes in relation to Robertson's Virgilian texts:

The point Robertson seems to be making is that such "obsolete" constructions have not really changed; the garment (rhetoric) may have changed, but the feminized other is still shrouded. The female author facing the past can choose to ignore it (if that is possible) or to play with its complicated "artifice," "extend[ing] / [her] arms into complicity and lyric/protocol" (*Debbie*, "Earth Monies"), shifting attention to the constructed surface of the cloth/text/architecture. (2002, p. 9)

Robertson applies this strategy in *Seven Walks* using Rousseau as her model. As I demonstrate, while a shared Romantic spirit invigorates each text, the differences in how the "solitary walker" is depicted and described by each writer are striking. Where Rousseau's solitary walker reifies the myth of individual male genius, the two narrators of *Seven Walks*, the central speaker that I name the "soft architect" and the supporting figure of the guide, ironise this position, countering with a "lattice-work for civic thought" (p. 203), a vision of an outward-facing, curious and collectively minded consciousness. Sometimes they speak from a subjective "I" position; at other times they mobilise a capacious "we" that is able to generously and collectively hold a range of viewpoints, including even the reader themselves: "there we were, nudging the plentiful chimera of the foreground, maudlin and picturesque in our rosy waistcoats and matinal etiquettes – please? – of course – if only – my pleasure – dawdling into the abstract streets" (p. 193). In most cases across this exegesis, I refer to this speaking voice as the "soft architect and guide" as a means of underscoring the plural and collaborative engagement that these



figures are undertaking together. The multivalent figure of the guide can be understood in one key sense as a contemporary reworking of the companion or chaperone who accompanied walking women during the Romantic period. In Chapter Two I spend more time unpacking the guide's shapeshifting identity and function, which changes throughout the poem. As we will see, Robertson updates the idea of the solitary walker by showing that the enduring quality of *apartness* identified by Solnit can drive a kind of attentiveness and noticing that transcends the individual even as they are themselves enriched. Walking the streets of New York City, the writer Vivian Gornick describes this phenomenon as "this self I now have more of" (2020, p. 29), an inversion of what Taylor diagnoses as Rousseau's "narcissistic cocoon" (2017, p. 215).

Like *Reveries*, *Seven Walks* was also generated from an experimental walking practice, but one with a wholly different relationship to the dynamic of the public and private. They were published in her volume of essays *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* as part of a larger body of work. Robertson has noted that "each of these essays is an experiment in collaboration with the forms and concerns of my community" (p. 230). The poems of *Seven Walks* in particular were formed out of Robertson's own walking practice as well as through pedagogical experiments undertaken with students, and in what she describes as "the good company of my fellow walkers" (p. 230). (She names poets Eileen Myles, Dodie Bellamy and Lissa Wolsak as among several interlocutors.) It is unclear here whether she means the experience of walks literally undertaken in company. Nonetheless what Robertson signals is the conceptual significance of walking as a practice in conversation with the intimate poetical work of writers within her milieu, as well as broader cultural ideas. Solnit's survey study on walking was published in 2000, implicitly and explicitly tasking walking with not just a contemplative function but a mobilising, activist role in organising publics as they reframed their priorities and commitments in response to the millennial turn.

When we meet the soft architect and the guide in "First Walk", they emerge from their urban setting with steaming coffee cups in hand: "My guide raised the Styrofoam coffee cup as if it were the most translucent of foliate porcelains" (p. 190). This denotes a quality typical to Robertson's descriptive method, where a casual gesture of the everyday – getting a coffee – is depicted in a heightened baroque lexicon to a droll and alluring effect that flirts with but resists notions of sincerity. Where Rousseau's purpose, as we've seen, was ruminative self-examination, the soft architects have an alternative goal: "we agreed to prepare the document of morning", working together to perform their

“researches” (p. 191). Like Rousseau they are interested in marking daily time, but their attention is turned outward, towards the material details and atmospheres that they encounter through walking. They are interested in documenting the culture at large rather than raking the coals of their inner nature. Where Rousseau sought out the knowledge of introspection, the soft architect and guide seek knowledge of a different order: they wish to actively contribute as artists and intellectuals to the storying of their city. They write, “Our scopisic researches aligned us, we liked to think, with the great tradition of the natural philosophers” (p. 202). Here is a scene described in this “First Walk”:

Clangour of the rising grates of shops, rattles of keys, the gathering movements in the clearer warming air, rhythmic drawl of trucks of stuff, skinny boys in aprons dragging bins of fruits, shut markets now unpleating themselves so that the fragile spaciousness leafed out into commodities. (p. 183)

In this sonically charged scene, an almost Dickensian sentiment is parlayed into an abstract conceptualism, riffing on the increasingly speculative model of finance. The word “unpleating” gives this description a sense of hyperinflated unease. The once-quotidian preparations of a market seem to lack solidity: the fruit and vegetables are theoretically present but remain hidden in their bins. There is a parallel narrative running through this passage about the growing abstractions of financial economies. This scene can be read spatially as an example of what Doreen Massey identifies as the “multiplicity of social relations” (p. 5): the complex weave of literary-historical signposting, combined with a punning theory of the market, orients the soft architects to what seems at the surface live and mobile social space, full of sounds, movement and activity, but which doesn’t convey the potential of what is being promised: the fruit, the customers, the community.

This passage above follows a similar rhythm to the previous one, where the surface description of the scene gives way to a theoretically coded reverie: in Robertson’s Vancouver, the streets are as real as they are conceptual. This, for the soft architect, is enlivening, and it is worth drawing out here the relationship between this plural, porous identity formation and the “pleasure” of these subjects. Geoffrey Hlibchuk, riffing on Barthes, notes that within *Seven Walks* “lies the textual jouissance where one can revel in the erotic bliss brought about by a proliferation of signification (“in the text of pleasure” writes Barthes, “everything is plural”) (2011, p. 232).

Building on the earlier sense of a city as phantasmal, a simulacrum of an older model of itself, abstraction is also referenced more explicitly here. The question lingers as to whether it is the city and the streets themselves that are outdated or whether the version of solitary walking they undertake – as leisured past-time, as research strategy – itself is due for renewal. They appear “nudging” as tricksters in an older scene.

In part, Robertson walks Vancouver to map a collective community and time period, in her own idiosyncratic style: “The she-theorist knew something more crimson than place. We felt suddenly and simultaneously that we should hire a theorist to underwrite our fantasies, the thought communicating by the mutually nervous adjustments of our carefully tousled coiffs” (p. 202). This passage speaks to the North American intellectual environment of the late-twentieth century, encompassing the rise of queer theory and feminist rejoinders to spatial theory. The trope of the (male) poet as “legislator” (Shelley, 1840/2009) is replaced here with the female, queer, she-theorist “sauntering purposefully [...] her heavy leather satchel swinging like an oiled clock” (p. 202). Massey describes the local as being constituted by the global as well as the historical – that is, as an unfixed and contested marker with the “outside as part of inside” (p. 5), a figuring that chimes with the soft architects’ own orientation within the text: “the fact remains that we are foreigners on the inside,” opined my guide; “but there is no outside” (p. 222).

Many of the walks of *Seven Walks* are also direct responses to local commissions: “Third Walk”, in which the soft architects retreat inside for an elaborate dinner, was first performed at a fine dining fundraising event for a local Vancouver gallery. “Might we go to dinner and have a fight upon a little sofa? My guide said yes” (p. 204). In the preface for their series on walking for *Jacket2*, Louis Bury and Corey Frost identify a link between walking as a writing method, and conversation as a similar strategy of peripatetic discovery. Conceptualising their chosen texts as in a conversational relation “seemed a way of getting off the highway and wandering through the residential areas around the airport” (2011), a move that invites pleasurable and inventive forms of wayfinding where new discoveries or strategies of being might be uncovered, together. In its production and presentation, *Seven Walks* is also a conversant text, threaded through with speech and other communicative acts: encounters of intimate, affectionate exchange. In this scene from “Second Walk”, “dandering” (p. 200) at a park “populated by gazes” (p. 201), the speakers experience a reverie:

Now we found an advantageous perch on a marble curb next to the splashing of a minor fountain. We unfastened our satchel; we intended to nibble and observe and refract. We ate two champagne peaches. A gamine laced in disciplined Amazonian glitter strode past. Her trigonometric gaze persuaded us entirely. Clearly she was not mortal. We chose a fig and discussed how we approved of arborists – here the specifically Marxian arborist emerged from among branchwork like an errant connotation. With our pearly pocket-knife we cut into an unctuous cheese and again the clouds tightened and the lilies curled and the little child ran cringing from us to its mother. (p. 201)

The scene is in dialogue with the concept of the male gaze, offering a refutation that foregrounds the pleasures of consumption and material and aesthetic excess. In their idleness the narrators are free to pursue conversational turns that support creative and intellectual theorising, supported by a kind of “branchwork”. Further, there is some suggestion of a Marxist-feminist paradise or afterlife. As with earlier scenes, the edges of the reverie begin to destabilise, fluxing and quivering, the tightening clouds and frightened child signalling the anachronism at work in images of florid excess. Imagining themselves into the role of the dandy or idle male solitary is a thought experiment with real limits, “cut” from the social fabric through which they’re woven. At the same time, the passage expresses a resistance to normative feminine modes: futurity and generational inheritance remains in the scene, but the child runs away cringing.

This scene also brings into focus ideas of leisure and labour, a point of friction that the soft architect and guide encounter frequently. Throughout the poem the soft architect and guide negotiate different facets of leisure. In this scene, the vision of leisure they try on is aligned with the classical Aristotelian notion of leisure as good in itself, linked with contemplation by virtue of being a form of non-instrumental time, in which subjects pursue moral questions and/or their own happiness (Shippen, 2014, p. 30). As scholar Nichole Shippen draws out, under the conditions of capitalism, Aristotle’s vision of leisure has been lost to “an instrumental, disciplined, and commodified understanding of leisure and free time defined primarily in relation to production (work) and consumption (consumerism)” (2014, pp. 5–6). As the soft architect and guide “nibble and observe and refract”, consumption isn’t the whole story but rather “trigonometric”, set in proportion with observation, in which they can take their bearings and register the broader context of where they are, and refraction, which might be understood as the energy returned from acts of conscious presence such as this. A sense of what they’re

receiving from their experience is being released back into the world, rather than absorbed or harvested.

Back at the restaurant, however, it is the vision of leisure as a proxy of production and consumption that comes into focus as the narrators question their place as leisured subjects within the city:

the life-sized streets, the life-sized society, the justice of human warmth as you enter evening. The rain looks expensive beneath sodium lights. Or perhaps it's the word "justice" that has an expensive sheen. We went to restaurants. (p. 204)

In this passage the narrators test the representational capacity of surface aesthetics (the streets are life-sized but are they *real*) as well as the representational capacity of language itself, bringing into the scene the word "justice" (the word, not the concept) as a vacant placeholder that turns the reader's attention to the limits of leisure in attending to deeper social questions, the social fabric of the city itself which is largely absent from the text.

As Eva Darias-Beautell offers, "[Robertson's] investigations of Vancouver reject the projection of idealized images and insist, instead, on the materiality of every aspect of urban production" (2016, p. 61). It is an aesthetic informed by Robertson's vivid engagement with the city and her close ties in particular with the experimental creative and social practices of other women. Among these influences, Robertson often cites Elspeth Pratt, a sculptor who produces objects from cheap materials; the Quebecois feminist poet Erin Moure, whose writing considers the orientations of female subjectivity across languages; and gallerist and curator Kate Rimmer, who often commissioned her writing and collaborated with her on small projects. As Robertson emphasises in a 2005 interview, "it seems important to name people, particularly now as 'The Vancouver School' institutionalizes itself around a coterie of male conceptual artists and their students" (Fierle-Hedrick, 2006, p. 49). These examples indicate the multidimensionality of Robertson's surface strategy, its spatial multiplicity formed from conversant wanderings within and through real and conceptual spaces.

In "Third Walk", any lingering desire for the easy erotics of the unctuous cheese quickly fades: "As a ruthlessly bland texture crosses my palate I lightly slap my guide's impassive face. Gastronomy restores nothing; neither would the wet street beyond the translucent glass" (p. 204). Further into the meal, the speaker observes:

From the brackish echo of public sensation my guide's neutral face absorbs a cruel and varnished sneer. Our silence is a style of temporary hatred, nourished by each little loosened oyster we swallow, each acidic little kiss, each sweet-meat, each odour of saturation, each quirky, saline broth. (p. 206)

“Silence” here is born out of empty consumption and cannot “restore”: the rituals of dining still the potential for the spontaneous conversant exchanges of the public life of the street (of which here remains only the faintest “brackish echo”). As in many scenes across *Seven Walks*, pleasant affective conditions suddenly take a brisk swerve as the soft architect and guide, in a moment of reflective pause, confront the privilege of their position. The strong negative affect of “hatred” here is tempered by Robertson’s sumptuous language. The effect isn’t self-flagellating, but still it’s an ironic twist that reveals the extent to which the pleasures of consumption and its more deplorable aspects, its exploitative origins and numbing, opiate qualities, are co-constitutive. So, the oyster’s “acidic little kiss” nourishes hatred – it bites back. Shippen suggests that

leisure activities that actively ask something of participants in terms of developing critical reflection, thought or action are necessary for making choice more meaningful and expanding the realm of choices beyond some of the more passive activities that are offered in direct service to the profit motive. (2014, p. 36)

In foregrounding their role not simply as experiential beings, but as writers, tasked with the role of writing down their impressions, the soft architect and guide substantiate Shippen’s idea. In email correspondence with Steve McCaffrey in 2000, when the writing of *Seven Walks* was mid-way, Robertson reflects that “more and more poetry is becoming for me the urgent description of complicity and delusional space [...] therefore the need for the urgent and incommensurate hopes of accomplices” (McCaffery, p. 38). In the restaurant scene, the soft architect and guide wrestle with their participation in the gentrification of the city, and the ways architectural space and the pleasure of leisure soothes and lulls consumers into states of comfort and forgetting.

Leisure develops in close conversation with the notion of creative labour. The scholars Hesmondhalgh and Baker define creative labour as “those jobs, centred on the activity of symbol-making, which are to be found in large numbers in the cultural industries” (2011, p. 9). The soft architect and guide’s efforts to record and describe their impressions of the city are not explicitly framed in the context of a broader system of cultural production. But given they are narrating the material transformations inflected by

financial systems upon the production of a city, their labours can't be separated from a broader logic of cultural production. Robertson herself is clear about her own authorship as a form of creative labour, noting in the Scaffold podcast that “most of the writing I do, I already know there's readers because I've been commissioned [...] and my way of respecting that readership is to try to delight them” (Scaffold, 31:45). The restaurant scene holds open the thought that pleasurable language – and pleasurable experiences – can be an effective carrier for radical critique.

Another suggestion that Robertson seems to be making is that labour can in itself be pleasurable, if and when chosen by autonomous subjects. Across *Seven Walks*, this is part of the ethical charge of the soft architect's function, as they uncover the regimes of power that structure the city and the hidden histories of production and labour that code their way, the “dialects of civic hatred that percolated among the offices and assemblies and dispatches” (p. 194). Hatred again bursts through the text in this example, and why not – the earlier example pointed to something more like the soft architect and guide's own feelings of guilt or complicity, but here Robertson points to strains of public life, class resentments, racism and violence, that are always part of the makeup of the city. Robertson suggests here, via the soft architect, that the promise of leisure as a site where creative or intellectual drives might be satisfied could be impossible to achieve, and in any case is somewhat illusory, for submitting to leisure enacts a refusal to see the conditions that support it: the labours of others. In this chapter's final section, I will investigate the ethical function of walking as a political instrument that can unlock and communicate the hidden and submerged histories of the city, its unofficial narratives.

### **Walking towards utopia**

The Romantic inheritance upon which Robertson draws is changeable and enduring at the same time, a “ritual of crisis and form” (p. 210), signalling the new ruins of industrialisation. In the “Fourth Walk” which constitutes the poem's middle, its “heart” (p. 210), the soft architect and guide observe:

ruined factories rising into fog; their lapsed symmetries nearly gothic. The abandoned undulations of the vast mercantile storage facilities, the avenues of these – sooty, Roman, blunt – and down below, the clapboard family houses with little triangular porticoes, lesser

temples in the scheme but as degraded. And in these rough and farcical mirrors, the struggle to recognise a city. (p. 210)

Vancouver, the “city of glass” (Coupland, 2000) is built near a major fault-line: some scientists predict a one-in-three chance of a Cascadia earthquake catastrophically impacting the city and nearby Vancouver Island within the next fifty years (Dangerfield, 2018; Schulz, 2015). Describing this scene of late industrial atrophy, the soft architect channels both the past and the imagined future. They catalogue a strata of impressions that highlights the forms of life over which a city has remit, the lives of workers and the lives of families, lifecycles of birth and ageing and the arcs of plenitude and receding fortune. The conjuring of Rome here demonstrates Robertson’s desire to conceptualise Vancouver with a kind of largesse; Sophie Thomas observes how Rome has become a “virtual” city (2011, p. 68), “mediated by a plethora of cultural representations” (p. 68) and “hovering in disconcerting and at times imaginary ways between the past and the present” (p. 68). The mirrors described above, “rough and farcical” (p. 210) serve a mediating purpose, reflecting the material surfaces of Vancouver’s high-rise condominiums and signalling self-reflection: in a state of array and empty of a public, the scene issues the question of how the millennial city should be composed – the reality no longer matching the metaphorical City of lively social and economic plenitude, if indeed it ever did. Susan Stewart writes of ruins that “a taste for appreciating ruins at a remove has its roots in Lucretius’s thoughts on the tinge of gratification whenever a viewer’s horror is mixed with a sense of ‘self-security’”. (2019, p. 5).

Here Stewart draws out a longer lineage for the notion of the sublime as described by Burke. Lucretius, too, as a “natural philosopher” is another male figure to whom Robertson returns in her writing. In her 2005 poem “First Spontaneous Horizontal Restaurant”, she writes: “Lucretius says the soul, the speaking, thinking force that flows / through a girl / Is part of life not less than hand, foot or eyes are vital” (Belladonna, p. 6). Robertson resituates the sublime in the materiality of the city itself, inverting the postmodern trope of the “articulate” city-as-language by reviving in its forms the embodied affects of sublime experience. Stephen Collis reads this strategy of embodied meaning-making as part of a larger interplay of modern and postmodern impulses within Robertson’s writing. He argues that Robertson draws on architectural tropes as a means of structuring meaning in the absence of traditional forms: rhyme and meter, sonnet and ballad (2002, p. 2), and goes on to theorise that Robertson “offers isolated persistences of the past within poetry’s urban sprawl: out of Modernism’s “movement’ comes the



relative stillness of [her] postmodern gardens” (p. 3). This tension between moments of passage and stillness is looked at in more detail in this chapter’s final section. The challenge issued however by the soft architect and guide’s encounter with this urban wasteland, in which they “struggle to recognise”, draws us back to the idea of walking as a collective strategy of resistance to ideological forces that would rather atomise a “public” and erode collective memory. Solnit writes:

Walking is about being outside, in public space, and public space is also being abandoned and eroded in older cities, eclipsed by technologies and services that don’t require leaving home, and shadowed by fear in many places (and strange places are always more frightening than known ones, so the less one wanders the city the more alarming it seems, while the fewer the wanderers the more lonely and dangerous it really becomes). (2000, p. 11)

In a 2020 interview with Scaffold podcast, Robertson reflects on the work she produced as the Office for Soft Architecture, including *Seven Walks*. Here she explicitly links the concept of the “outside” as a utopian figuration. She reflects:

Most utopian discourse is looking at a kind of mythologised position of outside as being liberatory in some sense and very often that outside is located in a historical past [...] for my perspective, which is [...] a white, female, feminist perspective [...] and sort of lower middle-class [...] the past never was a very rich locus for working people, for women, for people who are not racialized as white, the past very often [...] is oppressive, if not actively violent. [...] So for me I wasn’t interested in mythologising a past instant of plenitude because for me this is a mythological construction that benefits a really specific status quo. (Scaffold, 18:12)

The walking practices modelled by the soft architect and guide are inflected with resistance to the notion of the “outside” as a mythologised position. They attend to the ruinous and decaying as a means of scaffolding an alternative locus of meaning for marginal groups, especially women. In attempting to “notice the economies that could not appear in money” (p. 210), Robertson brings into play utopia’s classical origins. Fredrick Jameson in his reading of Plato and Aristotle determines that these classical models of utopia propose “that the root of all evil is to be found in gold or money, and that it is greed (as a psychological evil) which needs to be somehow repressed by properly utopian laws and arrangements in order to arrive at some better and more humane form of life” (2004, p. 36).

In the middle section of his walks Rousseau also puts forward an image of utopia, describing in the “Fifth Walk” his time spent on the Swiss island of Saint-Pierre. The scene he describes has the quality of heavenly, bucolic abundance:

small as it is, the island is so varied in soil and situation that it contains places suitable for crops of every kind. It includes fields, vineyards, woods, orchards, and rich pastures shaded by coppices and surrounded by shrubs of every variety, all of which are kept watered by the shores of the lake. (1979, 82)

This description recalls Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), in which utopia is formulated as an island. Utopia, the island, is constituted with natural features including a wide, calm harbour, “like a huge lake” that works to the “general advantage of the natives” (More, 2012, p. 97). Supported by the island’s natural plenitude, and the company of Thérèse Levasseur and the island’s stewards, Rousseau writes “everything I did during my stay there was in fact no more than the delectable and necessary pastime of a man who has dedicated himself to idleness” (1979, 82). This image of delectable idleness is presented most strongly in his descriptions of taking a boat out onto the lake during the long summer evenings:

Turning my eyes skyward, I let myself float and drift wherever the water took me, often for several hours on end, plunged in a host of vague and delightful reveries, which though they had no distinct or permanent subject, were still in my eyes infinitely to be preferred to all that I had found most sweet in the so-called pleasures of life. (1979, 85)

This floating and drifting idleness becomes a literary precursor to the solitary walker as transmuted into an urban locale. Within the images of this scene, which couple idleness and reverie, resonates the idea of *détournement* or drifting through the streets, which became the organising principle of the Situationists 200 years later. For the Situationists, the drifting principle of the *dérive* is a move that actively resists the claims of leisure and labour, privileging the pleasures of embodying present experience and spontaneous desires. As Guy Debord writes in *Theory of the Dérive*:

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. (1956, 2)

The *dérive* names a practice beyond the nexus of both leisure and work, which, it is suggested here, are tightly networked together. Instead, it presents a method of movement that takes its signals from the environment itself. Lead by the water, in his boat, Rousseau enters a series of reveries of undistilled pleasure as unshaped as the view of the sky. The dropping of one set of relations creates space for the formation of another. The soft architect and the guide experience this same state in “Fourth Walk”, after encountering the ruins where, as they walk and observe, they fall into a feeling of commune with their environment, their “separate mortalities” “tethered [...] to a single mutable surface”, and where “it was as if at that hour we became strands of attention that spoke” (p. 211). This dissolve of the ego is a meditative and attentive moment of receptive encounter where the soft architect and guide accept their positions as parts of the whole, decentering their own experience. This response is markedly different to Rousseau’s in the above passage, where once more the self-interest of his attention is notable. It also recalls in opposition Rousseau’s sentiments at the outset of *Reveries*, where his enemies have “violently broken all the threads” connecting him with public life (1979, p. 29). In his figuration of utopia, he centres himself, an amplification underscored by his environment; on a boat, on a lake, on an island: the intense magnification of the individual at a remove from social worlds inside a nature described by its support functions and not on its own terms.

A later description in Rousseau’s *Reveries* shores up from a different slant the utopian dream that is Rousseau’s summer on the island. It is a description of warm and sociable company: “After supper [...] we would sit down to rest in the summer-house, and laugh and talk, and sing some old song which was fully the equal of all our modern frills and fancies, and then we would go off to bed satisfied with our day and only wishing for the next day to be the same” (1979, p. 87). “Wishing for the next day to be the same”: surely such a wish must be the supreme definition of utopia.

Keeping in mind the potential to envisage an anti-capitalist, feminist utopia, Robertson returns to Romantic discourse as an imaginative tool:

Some of this struggle was named “the heart.” But we wanted the heart to mean something other than this interminable roman metronome of failed eros and placation, something more like the surging modifications of the inventive sky. So we attempted to notice the economies that could not appear in money: vast aluminium light sliding over the sea-like lake; the stacks of disposable portable buildings labelled Women and Men; decayed orchards

gone oblique between parking lots and the complex grainy scent that pervaded the street. (p. 211)

For the soft architect and guide, the ambition for the world they are trying to walk into being is of planetary scale, both more ancient than can be historicised and in a sense more obscure, of immeasurable and uncontainable size and quality: “beyond the roman metronome”. This metronome image also conveys the desire to break from binarised modes of relating and world-building, beyond the “disposable” binary of “women and men” where, it is suggested, eros can surge; where unconstrained female desire can form new economies.

If, as Taylor suggests, solitude for Rousseau was an “achieved condition” (p. 212), a higher order state, in *Seven Walks* the notion of the solitary becomes a mobile connective strategy at the level of the street. Solitaries are cells rather than free radicals. It is in the final, “Seventh Walk” that the case for the soft architects as solitaries explicitly surfaces. This walk sums up the data of their earlier experiments in discursivity:

Utopia was what punctuated the hum of disparities. Utopia: a searing, futuristic retinal trope that oddly offered an intelligibility to the present. We saw we could lift it and use it like a lens. We observed guys in their cities, guys in their cities and their deaths and their little deaths and mostly what we coveted was their sartorial reserve, so marvellously useful for our purpose. (p. 222)

Here Robertson expands the intimate “we” that, until this point, had come to signal in shorthand the combined consciousnesses of the narrator and guide: “we began to imagine that we were several, even many” (p. 223). If the soft architects have come to inhabit the figure of Rousseau, here the suggestion is that their intervention must be more than a roleplay or role reversal. The subjectivities of the non-male solitary need to be emphasised in their great diversity and abundance: “we never performed the pirouette of our privation” (p. 223).

The claim is made that “as many we could more easily be solitary” (p. 224), and the final section of the walk goes on to detail the way that each solitary pursues their own idiosyncratic surface study, contributing to the shared stratum of collective experience. One studies the colours of cars, another the greyhound in a painting by Giovanni Boldini; one applies language strategies, “repeat[ing] certain words: diamond, tree, vegetable” (p. 225), another performative strategies, “the one who would scream through gauze to illustrate the concept of ‘violet’” (p. 225).

To be solitary, in Robertson's articulation here, is to be self-possessed of one's own vision, contributing to the wellspring of a larger group or community. This aligns with coalitionist designs of feminist collectivism: in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler argues that social justice issues "depend more strongly on the links between people than on any notion of individualism" (2015, p. 66) and that activist groups better serve their aims by aligning with those also experiencing forms of precarity. Butler also notes that the interventions groups can make by speaking or writing for a public should foreground the possibilities of pausing and reflecting together, rather than "leading straightaway to a path of action" (p. 123). The notion of "solitaries" in fact puns on the notion of solidarities, a link that occurred to me after considering Andrea Brady's observation that "Robertson seeks out feminised solidarities across history as she re-centres the female body in a critique of subjectivity and speculative reason" (2021, p. 350). As will be developed further in the following section, Robertson ironises Rousseau's influence by inhabiting his form with the ideas and bodies of women whose perspectives have been historically side-lined. The ideas and perspectives of women whose creativity and labour served to invisibly scaffold the canon for generations due either or both to their care work or unrecognised expressions, suddenly reveal themselves in the text as the solitaries set to work attending to the city's various utopian contours. Rousseau's overarching influence is finally dispersed. He becomes simply a one in the many. Or, to put a different slant on it, Robertson's solitaries, in their numerousness and vitality, pierce the daydream of Rousseau dozing in his boat.

### **Walking with Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth**

As we have seen, Robertson formally engages with Rousseau both in the way *Seven Walks* is structured and in its thematic engagements with leisure, utopia and the concept of the solitary walker. In this section, I widen the lens beyond Rousseau to consider a matrilineal crosscurrent that influences the strategies of Robertson's soft architect. I argue for the inclusion of Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Wollstonecraft as cells within Robertson's collective of solitaries, due to the significant feminist innovations present in their writing and walking.

Tracing the practices of these two women in their respective texts *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* (“Journals”) (2008), and *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (“Letters”) (1796), I highlight three significant forms of inheritance with which the soft architect also engages. First, I show that walking makes possible new forms of public encounter. Next, I show that practices of walking are central to the circulation of texts, a critical means by which books and ideas reached writers and readers. Finally, I argue walking enables its practitioners to produce radical images that represent their environment in striking and ecologically significant ways.

Read together, these three writers serve to demonstrate the enmeshment of walking and writing across time: there is a symbiosis at work in how walking accounts for, conditions and constructs our experience in the world, a shared economy of walking. Relatedly, my reading of these women writers showcases how walking functions as a vehicle for social relations that brings past histories to bear on present forms of world-making, and future speculations.

By the time Wollstonecraft wrote *Letters*, she was an influential public figure, a noted polemicist and both critic and “disciple” of Rousseau (Taylor, 2017, 216). Her anxiety regarding her visibility in the public eye is signalled by the note of apology that opens the text: “In writing these desultory letters, I found I could not avoid being continually the first person – ‘the little hero of each tale’” (2009, p. 3). This first-person method, as she sees it, can’t really be avoided, as it allows for her “remarks and reflections [to] flow unrestrained” (p. 3). Nonetheless she is sensitive to the possibility that her own identity might get in the way of her message and intention, which she states as “giving a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through” (p. 3).

Wollstonecraft’s journey was, as Margot Beard puts it, “unusual” (2004, p. 74). As I discussed earlier, Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth were both tremendous outliers in a society where public life was for men only, and solitary walking and travel were deeply stigmatised. The reason for Wollstonecraft’s four-month tour of Scandinavia was to attend to some business matters on behalf of her lover, Gilbert Imlay. Even more remarkably given the times, Wollstonecraft travelled for most of this period with a maid and her infant daughter, Fanny (named after her best friend Fanny Blood, who had died in childbirth). She was otherwise unaccompanied on the trip (Pramaggiore, 2019, p. 837). Beard observes how Wollstonecraft managed to turn the trip to her financial advantage:

within three months of her return to London, *Letters* was published (Beard, 2004, p. 74). Yet this volume would end up being her final published work – she herself died in childbirth a year after its publication.

Wollstonecraft maximised opportunity for travel in order to develop her critique of social life that she had been formulating in previous writing. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) was published as a response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and takes issue with Burke's authoritarian, capitalistic leanings: "I beseech you to ask your own heart, when you call yourself a friend of liberty, whether it would not be more consistent to style yourself the champion of property, the adorer of the golden image which power has set up?" (Wollstonecraft, 1999, p. 11). Her follow-up, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), argues for the formal education of women for the greater benefit of society overall. Both texts responded to the upheavals of the French Revolution and sought to bring the lively intellectual debates of the period into British consciousness, while pioneering female and feminist inclusions in those debates.

*Letters* combines political and social observations on Scandinavian civic life, capturing telling details about the rise of early capitalism: "what is speculation", she writes, "but a species of gambling, I might have said fraud, in which address [manner of style] generally gains the prize?" (2008, p. 80). Interspersed are observations conversant with her life's great theme, the emancipation of women: "The wages are low, which is particularly unjust, because the price of clothes is much higher than provisions [...] A young woman, a wet nurse [...] receives only twelve dollars a year, and pays ten for the nursing of her own child" (p. 54). Wherever she travels, she walks, and this walking is represented as a means of stabilising her emotional life, or as she puts it, "the extreme affection of my nature" (p. 50), as well as an act of encounter with the natural environment, where she intuits, in pine and fir groves "some consciousness of existence", and experiences "a calm enjoyment of the pleasure they diffused" (p. 57). Throughout the book, it is via walking that she unlocks regular postulations on the aesthetics of the sublime and the relationship of nature to culture, ideas of urgent interest among the Romantic poets: Coleridge was a fan of *Letters* (Taylor, 2017, p. 30).

Throughout *Letters* Wollstonecraft also makes a number of personal reflections about her own experience, and about what it means for her to be a solitary. She was

taken by Rousseau's concept and there is no doubt he is close in her thought as she reflects on the solitary as a mode of experience in passages such as this:

Wandering there alone, I found the solitude desirable; my mind was stored with ideas, which this new scene associated with astonishing rapidity. But I shuddered at the thought of receiving existence, and remaining here, in the solitude of ignorance, till forced to leave a world of which I had seen so little. (2008, p. 69)

In this passage the word solitude is used in two different ways. First it is conjured in the sense of contemplative reflection, as a state that precipitates the imaginative flow of ideas. But for Wollstonecraft this is one side of the coin. She then registers solitude's other face, the trouble of being disconnected or isolated – she traces the limits of what can be achieved alone, especially in witnessing the changed conditions of industrialisation, which, in the townships and villages of Scandinavia, throws into relief the large-scale impacts on what she had been witnessing locally in Britain. Walking and writing for Wollstonecraft are communicative methods that marry these two forms of experience. Walking gives her access to the world: its pleasures and its politics, and it shapes and orders her thinking. In writing she reproduces these rhythms and gives them back to the world.

Inhabiting different pockets of the public and private spheres, and conscious of the threshold between them, Dorothy Wordsworth's diaries give radical form to her private consciousness. She published a scant six poems in her lifetime "under her brother's auspices" (Wallace, 1998, p. 101), and as far as can be known, did not harbour an ambition to be a writer in the public sphere. This makes her diaries even more compelling as a protean example of female consciousness in language. She devised her own style, for her small coterie of friends and family, and, significantly, for her own pleasure: Kerri Andrews observes that at this point in time, walking had become less unusual and had "worn paths to famous views, historic sights and mysterious documents" (2020, p. 51). It was gaining traction as a public, leisured, pastime. Of course, her friends and family were by no means obscure figures: they included her brother, William Wordsworth and a network of influential poets and writers, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Her Grasmere journals were composed over a period of several years from 1800 to 1803, precipitated at first by William's short absence as a means of keeping a record for him. They capture the intimate rhythms of daily, and ordinary, everyday life, in a clipped



and lively shorthand: “A very fine warm day – had no fire. Read Macbeth in the morning – sate under the trees after dinner” (2008, p. 5). Quotidian descriptions are spiked with striking imagery and observations (“a beautiful evening the crescent moon hanging above the helm crag” (2008, p. 5), and the rhythms of her prose move like sparkling water in a stream – as is fitting her method, walking seems to condition the form her writing takes, and indeed walks and walking are her main preoccupation in the entries themselves. Her diaries are as discursive and digressive as her rambles.

Like Robertson and Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth also innovates at the level of her authorship. Within her diaries, pronouns often shift, distort or collapse, her consciousness sometimes absorbing the identity of William into its fold as well as herself. On this point, Kerri Andrews writes that

while it is Dorothy holding the pen, the memories and sensations she records are a peculiar mix of her own independent reflections and her brother’s, as well as fragments from their individual shared experiences. Here “we” slips into “I” and back into “we” making it difficult to disentangle which feelings or memories belong to which individual. (2020, p. 54)

This is form-fitting writing that represents the particular kinds of walking in which Dorothy takes part. While she often did walk alone, and was able to do so as an unmarried woman living with considerable freedoms given the time, walking was a social endeavour: frequently she walked with her brother and among friends, and over the years their walks accreted details, mapping memories and experiences, so that to take a particular turn was to revisit very particular conversations, images or presences and stitch them back into the present. Walking in this sense was an affirming practice, an enriched form of relating to the environment that grew in depth over time, bringing her into conversation with other people, even if they were not physically there.

Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth’s texts demonstrate the idea that walking is a form of transport that can move women between forms of public and private life. Through walking, Wollstonecraft makes prophetic insights about the burgeoning developments of capitalism. She writes: “To commerce every thing must give way, profit and profit are the only speculations [...] I have seldom entered a shady walk without being soon obliged to make room for the rope-makers” (2009, p. 128). Here “thing” sits as its own lingual unit, and this “thing” “unpleats” (to riff on Robertson) into a commodity. So too, it seems for Wollstonecraft herself, squeezed into a form not of her choosing as she “makes room”

for the rope-makers. Her critique of capitalism is embodied, and walking provides the means of her revelatory insight.

It is also a means of escaping her confines. Perceiving herself as “destined to wander alone”, she nonetheless writes: “I dreaded the solitariness of my apartment” (2009, p. 73). This is a complex expression of autonomy: Wollstonecraft was moving through a period of significant personal anguish with the dissolve of her relationship with Gilbert Imlay (xii), so here she suggests that being alone in her apartment is to be uncomfortably present with her more difficult strains of feeling. Walking, however, offers solitude of a more metabolising nature. When she walks, she is part of the texture of life, able to reshape or “renovate” her sense of self: “I need scarcely inform you, after telling you of my walks, that my constitution has been renovated here; and that I have recovered my activity, even whilst attaining a little *embonpoint* [plumpness]” (2009, p. 50). It is her “full heart”, her desire recast, and her attraction to the world’s objects that keeps her on the walking trail.

For Dorothy Wordsworth walking provides the stealth means by which she is able to write in the first place, the lightning rod of her creative impulse, and in the form of the diary, a socially appropriate genre of expression. Where Wollstonecraft derived an income for her writing and had attained status as a public intellectual, Wollstonecraft’s writing was in close conversation with William in the main, where “William composed to Dorothy’s ear”, and in turn “Dorothy wrote in journals open to William’s eye” (Wallace, 1998, p. 101). Many of her striking observations were taken down with her brother in mind as a reader, and later written up by William in his poems. One of his most famous scenes, of the daffodils in “I wandered lonely as a cloud” (1807) comes to him in this manner (Wordsworth, 2008, xvi). Dorothy Wordsworth’s example, then, demonstrates an engagement with the public via more indirect means but one with significant implications. As well as rescripting the bounds of William Wordsworth’s own authorship, Dorothy Wordsworth’s inventions in language and image came to circulate far beyond the bounds of her by-and-large domestic, and private, experiences of life.

Walking also aided the circulation of texts. In Dorothy Wordsworth’s universe, correspondences, the receipt and circulation of texts, letters, newspapers, are as much part of the landscape as anything else: “in the Evening”, she writes, “we walked for letters” (2008, p. 11). In fact, not only is writing produced as responsive feedback to walking, but walking *produces* a public: for these writers it is a connective chain that allows

for the quite literal circulation of texts and ideas, whether it be as a means of transporting letters, or as the occasion for conversation and debate, as frequently occurred within the “large and fluid” Wordsworth household (Wallace, 1997, p. 112), which at various points constituted Wordsworth’s wife Mary, Mary’s two sisters Sara and Joanna Hutchinson, and, for a brief time, neighbours Coleridge and his wife, Sarah.

Throughout her diary entries Dorothy Wordsworth also provides an insightful demarcation of how her and William’s texts were produced, writing at one point, “Wm went into the wood & altered his poems” (p. 15). Altering here, with its implications of alterity, reveals the poetic artifice at work, a poetics self-consciously removed from the activities and concerns of daily life. Dorothy Wordsworth’s domestic situation was unusual compared with other women of her class, as she had the goodwill of her brother in spending her time much more freely, compared with women whose time was circumscribed by husbands, fathers and children. Andrews notes that “Dorothy has the means (time, money, leisure) to articulate the meaningfulness of [...] experience, while the anonymous woman, burdened by her domestic functions, remains silent” (p. 60). Nonetheless, this neat summation performs the gendered splitting of labour into an outside (the woods) and an inside (the house). Dorothy Wordsworth is in the house, her writing “fitted into corners” (Wordsworth, 2008, xviii) of her days, while William “composes” in the woods. The difference is stark, portraying women’s labour as contained to a private interior and men’s adaptations of exterior, public space as an extension of the private.

The pragmatic productivity of the woman writer under such conditions has a form of life within *Seven Walks* too, as the soft architects are charged with producing a “document of morning” from their research. Not a manuscript, or white paper or catalogue, but a document, a text-object with a series of open and neutral signifiers. The document is an open form of potential for becoming myriad other kinds of future texts. And a document can be worked over together: many pens and eyes can traverse its landscape. The writer of a document doesn’t presuppose its purpose or usefulness; at the same time they offer up their findings in good faith. Where the forms of Wollstonecraft’s and Wordsworth’s texts, the letter and the diary entry, are feminised genres of expression, Robertson’s updated form, the document, is free of such designations, in fitting with her gender fluid strategy.

With walking as their method, Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth and Robertson represent their environments in striking and ecologically significant ways. Throughout *Letters*, Wollstonecraft's catchphrase is the emphatic "Adieu!", with which she signs off many of her letters. At times she also uses it as a transitional statement within the letters themselves, as a way of clearing the air between thoughts before moving on to the next idea. These Adieus function like "things" on a walk, as forks in the road or perhaps more fittingly as swerves in direction. They also affectionately signal the reader as a companion and intimate witness. Midstream in a passage about the character of the Danish, she writes:

Adieu! I must trip up the rocks. The rain is over. Let me catch pleasure on the wing – I may be melancholy to-morrow. (2009, p. 98)

And elsewhere, after a passage reflecting on the challenges of Danish wives "worn down by tyranny to servile submission" (p. 98), she writes:

But adieu to moralizing. I have been writing these last sheets at an inn in Elsinour, where I am waiting for horses; and as they are not yet ready, I will give you an account of my journey from Gothenburg... (p. 98)

A walk precipitates spontaneities of observation, direction and thought, and this is the literary affect carried in her deployment of "Adieu". In the first example, "Adieu!" jump-cuts to an expression of her desire to walk, a form of "pleasure on the wing" (p. 98), a form of available, accessible pleasure that allows her to explore but also test her own limits. The double potential of "trip" here speaks to the sharpness of her vision as an intellectual. She must experience the world to know it honestly; she must be certain the rocks are real and not painted (Robertson, 2011, p. 221). In the second example, "adieu" moves the reader along at a lower gear but still shifts the trajectory and terrain of her writing.

The rush of energy in each "Adieu!" with which Wollstonecraft signs off speaks to walking's generative principle. Always at the point of closure, the affective and atmospheric charge arrives like an endorphin release: she releases the reader; or they arrive home. Robertson frequently achieves this same effect in *Seven Walks*; nowhere more so than in the very final lines of "Seventh Walk", where the soft architects arrive at dusk "to their tree":

Our chests burst hugely upwards to alight in the branches, instrumental and lovely, normal and new. It was time for the lyric fallen back into teeming branches or against the solid trunk gasping. (p. 226)

The lyric is a legacy, a history, a poem, a song that arrives unpleating across time to buoy and reassure them like a warm wind. They are held by the tree: the “solid trunk gasping” is an ecologically inflected image of a support system, not patriarchal but organic, the gasp a form of breath-work or photosynthesis. Ryan Fitzpatrick observes that the poems of *Seven Walks* “are anti-lyric poems written, not only without an “I”, but without a conventional author” (2018, p. 175), yet the image presented here offers a more dynamic possibility: what if the visionary potential of the lyric form can be reclaimed?

Wollstonecraft and Robertson in her wake finish their texts with bursts of affective potential whereas in *Journals*, Dorothy Wordsworth signals her ecological enmeshment by her beginnings: “A very cold evening / A very fine evening / A very fine sunset / A rainy morning”. These openers underscore a sense of daily time and its rhythms in place. And across her entries, the weather is a constant presence, a major actor that affects her and William’s choices and behaviours. This is emphasised in her use of clipped sentences that weave the weather with other daily matters: “I sowed kidney-beans & spinnach, a cold evening” (2008, p. 11).

As well as their engagements with environment at the level of the sentence, Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth demonstrate a dynamic practice of image-creation in their writing. Dorothy Wordsworth uncovers fragmentary and uncanny phenomena in her walking, which she documents vividly. Here are two examples:

there is a curious yellow reflection in the water as of cornfields – there was no light in the clouds from which it appeared to come. (2008, p. 18)

we walked backwards & forwards until all distant objects except the white shape of the waterfall, & lines of the mountains were gone. (p. 47)

These uncanny and elliptical tricks of the light are of a different order to William Wordsworth’s earlier taxonomy offered at the start of this chapter, neither tree nor sea nor green field (Wordsworth, 1850/1995, p. 11). And they are not commodities but objects in themselves, valued for the pleasure of their brevity and illuminated once more on the page in language. In these examples, Wordsworth prefigures the optics of the photographic image and brings us back to Robertson, whose own text is cut through with at times unnerving perspectival shifts: “A mannered curve that has become a

complexity meanders into radiating slits” (p. 206). She too speculates on the porousness of ideas held within nature, and the centrality of the (walking) body as a reading device:

Imagine a very beautiful photograph whose emulsion is lifting and peeling from the paper. There is no longer a negative. To preserve it you must absorb this artefact through your skin, as if it were an antique cosmetic comprised of colloidal silver. You must absorb its insecurity [...] (p. 220)

Wollstonecraft, meanwhile, offers this in one of her sign-offs: “Goodnight! A crescent hangs out in the vault before, which woos me to stray abroad” (2009, p. 16). Here it is the spectacle of the ecological fragment that lends her the generative capacity to stay mobile – it restores her and keeps her going. Further, she is motivated to enlarge the terms of her engagement beyond the self. Elsewhere she writes that “I walked on, still delighted with the rude bounties of the scene; for the sublime often gave place imperceptibly to the beautiful, dilating the emotions which were painfully concentrated” (p. 10). Susan Stewart notes that the difference between the sublime and the beautiful is “where the former is individual and painful [...] the second is social and pleasant” (1984, p. 75). We can read in this scene then the generosity of Wollstonecraft’s activities as a walker and a writer, bracketing her personal suffering in favour of a reward that is “social” and which can be passed on in a form of reproducible pleasure, the conversant technology of the letter.

The epigraphs to this chapter offer a call and response between Rousseau and Robertson, two writers drawn to practices of documenting present experience. Rousseau’s attachment to life is framed in a language of suffering – whether looking to the past or to the future, the miasma of the self, which he names the “heart”, might be assuaged for a time but never settled. Impermanence is a source of terror, generating his enlivening and enduring descriptive strategy which has retained authority for centuries under the guise of the solitary walker, shoring up the idea of the individual as a divided self, at odds with the world.

Robertson takes up the task of rescripting this inheritance. She challenges the “institution” of patriarchal autonomy by applying a refreshing gaze to overlooked details. The “researches” of the soft architects are attuned to the compelling idiosyncrasies and telling data of surface. The soft architects work together as “strands of attention”, as “cells”, and, like Rousseau, as “solitaries” too. But here in this revised telling solitaries

work as *solidarities*, as kin, a collaborative network that apprehends utopia not as a destination or future but as a “retinal trope”, an attitude, an applied effort of seeing and relating, a form of movement, an imaging and an imagining. A walk.

### **Walking the climate *fin de siècle***

The descriptions of Vancouver offered up by Robertson’s soft architect conjure a “late civic afternoon” (p. 222), a “grey discourse called human” (p. 222) marked by atrophy and decay, “the smell of spoiled fruit lingering in moist air” (p. 212). As they lucidly state, “Given inevitable excess, irreversible loss and unreserved expenditure, how were we to choose and lift the components of intelligibility from among the mute and patient junk?” (p. 223). “Lift” functions flexibly; where the soft architect and guide enact an ironic “lifting” of patriarchal forms and protocols, so too their strategy is one of recycling or reuse: facing “irreversible loss”, they ask whether there are possible futures that can be salvaged from what has been discarded or overlooked.

In this concluding section I argue that in *Seven Walks* Robertson represents what I am defining as the “climate *fin de siècle*”, a millennial turning point where, once more, principles of decline and rebirth were coming to a head. Scholar Charles Rearick, writing for the *Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire*, notes that the phrase began showing up in French writing in 1886, “reflecting an emergent interest in the nineteenth century’s closing years (particularly its final decade) as a distinct historical period” (2006, p. 814). Rearick glosses the term as meaning “either up-to-date and fashionable or decadent and worn-out” (2006, p. 814). He also notes that the term underwent resurgence and new application at the turn of the twenty-first century “as the approach of the new century and new millennium stirred anticipation and anxiety” (2006, p. 814). This term is, as Linda H. Peterson notes, “Janus-faced” (2012, ix), referencing both notions of modernity and states of decline.

The *fin de siècle* shift from the nineteenth into the twentieth century is recognised as a period in which innovations in science and discourses of rationality clashed with the rise of spiritualism and a celebration of artifice, “the contemplation of both sumptuousness and demise” (Härmänmaa & Nissen p. 1). In the climate *fin de siècle* of the twenty-first century millennial turn, these tensions rose to the surface again under a different guise,

with the epochal shift of climate science; the emergence of Anthropocene discourse, and the registration of the long-term consequences of settler-colonialism and late-industrial growth.

The first paragraph of “First Walk” reads in full:

(Once again the plaque on the wall had been smashed. We attempted to recall the subject of our official commemoration, but whatever we said about it, we said about ourselves. This way the day would proceed with its humiliating diligence, towards the stiffening silver of cold evening, when the dissolute hours had gathered into a recalcitrant knot and we could no longer stroll in the fantasy that our waistcoats were embroidered with roses, when we would feel the sensation of unaccountability like a phantom limb. But it is unhelpful to read a day backwards.) (p. 190)

The poem begins as a tight “recalcitrant knot” that foregrounds its two central entanglements. The first of these is the question of Vancouver’s submerged, erased and forgotten histories and the soft architect and guide’s own participation or complicity within a greater system of cultural amnesia. The second is the critique of urban walking in its inherited masculine form as a means of resistance and reckoning. The image of the embroidered waistcoat brings to mind Baudelaire, and by association the figure of the flâneur more broadly. This inheritance isn’t entirely repudiated – after all, the soft architect and guide are still wearing the uniform. Yet they assert their intention to read and listen to the stories of the city and to “feel” its effects, including the “sensation unaccountability”, as part of their redesigned walking strategy.

The passage itself lacks any contextual markers. Major details – where they are, the subject of commemoration, even the time period – are missing. The reader, like the soft architect, needs to work to fill in the gaps. Writing as the Office, Robertson’s essay “Site Report: New Brighton Park” (p. 33), which also appears in the *Occasional Work* volume offers some useful context. This essay considers the strata of conflicting histories at the city’s founding site that was, prior to colonisation, a “Musqueam clam beach called Khamamoot” (p. 39). Now a waterfront park flanked by a suburban swimming pool and the vestiges of light industry, the Office relays the inscription on the park’s “commemorative bronze plaque”:

“Here Vancouver began. All was forest towering to the skies. British Royal Engineers surveyed it into lots, 1863, and named the area Hastings Townsite [...] Everything began at Hastings. The first post office, customs, road, bridge, hotel, stable, telegraph, dock, ferry,



playing field, museum, CPR Office. It was the most fashionable watering place in British Columbia” (p. 39).

As Unangax scholar Eve Tuck and K. Wanye Yang examine, the particular violences of settler colonialism are unrelenting in their influence. As they argue, the term “decolonisation” specifically refers to property and land rights, and not to other forms of colonialism such as labour (2012, p. 5). They write that “the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation” (p. 5). In response to the fictive assertions of Robertson’s plaque (among them the notion that the land was a “forest [...] where everything began” and not a place, a home, a community and an industry in its own right as sovereign Musqueam territory) the Office particularly homes in on the apparatus of real estate as a colonial instrument. The Office states: “we shall add to this inaugural mythos an additional fact: the site also comprises the first real estate transaction in what was to become our city” (p. 39).

Bearing this in mind, Robertson turns on her notion of the plaque as signifying an “inaugural mythos” in her reimagining of an urban mythos within Seven Walks. In relation to the *fin de siècle* writers of the nineteenth century, Michael Saler notes that “numerous *fin-de-siècle* writers not only extended the Romantics’ model of the psyche, they also promoted the Romantics’ valorization of the Imagination as a faculty that was equal, rather than subordinate, to reason” (p. 3). Read together, the New Brighton Park essay and *Seven Walks* counterpose these tendencies, the imaginative rendering of Vancouver into a series of fabulist reveries on the one hand, and on the other, the “reasoned” account of the city, drawing on documentary material in the form of the city’s archival records.

Insofar as *Seven Walks* “begins” with the vigorous rejection of the colonial narrative and the desire to bear witness to settler-colonialism’s ongoing violence, the soft architect and guide negotiate a very different set of industrial symptoms to those that Wollstonecraft documents in *Letters*. Turning her mind to the far distant future, Wollstonecraft speculates:

I ever carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two of years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot; yes; these bleak shores. Imagination still went

farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Where was he to fly from universal famine? Do not smile: I really became distressed for these fellow creatures, yet unborn. The images fastened on me, and the world appeared a vast prison. (2009, p. 68)

In the townships of Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft perceptively draws out the signs of early capitalism's growth logics. But for all her assiduousness in documenting the signs of early industrial capitalism, she is unable to future-tell the extent to which these extractive practices will accelerate. Meanwhile, in *Seven Walks*, the soft architect's rendering of the present Vancouver orients not to the future but towards a reckoning with past histories, its ruins, silences and repressions. The pleasures registered by the soft architect and guide, magnified by Robertson's intentionally sensuous prose style, are documented alongside more difficult and ambivalent emotions. Following on from their consideration of the plaque, later in "First Walk" they observe, "Our own passions often prematurely matriculated into irony or doubt, or most pathetically, into mere scorn" (p. 194). Yet the intention isn't to cast these feelings aside but to register them fully as a form of useful intelligence about the time and place they find themselves in, and about the structural inequities with which they are complicit. They go on to state:

We consulted morning also because we wanted to know all the dialects of sparkling impatience, bloated and purple audacity, long, irreducible grief, even the dialects of civic hatred that percolated among the offices and assemblies and dispatches. We wanted knowledge. (p. 194)

As Emily Alder notes, the nineteenth century's *fin de siècle*'s proliferation of scientific discoveries "occasioned a widespread conversation about knowledge and the basis of its foundation" (2020, p. 27). Here, in a climate *fin de siècle*, this desire for knowledge is expressed in the imagery of environmental degradation, bloated and purple, percolating, suggesting polluting atmospheres and ravages of the industrial system as an inheritance that needs to be reckoned with.

With the plaque itself remaining figuratively ensconced between the two brackets at the top of Robertson's poem, an emblem to their overarching mission, the soft architect and guide zoom out to consider the machinations of the park itself as they walk through it in "Second Walk". They flag the park as a "paradoxical ornament" "where the site oozed through its historical carapace" (p. 196) and describe their walking as a kind of

slow reveal, where they wait for its catalogue of “mobile affects” to show themselves. (p. 196)

In “Site Report: New Brighton Park” the Office documents the racialised encounters embedded in the park, from its origins as sovereign Musqueam land, to the exclusion of Japanese Canadians from swimming pool access in the mid-century, following World War II. It is worth emphasising that among the site’s many uses, the plaque privileges its history as a leisure zone, sometimes “watering hole”, sometimes park; a utility to which the site returns over the years, a sticking point. The Office recounts a contemporary account from the early years of colonial purchase where “beautiful grounds and picturesque walks are being laid out. Even now it is almost daily being visited by pleasure parties” (p. 39). As the development of central Vancouver proper moved westward, the site was redeveloped in service to light industry and then became a park again – the Office points out that the park was “never a settlement, always already a zone of leisured flows”. There is a resistance here to colonial settlement from its very first issue – yet the park, a confection of the white settler imaginary, persistently returns. It is restored to usefulness as a zone of white denial, as documented by the Office: “with fluent obliviousness, picnic there” (p. 41).

In “Second Walk” Robertson affectively inscribes some of the key tensions uncovered in her examination of the New Brighton site. Rendering the park anonymously preserves a larger structural focus on the reproducibility of such conflicted sites across cities, underscoring the “habitual” suppression of their unresolved colonial legacies. As a means of drawing out this symptomatic withdrawal, Robertson introduces a “paradoxical ornament” into the poem.

The soft architect and guide find themselves in a “spiritual diorama” where their strolling becomes a “layered emergency” (p. 196). They observe: “we recognized that we were the outmoded remainders of a class that produced its own mirage so expertly that its temporal distance went unnoticed [...] we were of the lyric class” (p. 197). The spiritual diorama dramatises the historical erasure that typifies the park as an urban site, designed for leisure at the expense of social complexity. The soft architect and guide experience this as a crisis of agency, having fallen into the “lyric” trap where they can no longer deny the limited reference of their own subject positions. They fear being taken for a “pleasure party” (p. 39).

Historically, the diorama is a nineteenth-century spectacle, a visual technology that existed alongside other media such as the panorama but which in its use, sometimes, of moving parts and props, as well as the use of light in creating changing visual backdrops, prefigured photographic and cinematic technology. Daguerre, instrumental in the development of early photography – the daguerreotype – installed a diorama in Paris in 1822 which was followed in short succession by a diorama in St Regent’s Park, London (Thomas, 2008, p. 117). These dioramas were large-scale exhibits housed in circular rooms with rows of seating akin to a theatrical performance. They tended to show two kinds of scenes, landscapes and architectural interiors. Sophie Thomas observes that “the Diorama draws attention to the place of what has been buried and obliterated – by time, by history, and even by the force of a visual realism that triangulates the relationship between nature, art, and death” (2018, p. 117). In *Seven Walks*, the diorama encountered by the soft architect and guide isn’t an object separate from the park, but the chimerical shapeshifting of the park itself:

Thus, the park. The bursts of early evening rain would thrust the foliage aside and shape a little room for us, promising truant privacies. Fragments of a hundred utopian fantasies of one sort or another mingled with all the flicking and dripping. (p. 199)

The dioramas of London and Paris featured scenes that would shift via the projection of light; the use of different paint colours meant different visual elements could be brought in and out of focus. Thomas notes how the dioramas were remarked upon at the time for their uncanniness, absent of animals and other life forms. In addition, she notes that the “illusion in the Diorama is uncannily disturbing not only because of its particular configuration of art *versus* nature, but also because this configuration is explicitly underwritten, or doubled, by the more apparent tension between the living and the dead” (2018, p. 122).

This doubling effect is present in Robertson’s figuring of the spiritual diorama, which appears for a second time:

Previously I mentioned the spiritual diorama. Just for the satisfaction I’ll repeat myself: “It is hard to make great and remarkable faults in a spiritual diorama” [...] The glittering attires and airs of summer began to vitrify so that we felt ourselves on the inside of a sultry glass, gazing outwards towards an agency that required us no more than we required the studied redundancy of our own vocabulary. Hope became a spectacle, a decoration. Anger was simply annulled. All that we could experience inside the diorama was the fateful listlessness usually attributed to the inmates of decaying houses, or to the intolerable injustice of

betterment, the listlessness of scripted consumption. It was innocuous and pleasant, but it did not move (p. 198).

In this elaboration, the park in its constructed guise becomes an immobile aesthetic, freezing the improvisatory call of the speakers' affective experience. The relationship of the speakers to this spiritual diorama, their "fateful listlessness", can be understood as a version of temporal space along the lines of what Lauren Berlant theorises as the impasse, a "temporary housing" (2011, p. 192) where one "moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help clarify things" (2011, p. 192). Within the diorama, the agency of the soft architect and guide is drained, but it does allow for observation and reflection, and it serves to intensify and bring into focus the gaps and absences of the park's representations.

Thomas argues that figural doubling is "at the heart of the dioramic enterprise" (2008, p. 123). It is reproduced in its name, with "di" holding connotations to both "twoness" and "throughness" and "Dio" building off "dia", suggesting the arc of a day, a sensation of circular time – we can think of each of the *Seven Walks* as layered across each other like a diorama spectacle, taking place all at once in a shared time. The doubling is also produced in the way the diorama makes its images, with two worlds ostensibly layered over each other on the same screen.

In *Seven Walks* the park doubles as a diorama, but this doubling occurs elsewhere as well. The description above, of the park "shaping a little room" (p. 199), recalls a reverie experienced by the soft architect and guide in the poem's First Walk. In this reverie, the past is figured as many rooms opening out into more and more rooms. In one room, "twelve pixelated scenes from the life of a teenager replaced walls. The pigments were those of crushed weeds under skin and just for a moment we left our satchels leaning on the font." (p. 191) In the park, the narrator has removed their satchel and begins to find the scene in front of them "flicking and dripping" (p. 199). This doubling represents the failure of representation. Even when imagined from all sides, there is a real limit to the soft architect's desire to see beyond the park to what was there before, what is now materially absent. The repetition only intensifies what is absent in the scene. Thomas notes one review of the diorama which states: "The idea produced is that of a region – of a world – desolated; of living nature at an end; of the last day past and over" (2008, p.

123). This is the sensation provided by the park as well, which is “populated by gazes” (p. 201) more than people themselves as agents of change.

Temporarily housed within the impasse, the speakers are able to experience the park as the trap it is. They ask, “Is it possible to persuade towards disassembly? For such a persuasion is what the park performed upon us, loosely, luxuriantly” (p. 199). The park is hostile to the walkers’ inherent politic, and its guise as a neutral zone of leisure begins to fall apart. Berlant has observed that the appearance of a glitch is the “revelation of an infrastructural failure” (2016, p. 393), and here the glitching diorama brings into focus how the park drains the political agency of the soft architects. The park that offers itself as public space also functions as a zone of erasure and disassembly. The spatial effect here is “delusional” (McCaffery, p. 38). Solnit, among others, has documented the essential political function of walking, writing that “the new millennium arrived as a dialectic between secrecy and openness; between consolidation and dispersal of power, between privatization and public ownership, power, and life, and walking has as ever been on the side of the latter” (2000, p. 21).

At the beginning of this chapter we saw that the “solitary walker” trope arose in the wake of Western coal-fuelled industrialisation and its palpable effects. Where Robertson’s version of the solitary walker foregrounded the subjectivity of the individual, the examples of Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth showcased an alternative, matrilinear sphere of influence, where solitary walking became networked with broader social and environmental ecologies. As the soft architect and guide escape the “fading cognitions of the park” (p. 198), they observe “And as we strolled through the park to accomplish our speculations always we wondered – were we inside or outside the diorama?” (p. 203). They have learnt that the question is rhetorical – they remain “inseparable from the context they disturb” (p. 196). But what they model is a means of moving forward despite their doubts, carrying with them the complexity of their discoveries. As subjects of a city where they frequently experience so much pleasure, they carry forward the shame of their own complicity with the colonial narrative and the complex legacies of a long lineage of walkers. And they feel a renewed desire to continue with their “researches”, with their practice of documenting the city. They view this as a greater contribution to a “lattice-work for civic thought” (p. 203). In the soft architect and guide, the walker is modelled as a generative cell that expands, enriches and re-energises the greater social body.

That women might walk – that they might, in claiming solitude for themselves, read, write, think and come to know their own minds – was a persistent and prevailing cultural anxiety during the Romantic period that still powerfully shades aspects of the social experience of walking for women today. Walking remains a form of resistant and fraught engagement with the world; to walk at night remains socially sanctioned and brings with it elevated risks of harm; to walk in the city at all presupposes social and public infrastructures; the provision paths and sidewalks, physical health, spare time.

Reclaiming solitary walking for women is Robertson's abiding task in *Seven Walks*. Her solitaires do not need to be painfully set apart from society to experience pleasure or produce writing. Rather, in her figuring of the soft architect, Robertson retains the pleasures of companionship while casting off the shackles of patriarchal surveillance and control. Her solitaires are artists and intellectuals and poets; they are free to pursue the desires and forms of knowledge that interest them. Art scholar Lucy Lippard describes place as what gets made when the environment becomes filtered through personal experience (1997, p. 7). Walking for Robertson is a collective, feminist mode of making the abstract concrete, of turning an idea of the city into a lively place – rich in meaning and full of generative possibilities for life and culture.

## **Part two: mediumship**



## Introduction

Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? This *I*, so much alive? In what element will it mix, giving or receiving fresh energy – what will break the enchantment of animation?

— Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters* (1796/2009, 48)

One's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions.

— Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", *Moments of Being* (1985, p. 73)

Arriving in Vancouver mid-morning, I dropped my bags off at my accommodation at the Patricia Hotel, and quickly set out on foot. My first port of call was a local bookshop, and at Paper Hound on West Pender St I found what I'd hoped to find, shelves and shelves of local poetry and small press titles. I was in Vancouver to retrace Robertson's steps through the city, and to spend time with her archive of journals, held at Simon Fraser University. It was to be my first experience working with an archive and I was following a hunch: I'd started to pick up on instances of mediumship throughout *Seven Walks* and I was curious to see whether I'd turn up any additional evidence from Robertson's notes and typescripts. I was also curious about the enigmatic figure of the guide: while Robertson names in her Acknowledgements some of the walkers and peers who had contributed to her production of the text, I wondered if there was one person in particular she had in mind as the text's guide, whether she was drawing on a reference or template that had so far escaped my notice.

I hoped to get to know the city about which I'd developed an intimate impression through Robertson's writing. I was interested in Vancouver as a portside, Pacific city, just as Sydney is, and in what its temperamental similarities might be. It was reading *Occasional Work* as a new resident of the Sydney suburb of Marrickville in 2016 that had so drawn me in to her poetics of surface – I recognised in her language my own experience of coming to know a city reckoning with a late industrial climate of acceleration. At that time, I was walking through the streets of my new home cataloguing in photographs

discrete building offcuts and piles of junk. I felt so much attachment to these signs of life in flux, the craft and trimmings of departed hands that seemed to hum with the desire for change, just that, neither good nor bad in itself. I remembered Sina Queyras's claim about *Seven Walks* as a poem that pitches itself as "collaborative and inhabitable public space" (2012, p. 365). Were there further clues to be unlocked by visiting this originating setting?

At the Paper Hound I eventually made my selection and took a seat in the coffee shop across the street to read and plot out my next move. That's how I met my guide, Caitlin – she commented on the book I'd bought, bP Nichol's *Continental Trance* (1982), and we struck up conversation. Caitlin was an activist and artist, an enthusiastic reader of poetry who knew everything about the local scene. After our chat she sent me a list of where to eat and drink in the city, and over the course of my stay took me out twice to poetry events I'd have otherwise not known about, including a warehouse reading by the legendary Vancouver sound poet Bill Bisset. Caitlin's sudden appearance just moments into my arrival in the city felt like a charmed inauguration and presented me with the hidden knowledge I required to slip through the city in the guise of a local rather than a tourist. In opening up my book at the cafe I had opened up a social experience that permeated outwards from the text itself. I had walked and read my way into this place.

After Caitlin left, I turned back to *Continental Trance*:

the revelation is in the blue dome of air  
beneath which this train & the dawn appear  
as blue as the robin's egg i found age two  
shattered on the sidewalk  
bits of curved blue flung all about  
& the train of that it lead to  
  
as blue as that imagined sky that day  
when the clouds were white  
& the prairies lay over the mountains  
in my future (1982, p. 24)

In *Continental Trance*, bP Nichol relays a train journey from Vancouver to Toronto. On the train, he moves forwards and backwards in time, in the same instant, contained by a blue dome of sky, a cosmic image that buffets this logic in its luminous sweep. The blue

dome reminded me of Robertson's "spiritual diorama" (p. 196), a complex metaphor within *Seven Walks* that I've never been able to satisfactorily unlock, but which speaks to, I think, the illusion of unity and order that we are driven to create for ourselves. That passage, I remember, resonated with my own discombobulation – the miasma of being in the sky – plane travel and jetlag. Probably the sky in Vancouver was blue that day too – I remember the balmy air; T-shirt weather. Vancouver, it seemed to me, based on the quick impressions of that first walk, was an amalgam of all the Australian cities I had lived in: Melbourne's lowkey strips of cafes and boutiques, Sydney's Pacific Ocean glitz, Canberra's institutional architecture and idiosyncratic public art – on the way to the bookshop I came across a small fountain staged between a park bench and recycling bin. The water fountains I was expecting, as Lisa Robertson addresses them in her essay "The Fountain Transcript":

Why are our fountains not truly bombastic, like their Baroque counterparts in the great European capitals and gardens? Is it because of the scale of the weather? The snowy cordillera? The Pacific? A deliberately affected nonchalance, as in our fleecy sartorial style? (p. 51)

Still, what I also reflected on was how easily I could write my own experience into everywhere I went, how quickly I could jump to comfortable analogies, and how I needed to resist glossing over what might be obscure or less intelligible. The "fleecy sartorial style" I anticipated, but what no one had told me about Vancouver was its populous community of people experiencing homelessness, a truth about the city I noticed immediately since the Patricia Hotel is ensconced in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. While I was there this neighbourhood was described to me as "ground zero" of North America's Fentanyl crisis (Chan, 2022). This is due to decades of property development and cuts in social welfare support, as well as Vancouver's temperate weather conditions – it's the only Canadian city where it is possible to sleep outside during winter. What struck me most in those first days, gripped by the city's newness, was how there seemed to be two planes of reality occupying the same space. Part of the story of "soft architecture", I realised, was the story of bodies moving and coming together in temporary and ever-changing patterns. It was bodies, not buildings, that truly scaffolded a city, and it could only have been as a body, as a walker, that I noticed it.

From Caitlin I learned that the Patricia Hotel had been social housing a long time before, but had become hotel accommodation some twenty years previously. As well as this fractious privatisation, it had a long, bohemian history; the home of an infamous basement jazz bar in the early and mid-twentieth century, its budget room price and grand but now tawdry fixtures made it a mainstay for visiting artists.

My room was dusty, paint-chipped, and the carpet was unevenly worn. A window overlooked the carpark, where stragglers from the basement bar would gather and smoke at 4 am. There was a bathroom, a cupboard – no desk. When I wasn't at the archive I worked on the bed, spreading everything I needed out on the faded duvet. Staying alone in a hotel brings a feeling of decadent autonomy. It rivals a walk as a perfect structure for experiencing solitude, away from the habitual cues and accumulated objects of the home. It is emphatically a non-domestic space, an interior that houses other kinds of fantasies – creative and libidinous. In her book about her time as a hotel reviewer, Joanna Walsh reflects that “boutique hotels make a virtue of the local [...] It [the room] feels personal, but it's not *your* personal. You adapt yourself to the room's desires” (2015, p. 7). Tawdry and faded as it was, I was happy to be living, for those three weeks, under the sign of Patricia.

At the library, the staff warmly welcomed me and set me up at a large wooden desk with my first cart of boxes. The first journal of Robertson's I picked up was a Muji notebook, the exact same kind as my own. I opened it. I had scant idea of method or process, beyond a tacked-out plan of what boxes to retrieve. But I had my few niggling questions and was choosing to take the matching notebooks as my first good sign. The pages of the journal were much like my own, too, patchy and scattered thoughts dashed off in a private hand – the marks barely legible. I faltered momentarily. But soon my brain caught on to Robertson's handwriting style and suddenly I was flying through the pages.

I didn't anticipate at all how intuitive, focused and born from chance my experience at the archive would be. In *Spontaneous Particulars* (2014), Susan Howe posits the literary archive as a sanctuary for the “currently exiled” Romantic spirit. “This visionary spirit, a deposit from a future yet to come”, she writes “is gathered and guarded in the domain of research libraries and special collections” (2014, p. 17). I quickly saw that my task was simply to listen to the material and to look with the same curious and roving eye I had cultivated on the street. I noticed how the journals were framed on the back pages and

inside covers by the names, emails and phone numbers – landlines – of the people Robertson was meeting and engaging with at the time. The pages of the journal brought together these social and communal relations in a jumble with the notes and drafts that would become *Seven Walks* and the essays of *Occasional Work*. The journals were like that absorbent photographic surface mentioned in *Seven Walks*, the “antique [...] colloidal silver” (p. 220) – a snapshot of traces that felt not at all disjunctive but like threads from the larger weave of the published text. There were boundless threads I could pull. I struggled to know how to find what I needed. I kept turning the pages, looking and listening. Then, a few days in, the first of my questions was answered. There it was, emphatically circled at the top of a page: “The Dog (my guide)” (Robertson, 1996–1997). Could this be true? I revisited the poem and saw that it was.

The next revelation came to me back in my room at the hotel. Down a rabbit-hole I’d discovered a recording online of Robertson reading from her as-yet-unpublished manuscript – the text that would become *The Baudelaire Fractal* (2020). One evening, lying on the duvet, I started listening. The passage she begins with recounts her own experience, also in a hotel. She wakes to find that she has been possessed by the entire authorship of Baudelaire: “Reader, I become him. Is that what I felt? No, I did not become him; I became what he wrote” (Robertson, 2017, 4:18). This encounter is foregrounded as a “peculiar and for me unprecedented experience” (Robertson, 2017, 2:22). She recounted the following passage, reproduced verbatim in the later, published work:

I can feel physiologically haunted by a style. It’s why I read ideally, for the structured liberation from the personal, yet the impersonal inflection can persist outside the text, beyond the passion of readerly empathy, a most satisfying transgression that arrives only inadvertently, never by force of intention. As if seized by a fateful kinship, against all odds of sociology, the reader psychically assumes the cadence of the text. (2020, p. 10)

Listening to Robertson read, I was drawn into the crosscurrents of these passages. The way the spatial architecture of the hotel becomes a structuring metaphor for the experience and transmission of reading a text. The hotel itself as a supporting structure, “personal, yet impersonal”, recalling Joanna Walsh’s observations. The suggestion that readers find “fateful kinship” with certain texts, following a logic of sensuous attraction, “beyond readerly empathy”, beyond that which is already known to them. The reader’s descent into that unknown, as a transgressive act, and its real, embodied influence, a phenomenon experienced physiologically, the transmission of feeling across time. How

Robertson brings this into alignment with the Romantics, summoning the transgressive women readers of this period in her conjuring of *Jane Eyre* (1847/2011) (“Reader, I ...”), a deliberately hackneyed posture that she immediately subverts. In this passage, Robertson may have acquired Baudelaire’s entire authorship, but the story she is telling is about the enduring potential of literary practices as sites of transgressive feminist potential. She conjures an erotics of reading, turning her interest in feminine pleasure into a makeshift philosophy.

This chapter takes these two discoveries from the archive as its organising prompts. Encouraged by the revelation of Robertson’s own mediumistic encounter with Baudelaire, I argue that a prototypical interest in mediumship is on display throughout *Seven Walks*. I show that the soft architect and guide take on many of the characteristics of the spirit-medium, from their performative and reflexive means of engagement with the city, to their innovations in language as they write up their document, to their receptive and sensitive capacity to absorb meaning from the urban objects and materials they encounter. My aim is to concretely demonstrate that the soft architect is a walker-medium, a uniquely defined figure that enacts a receptive and attentive mode of engaging with the city, recomposing lost and overlooked genealogies of feminised creativity and labour.

Spirit-mediumship, like the walking practices discussed, is both a culturally encoded pastime and a means of literary and aesthetic innovation. I use the term in reference to the specific cultures of séance and spirit communication that arose in two waves during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In its first wave, mediumship came to prominence at a time when women were gaining property rights of their own and achieving increased autonomy in public space (Owen, 1989, p. 3). Seances were a popular pastime; theatrical productions held in rooms and theatre spaces, where the spirit-medium would correspond with the dead, entering a trancelike state whereby the dead could speak through them like a vessel. Such events took place in private loungeroom settings as well as large-scale, public venues (Natale, 2011, p. 4). Mediumship, in its spectrum of public and private guises, was a group activity where women could gather, express themselves and, in the cases of the mediums themselves, “try on” authoritative personas. For these reasons Alex Owen, in her foundational study *The Darkened Room* (1989), repositions this popular pastime as a significant cultural moment in the trajectory

of women's rights, writing that mediumship, caught up in the larger wave of Victorian spiritualism, was "another of the hidden or forgotten factors in women's long struggle for increased effectiveness, status and autonomy" (Owen, 1989, iv).

Spiritualism itself is an overarching movement that includes in its scope mediumship and séance as well as a range of other mystic and occult practices. The advent of modern spiritualism is commonly attributed to the phenomenon of the Fox sisters in 1848, who became famous for establishing spirit contact with a murdered peddler in Hydesville, New York (Kontou, 2009, p. 5). A few decades on, the establishment of the Society of Psychical Research, began to formalise some of the spiritualist movement's claims. A wedge was formed between modes of "popular" spiritualism, and the SPR's scientific research (Sword, 2002, p. 4), and as Kontou writes, by the turn of the century, the SPR had come to "overshadow" the careers of women who had been celebrated at the height of the spiritualist craze (2009, p. 7).

Writers are often described as mediums in a metaphorical sense. Working from their unconscious, writers pull in references from other writers, and borrow from and extend notions of genre and aesthetics. This system of influence and transmission is all but assumed as the nature of literary production. Kontou productively ascribes the term "author-medium" to those writers who draw on mediumship as a thematic or metaphorical system within their writing. From this designation several questions arise that trouble the status of authorship. Kontou writes:

to what extent do these author-mediums *ventriloquize* the dead? If the dead speak through the medium, then surely we can argue that the medium also speaks through them? How do we distinguish between these new and old voices? How are we to interpret this spectral dialogue between two worlds? What is added and what is taken away? What is lost forever in transmission? (p. 2)

Throughout this chapter I draw on this idea of the "author-medium" to think through not just the operation of the soft architect, but Robertson's own authorship as well. Robertson's takeover of a Rousseauian style and posture is a way of "speaking through" his influence. As for the figure of the soft architect, cloaked in their dandy-esque, Baudelairean jacket, and in the company of the guide, they are able to time travel beyond the bounds of linear temporal logic. Although the aesthetics of the poem are grounded the language of the past, their orientation is unclear – whether, in their encounters with Vancouver, they are travelling forwards or backwards in time; or whether, cloaked in an

older, enduring style, they are projecting from a future yet to come. Robertson's mediumship is speculative, collapsing the usual temporal demarcations between new and old voices.

The second wave of spirit-mediumship in the early part of the twentieth century became more self-consciously engaged with questions of authorship, and as the scholar Helen Sword argues, was highly influential to the development of literary Modernism. Precipitated by the advent of the First World War, where "new clients flocked to spirit mediums in hopes of making contact with the dead" (Sword, 2002, p. 3), this mass cultural expression of mourning quickly acquired a literary flavour. As Sword argues in her study *Ghostwriting Modernism* (2002), a particular trend arose of mediums, frequently women, using the practice to contact dead authors, a practice in which the author was called on to clarify or expand on aspects of their authorship and in some cases deliver entire new texts via the medium (p. 13). As with mediumship's first wave, this phenomenon gave some women a social means by which they could gather and participate in culture, and particularly gave women a shot at flexing their own skills as authors at a time when access to literary production was severely circumscribed. Sword's argument is that far beyond simply regurgitating the ideas of dead (male) writers, these mediums engaged with ideas that would become associated with high Modernist aesthetics, such as "linguistic playfulness, de-centrings of consciousness [and the] fracturings of conventional gender roles" (2002, p. 11). This view is supported by Kontou, who argues that the séances of the Victorian era anticipate some of the innovations of Modernism (Kontou, 2009, 5). I draw on Sword's arguments throughout this chapter in order to align *Seven Walks* with a counter-canonical Modernist trajectory, one where women's creativity was central and reflexively sustained by their ability to command power and authority within the intimate and dynamic space of the séance room.

The first section of this chapter maps mediumship onto my account of walking so far. Specifically, I consider the relationship of trance mediumship to the concept of reverie before turning to the function of spirit-mediumship as akin to what I drew out, in relation to Rousseau, as an experimental creative practice. I also demonstrate how, just as walking weaves together materialist and metaphysical forms of relating, mediumship practices also have a strikingly materialist emphasis given its otherworldly concerns. Spirit-mediumship presents a provocative dance between notions of passivity and



receptivity. In this chapter, I unpack the way that mediumship presents a robust challenge to notions of individual authorship.

The second and third sections of this chapter consider respectively the trope of the room as a site for women's creative freedom, and the figure of the guide. The room and the guide are two dominant features of spirit-mediumship, the locative site for mediumship as an event and the means that make possible the medium's travels into the realm of the otherworldly. These sections suggest that it is no real coincidence that these two popular-cultural figurations of mediumship are also resonant literary symbols, as I draw out the deep affinities shared by mediumship and literary production.

Throughout *Seven Walks*, the soft architect and guide are constantly moving between real and imagined rooms, occupying a threshold between interior and exterior, public and private. Rooms appear both as symbols of knowledge, as libraries, and as sites of potential where intimate forms of relating and invention are possible. My second section considers Robertson's rooms in relation to Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own", arguably the twentieth century's most prevailing literary metaphor in terms of writing and gender equity. Woolf and Robertson are two prophetic writers working at either ends of the twentieth century. I build a case for mediumship as the means by which these two writers become engaged in a dynamic correspondence across time.

Within *Seven Walks* the guide also figures as a constant presence. In my final section I consider the proliferating identities that are attached to this shapeshifting and mercurial figure, making two claims: firstly, that the prospect of the guide as a dog signals a new kind of mediumship attuned to the late-twentieth century's ecological awareness. And secondly, that the guide upholds a literary function, signalling Robertson's commitment to a feminist counter-canon. Tracing the guide through *Seven Walks* brings into focus the radical temporal work the soft architect undertakes.

## **Mediumship in *Seven Walks***

Scholars have frequently commented on the unusual rendering of the soft architect and guide as "partly in another place" (p. 210), moving through the city in a way that elides and transcends standard demarcations of time and matter. They move with a sense of

distance from their environment, a feeling conjured by the frequent presence of glass, mist and other translucent or partially obscuring details. They express a heightened sense of porousness, slipping frequently between physical, embodied personhood and textual invention. Their attention similarly moves back and forth between attempts to recompose the archive of the city – its history and its material surface details – and the pleasures and frustrations of language as its communicative technology. Geoffrey Hlibchuk and Ryan Fitzpatrick both link this porousness to Robertson’s interest in rearticulating urban experience. Hlibchuk identifies “delirium” as one of Robertson’s main vehicles, which he views as a means of “describing the tenor of urbanity” (2011, p. 223). Fitzpatrick notes that the approach Robertson takes is “largely speculative and aestheticized” and that twenty-first century Vancouver is brought into “expressive proximity” with cities of the past, such as nineteenth-century Paris (2018, 2). Mediumship provides a useful framework for unpacking these qualities, both the “delirium” that manifests in the imaginative state of reverie, and the “expressive proximity” where the boundaries between contemporary Vancouver and its literary and historical antecedents begin to dissolve.

Two examples set the scope for how mediumistic tropes are deployed within *Seven Walks*. The first builds on mediumship as a richly performative historical phenomenon. The second is an example of literary mediumship, where mediumship is evoked as a metaphor for the challenge of representing experience in language.

The first example occurs during “Third Walk”. This is the scene where the soft architect and guide are dining at the restaurant:

Engaged in close, indeterminate conversation which causes the mingling of the plundered textiles of our sweeping coats, we open an anonymous door, cross a rough threshold, and descend directly to the commercial heart of pleasure and regret [...] we do not understand whether we are guests or clientele [...] we cannot discern whether we have entered a microcosm or a landscape or a lackadaisical simulation of time. Pleasure is a figured vacuum that does not recognize us as persons. We stand annulled in our ancient, ostentatious coats. (p. 206)

The intimate setting conjured in the first part of the quote recalls the atmosphere of the séance room, which often incorporated tricks of costuming, lighting and sound. Simone Natale notes that during the nineteenth century séances quickly became viewed as “entertainment” (2011, p. 240) a form of “brilliant amusement” (p. 240) that built into

the spectacle a range of sensual experiences including musical performances and even the thrilling touch of spirit hands on audience members (p. 246). Crossing the “rough” threshold, the soft architect and guide move into a “figured vacuum”, a phrasing that feels closer to the bright, negative space of the white cube gallery than to the phantasmagoria of unearthly realms. Where acts of mediumship were commonly structured as an ascension into the afterlife – into heaven – here the soft architect and guide invert this figuring, travelling downwards, a far less salubrious journey. This orientation brings to mind the descents into hell frequently depicted in classical literature, from Homer to Virgil to Ovid to Dante. Yet they do not seem to be in hell but rather a kind of ambivalent purgatory, where a range of temporal possibilities are conjured then collapsed: the “microcosm” of twentieth-century scientific thought, the “landscape” of the Romantic era, the “simulation of time” as a speculative, technological future. Mediumship in this passage is not limited to correspondences with the past; it presents itself as a channel for projection into the future as well. As they stand in their “ancient, ostentatious coats”, there is this sense that as millennial subjects, performatively styled in the masculine posture of their forbears, they are in a place pitched far beyond their inheritance.

At the same time, this passage extends the ruminations on consumption and social responsibility with which the soft architect and guide are preoccupied with throughout this walk. In Chapter One, I wrote of this scene that the soft architect and guide wrestle with their participation in the gentrification of the city, and the ways architectural space and the pleasures of leisure soothes and lull consumers into states of comfort and forgetting. This moment of mediumship is a means by which the soft architect further accesses the contemplative experience – they are able to get to the heart of the problem, troubling their sense of identity, whether they are “guest or clientele” and raising a question about the ethical responsibilities of the urban walker. There is a fine line between guest and clientele. Both relate to consumption – Maia Joseph observes that Robertson “refuses to avoid elements of art that are [...] more easily commodifiable” (2009, p. 162) but one is received with more generosity and warmth than the other. This is a rare moment in the poem where the soft architect is producing a subtle demand for acknowledgement, the desire to have their participation welcomed by the city and its inhabitants.

The second example forms the concluding statement of “Third Walk” and extends the soft architect and guide’s meditation on complicity and consumption to question the degrees to which life itself, in all its complexity, can be captured in language. This passage takes on the rhetorical style of testimony. The soft architect and guide observe:

But the happiest days of our life are incomprehensible deliria, frontiers whose passages are blocked by words. We had recourse to material and rightly or wrongly we assigned the word rapture to its strangeness and obscurity. We knew memory to be superfluous ornament. And yet all our thinking is memory. Our investigations will terminate in a sublime falsehood: we will have failed to draw a waking life. We can’t hold the stiff blood of paradise over silent paper. (p. 208)

Rather than drawing out language as a device for making meaning, once again the soft architect subverts standard arcs of thinking. They present the idea that language, as a mediating instrument, actually blocks our ability to express the full resonant charge, the “incomprehensible deliria” of experience. As they walk Vancouver they see and feel deeply the environment around them and attempt to recompose, for the reader and for themselves, this data, in forms that challenge what Elena Ferrante calls the “male city” (2016, p. 220). Yet, acknowledging that thinking itself is a linguistic construction, they can’t overcome this impasse. They also suggest here that religious and spiritual thinking isn’t a means past this roadblock. They assign the word “rapture”, but don’t submit to the concept itself as a way of making sense of the intensity of their subjective experience. So, the concept of the sublime, which as we have seen is a running point of reference throughout the text, becomes here “sublime falsehood”. As inheritors of a long tradition of male thought, the soft architects wish very much to innovate and transcend the bounds of their forebearers. But something exquisite about the nature of life itself blocks them here, and they are left only with the strange pleasure and poignancy of withheld meaning. The final sentence, “we can’t hold the stiff blood of paradise over silent paper”, reveals the sensuous intensity of their deep desire for knowledge. The “silent paper” rests with a powerful negative charge.

The frequent reveries into which the soft architect enter have much in common with the trance-state of mediumship practices. In the trance-state, the medium becomes possessed by a “spirit control”, who speaks through them; such practices were common within the relatively intimate circles of the séance room, but trance lecturing was also its own genre of mediumistic performance, and rose to particular prominence in the US.

Robertson's mediumistic encounter with Baudelaire can be read from within this frame, both because of the initial presentation of this text as a live reading that incorporated performative elements – during one part, she circulates a vintage textile among the audience – and because she says herself at the beginning of the talk that she was on a lecturing tour when this channelling of Baudelaire occurred (Robertson, 2017, 8:59).

The circulation of textiles, is a repetition of a performative flourish Robertson has previously enacted. During a lecture relating to the essay “Value Village Lyric”, later published in *Occasional Work* (p. 182), Robertson recounts that she “circulated a *Comme des Garçons* jacket and other thrifted artifacts” through the audience as she spoke. (Robertson, personal correspondence, 29 March 2018). In “Value Village Lyric”, she writes that “clothing is metaphysical. It constitutes the dialectical seam threading consciousness through perception. Like metaphysics it wears out” (p. 183). Robertson's offering here is the idea that spirits speak through materials too, that garments pass on modes of lived experience and knowledge, gestural habits, scents, techniques of craft and repair, and that “wearing out” speaks to the goodness of these collective efforts – since in the market, outside the alternative economy of thrift, commodities are disposed of or superseded, made redundant long before their potential uses are expired.

The narrations of the soft architect in *Seven Walks* have a trance-like flow: though they recount discrete scenes and encounters, each walk seems to flow seamlessly without interruptions from the greater world, and with a formal and incantatory diction. Although I have highlighted the presence of a range of literary figures referenced on these walks, it isn't so much that one particular spirit inhabits the form of the soft architect, but more that they transmit a cacophonous mix of influences and voices. And in particular, the environment itself is parsed as the threshold space via which such correspondences are possible.

Frequently the soft architect and guide foray into memories, projections and fantasies that take on a structure and logic inspired by their surrounds, or by the charge of particular objects, such as in the scene where they use a “pearly pocket knife” (p. 201) to cut a cheese and find that “the clouds tightened and the lilies curled” (p. 201). An example of this is in “Fourth Walk”, where the soft architect and guide come to a sudden meeting point in the forest:

Beyond the porticoed towers the broad street rose to address a sort of quincunx or grove. Generations of wanderers had remapped the city's inchoate routes to lead to this city's venerated mound. My guide and I, like many other travellers, were pleased to briefly enjoy the hospice of that thick-set wood. For we were not alone among the pedestaled trees that named the myths of liberty. We knew our sylvan companions among pommier d'Antoinette, Fiennesque Elm, Noisier de Certeau by the same means we had feared would precipitate our own recognition. (p. 214)

Inside the protective "hospice" of the woods, the soft architect is able to channel the spirits of "generations of wanderers" who have preceded them. The traditions they register here are literary; figures from the tradition of letters, not from the historical record or from religious or spiritual doctrine. And these "sylvan" companions are registered in naturalistic terms, not humans or spirits but trees, ecologically alive and enduring. Rising from the woods is a multi-generational chorus that generates a collective portrait of Robertson's ideal walking subject: the decadence and iconoclasm of Marie Antoinette, the intrepid, visionary knowledge-seeking of seventeenth-century travel writer Celia Fiennes, the studious grace and urbanism of Michel de Certeau. And then there is the telling statement, the fear of being recognised.

In Chapter One I discussed how the desire for disappearance expressed frequently by the soft architect is linked to the historical surveillance of women and the desire not for erasure, but for the freedom to experience the city unnoticed, cloaked and dressed in the privileges of the male figure. At the heart of spirit-medium practices was a similar tension for women who sought to achieve a degree of power by recasting the maligned trope of passivity as a tool for creative reinvention. Owen writes that "the mediumistic project rested on received notions of innate femininity and yet often outstripped and outmanoeuvred them" (39). Like the flâneur's jacket that adorns the soft architect, mediumship is a trojan horse that allowed certain women the chance to explore their own desires and creative fantasies, via a performative submission to spirit voices. By this method they also explored the illusory power of the author function, demonstrating the fictive apparatus of "individual" authorship by embodying and opening up space for a plurality of voices.

"Passivity" is often referred to in the scholarship of mediumship as the dominant tool by which women subverted gender expectations. Alex Owen provides a useful overview for this dynamic, noting that women were desirable as mediums because of

prevailing attitudes towards femininity that understood women as gentle and receptive vessels. She defines passivity as a “lack of masculine willpower”, writing that

passivity became, in the spiritualist vocabulary, synonymous with power. And here lay the crux of the dilemma. For the very quality which supposedly made women excellent mediums was equally construed as undermining their ability to function in the outside world. Female passivity, the leit-motif of powerful mediumship, also positioned women as individuals without social power. (1989, p. 10)

Passivity is a trait of particular interest for the soft architect, who meditates on its function as a means of reception, figuring it as a form of listening, and as a quality that can be mobilised – a strategy. In “Second Walk”, the walk in which the soft architect and guide encounters the park, they observe:

It was as if everything we encountered had become some sort of nineteenth century [...] We would lean on its transparent balustrade, rhythmically adjusting our muted apparel, waiting somewhat randomly to achieve the warmth of an idea. But you should not assume that my guide and I were entirely idle. Waiting was many-roomed and structured and moody, and we measured, then catalogued, each of its mobile affects. We dawdled morosely in the corners of waiting, resenting our own randomness. Or we garnered our inherent insouciance towards the more subtle sediments of passivity. (p. 196)

Here again in their reverie or trance they are transported to a different temporal register. They wait for the nineteenth century to speak through them, seeking to achieve the “warmth of an idea” that they are unable to articulate. As elsewhere in the park, their capacity as actors is drained from them, though they attempt to make the best of the situation, turning their attention to the idea of waiting itself and its affordances as one of passivity’s “subtle sediments”. Their method is fruitful. Within the strictures of nineteenth-century cultural mores they realise they can attend to the structural conditions that circumscribe their experience as feminised subjects. They can measure, catalogue and learn from the experience of waiting, and return to the present with an embodied sense of this condition and its lessons.

Later in “Second Walk”, the soft architect expands on the subversive pleasures achieved by this strategy:

What our passivity achieved or attracted were the fallen categories of experience – the gorgeous grammars of restraint, pure fucking and secrecy and sickness, mixtures of

unclassifiable actions performed in tawdry decors [...] Yet those fallen categories, seemingly suspended in some slimy lyric harness, came to animate and rescue our bodies' role as witness, witness to the teaching and fading cognitions of the park. (p. 198)

Once more, while their body remains the originating site of intuitive awareness, this becomes not an end in itself but a form of greater awareness of the world beyond the self, "the fading cognitions of the park". Authorship becomes an organic and metabolising superstructure that includes and exceeds the soft architects' own individuation.

In a state of passivity and attuned to the atmospheres of the previous century where mediumship was ascendant, the soft architects go on to observe that

here, on the clipped margins of the century, in our regalia of mud-freckled linens, and with our satchel of cold provisions, we needed to prove to ourselves at least that although we had no doubt as to our lyric or suspended status, we were eager to be happy. We wanted to be the charmed recipients of massive energies. Why not? Our naivete was both shapeless and necessary. (p. 198)

Walking is how they make their correspondence with the past, a "suspended" state in which they acquiesce, "why not?", to receive the maligned knowledge of feminine experience – those "fallen categories". Wearing "mud-freckled linen" and with "cold provisions", the architects remind us not only of their status as walking subjects, but their status as historically produced subjects "on the clipped margins of the century".

## **The room**

Throughout *Seven Walks*, the soft architects move continuously in and out of real and imagined rooms, collapsing and complicating distinctions between interior and exterior, public and private. My main contention in this section is that this practice of walking into and through the space of the room is what makes the soft architect such a novel walking subject. I show that this practice distinguishes the soft architect from the flâneur in particular and unsettles the common demarcations of gendered space that have framed walking with such longevity.



In making this claim I read *Seven Walks* alongside the writings of Virginia Woolf, focusing on the essay “A Room of One’s Own” and her memoirs, particularly “A Sketch of the Past”. Both women, from opposite ends of the century, invoke the room as a powerful metaphor for the creative liberation of women. They draw frequently on the room – and the street – as metaphors for memory, creative process, and temporal distance. In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf observes: “I see it – the past – as an avenue lying behind” (1985, 67). There are two other major similarities between Woolf and Robertson that are worth highlighting. First, they share a strong sense of matrilinear inheritance. For Woolf this concern shows up frequently in her writing, perhaps most famously in her speculations about “Shakespeare’s sister” in “A Room of One’s Own”, where she imagines a future, some one hundred years on, in which conditions will be more supportive of women writers, so that “the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down” (1929/2015, p. 111). Here she is speaking collectively on behalf of women throughout history who were not able to assume the posture of a writer, for whom other claims were made on their bodies and minds. And as have seen for Robertson, tracing a feminist counter-canon is central to her soft architecture project, to uncover the hidden labours of women and recompose these traditions using an alternative palette of decorative description.

Both writers also share an interest in the gendering of power and how this manifests materially. In another passage from “A Room of One’s Own”, Woolf considers the investment in male genius that has sprung up in the bricks and mortar of Oxbridge. She writes, “an unending stream of gold and silver, I thought, must have flowed into this court perpetually to keep the stones coming and the masons working; to level, to ditch and to drain” (1929/2015, p. 10). This causes her to reflect on the “flow” of money that has flushed through the place, constant through changing epochs, through the age of faith and the age of reason (p. 10). She considers the immense difficulty in challenging such a determined system, a consideration that becomes personally inflected when she realises she isn’t permitted to visit the library, or even walk on the path under her feet. Robertson’s attention to the flows of capital within *Seven Walks*, where she writes about the disappearance of Vancouver into the “fluid called money” (p. 9), and where the soft architect recounts, “I was witness to my own desire, as if erased, and it was something like history (p. 217), sets the stakes for why a room, a feminist architecture, remains so necessary in both real and symbolic terms.

As Sword notes, Woolf's "novels and short stories bear everywhere the mark of spiritualist speculation" (2002, p. 84). In her personal life Woolf was not involved in the spiritualist movement, which was considered something of a "low haunt" (Sword, 2002, p. 76) among the brokers of high Modernism, though there were notable exceptions, among them H.D. and Yeats (2002, p. 118). But the popular influence of spiritualist practices in the broader culture seeped into the work of most writers from this period in one form or another. For Woolf, the uncommon passage between subjectivities was the hallmark of her stream-of-consciousness style. The adoption of mediumistic tropes, her characters regularly disappearing into flashes of reverie, was a means of sensitively accessing the past, particularly in later works the grief and schism brought on by the war. In focusing on Woolf's autobiographical writing and elements of her own authorship, I present the speculation that Woolf is herself a soft architect, aligned with Robertson's principles of walking, observation and the recomposition of the city and its literary genealogies.

In *Seven Walks* walking gives the poem its animating charge and the means of loose narrative progression through various scenes and locations. Yet the room in particular is the poem's prevailing spatial unit. Rooms of all different kinds are represented and passed through, from a "vast room" displaying "sociological moments as if the physical texture of watching inspired a décor" (p. 205) to a room made up from the foliage of the park, which "promis[ed] truant fantasies" (p. 199). These rooms often manifest as part of the soft architect's reveries, and as these examples suggest, are used to structure particular facets of experience and desire. The poem draws out themes present in its ur-text, "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto":

Beginning in grand rooms ranked in small stone Natufian couples co-mingled in kisses, the Perspex galleries of pendant Babylonian dollies, the long halls of Egyptian cats that are sirens or dynasties, we amble towards the disappearance of godliness into cloth. (p. 18)

It is notable that Robertson begins by conjuring the rooms of museums and galleries, of classical architecture. These rooms are "grand" but also static and mutable, and seem to condition a kind of cold, patriarchal surveillance. The objects held within these rooms are captured in frozen displays, models of latent, even taboo, feminine desire – dollies and sirens. Robertson thus moves her speaker towards a different possibility. As they "amble towards the disappearance of godliness into cloth", they seek to recast this surveillant

tradition according to a more sensuous, fluid, tactile and feminine logic. As is by now clear, this opening passage sets up the principles of the dialectic that Robertson returns to repeatedly in her subsequent writing, a recasting of patriarchal structures into more affirming and receptive feminine forms.

The room structures walking in this first instance. The room is where the walk begins, but it is also the superstructure that contains the walk. In this passage, while the soft architect “ambles towards disappearance”, they don’t step beyond the room’s bounds. The room seems to hold for Robertson an almost utopian sense of potential. It is her ideal structure, an externalisation of the mind’s capacious varieties of knowledge, experiences and mood. It is a structure she reclaims from history, where it commonly appears, as she begins here, as storage units of patriarchal power. Robertson’s rooms are changeable and connective; throughout *Seven Walks* they seem to stitch together like scenes from a dream, as sites of “imbrication” (p. 190).

Woolf’s prevailing metaphor is the “room of one’s own”, a means of describing the practical requirements needed for a woman to become a writer: space, along with money and privacy. Yet “A Room of One’s Own” is full of rooms that complicate and substantiate this image. One passage in particular contributes to my argument that the soft architect’s walking includes the room within its ambit. One night, walking to her quarters at Oxbridge, Woolf observes:

One seemed alone with an inscrutable society. All human beings were laid asleep – prone, horizontal, dumb. Nobody seemed stirring in the streets of Oxbridge. Even the door of the hotel sprang open at the touch of an invisible hand – not a boots was sitting up to light me to bed, it was so late. (1929/2015, p. 25)

Woolf herself takes on the quality of a spirit here, wandering through a scene in which the world slumbers. She is in a transitional state where the social worlds of day and night, life and death are blurred and her passage from the social world of the street to the interior, private space of the hotel is frictionless. The idea of the spectral touch of an invisible hand, permitting entry into the interior, recalls the thrilling sleight of hand of the séance room.

As the title of Alex Owen’s landmark scholarly text suggests, “the darkened room” was one of spirit-mediumship’s central images and its dominant organising principle. The room represented principles of both containment and invention, drawing public audiences into a creative space where meaning was collectively produced in response to the medium’s performance. The séance room functioned as a threshold space, removed

from the logic of everyday life and offering a space for social and creative expressions. In this respect, like practices of walking, the room supported a social environment that allowed for participation in literary culture and public worlds to which women for the most part had little to no access to in daily life. In the quiet passage from Woolf above, her movement between the public and private spaces represents a subtly transgressive habitation of space, the sense of being able to freely roam where she likes. Since everyone is asleep, she doesn't need to be cloaked to do so. She can walk fully as herself.

The premise that the room is an originating site of feminist subversion and re-invention, and a template for wider acts of seeing and becoming in the world, is also re-enacted within *Seven Walks*. In "First Walk", just as the evocation of the room begins Robertson's manifesto, the conceptual possibilities of the room become the subject of the soft architect's first reverie. They observe:

From our seat on the still, petal-choked street we reconjured the old light now slithering afresh across metropolitan rooms we had in our past inhabited: rooms shrill and deep and blush and intermediate, where we had felt compelled to utter the grail-like and subordinated word "rougepot" because we had read of these objects in the last century's bawdish books; rooms with no middle ground, differently foxed as certain aging mirrors are foxed; shaded rooms pleasure chose; shabby, faded rooms in which, even for a single day, our paradoxical excitements had found uses and upholsteries, rooms of imbrication and elaboration where we began to resist the logic of our identity, in order to feel free. (p. 190)

Unlike the grand rooms of the example earlier, these rooms aren't structured around what they contain – they don't house objects. Instead they hold affective meaning via their structure and surface. The descriptions "shrill" and "blush" cast a traditionally feminised subject as the room's inhabitant, and "upholsteries" brings to mind a drawing room setting, a dramatised space often mobilised in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. The reference to the last century's "bawdish books", supports this evocation of the literary. A site of "pleasure", these rooms produce a surplus of meaning in their "imbrication and elaboration". This language seems to celebrate the complexity of the collective of women whose experiences the soft architect carries. After all, these are the rooms of the past, which the soft architect and guide are momentarily revisiting. By casting back into the past, they are able to hold close in mind the intention of their current walk, which is to be receptive to the "long, irreducible grief" (p. 194) of the city's

gentrification as well as the collective pleasures of resisting and subverting forms of patriarchal power.

Later in “First Walk” the soft architects, rising from the wooden bench on which they’re seated, are transported into a room of more specific taxonomy: the library. As they observe:

When we built our first library it was morning and we were modern, and the bombed windows admitted morning, which flowed in shafts and tongued over stones. Paper documents had been looted or confiscated; new descriptions became necessary. Twelve pixelated scenes from the life of a teenager replaced walls. The pigments were those of crushed weeds under skin and just for a moment we left our satchels leaning on the font.

The satchels, the pixilation, the confiscations: What actually happened was a deep split, deep in the texture of mortality. We had been advised in the morning papers that there was no longer a paradise. Hell was also outmoded. This is why we were modern. We built this library with an applied effort of our memory and its arches were the chic curvature of our tawdry bead necklaces turned up on end. (p. 191)

In this dramatised and glitching scene the feminist fight for access to knowledge is registered in the language of war, with description highlighted as their essential strategy – description being the talent for finding something new within the old. The paper documents “looted or confiscated” are what the soft architect takes on as their mission to replace, a record and testimony of their experience and close attention. The suggestion here is that this act of creation isn’t purely inventive but an attempt to right past wrongs.

This passage demonstrates the scale of their project, which isn’t just to write an alternative account, but to restructure social architecture itself by figuring the room as a library, a democratic form of knowledge keeping. Once again, the aim here is to trace a lineage of empowerment that has always existed, and to concretise this radical counter-history in newer, softer rhythms of language and metaphor: “its arches were the chic curvature of our tawdry bead necklaces”.

The gravitas of this mission is expressed in mediumistic language, as a “deep split” (p. 191) in the “texture of mortality” (p. 191). Lived experience is no longer mediated by the fear of hell or the desire for paradise. Rather, in Robertson’s expanded application of mediumship, its mediations are virtual, and a new category of experience is introduced:

the idea of the teenager, a figure holding the radiating energy and youthful promise of open possibility; the affirmation of a future beyond the present.

In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf also casts into the past, a process that opens her imagination to new theories about her authorship and experience in the present. In the journal she paces out a series of reflections on what she refers to as “being” and “non-being”, describing aspects of her early years and the influence of these experiences on her conception of herself as a writer.

Describing the early shock, as a child, of the suicide of a family friend, Mr Valpy (1985, p. 71), Woolf notes that from this experience she learned to welcome such shocks as useful. She writes, “after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer” (p. 72). She continues: “it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting into words” (p. 72). For Woolf, “being” is achieved in moments like these shocks, where she feels intensely connected and alive to the forces of the world. Non-being, which Woolf constructs as being akin to daily, habitual time, has a different quality to it. Describing a day of quotidian activities filled with more “being” than average – for she achieved some writing and read some interesting books – she observes, “I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool” (p. 70). As Robertson does so frequently, here Woolf draws on a textural image, cotton wool, to hold this nuanced articulation of everyday experience.

This description is of a kind with the malaise expressed by the soft architect in the scene inside the diorama, where they observe: “All we could experience inside the diorama was [...] fateful listlessness [...] it was innocuous and pleasant but it did not move” (pp. 198–99). And later in the essay Woolf goes on to describe an exceptional moment of being, which further chimes with Robertson’s conception of the spiritual diorama:

It was sunset, and the great glass dome at the end of the station was blazing with light. It was glowing yellow and red and the iron girders made a pattern across it. I walked along the platform gazing with rapture at this magnificent blaze of colour, and the train slowly steamed into the station. It impressed and exalted me. It was so vast and fiery red. The contrast of that blaze of magnificent light with the shrouded and curtained rooms at the

Hyde Park Gate was so intense. Also it was partly that my mother's death unveiled and intensified; made me suddenly develop perceptions, as if a burning glass had been laid over what was shaded and dormant (p. 93).

It was the collective grief of war that saw spiritualist practices rise again during the Modernist period. Here Woolf's personal grief opens a dimension within her own perception, burning through that gauzy cotton wool and, with the intensity and volatility of glass, bringing the world into intense focus. Robertson's glass dome and spiritual diorama represent figurings of this threshold between being and non-being. The soft architect and guide find themselves caught on the inside, in a state of non-being, as they observe, "on the inside of a sultry glass, gazing outwards towards an agency that required us no more than we required the studied redundancy of our own vocabulary" (p. 198). Woolf achieves here what the soft architect and guide wish for when they say, "we wanted to be the charmed recipients of massive energies. Why not?" (p. 198). Woolf's sublime encounter in the city brings her own life force into focus, an energy too massive for any single room, diorama or dome to hold. The contrast she gives, between the "magnificent blaze" of the dome and the "shrouded and curtained rooms" of her childhood home, signals the limited usefulness of the room as a site of protection and potential. Woolf wouldn't have had this rapturous encounter with her own spirit if she wasn't out walking. The walker, the soft architect, requires both the room and the street to achieve a wholeness, a problem Woolf identifies as one of the greatest challenges of her own novel writing: "The real novelist can convey both sorts of being [...] I have never been able to do both" (p. 70). Moreover this issue is fundamental to her sense of self. Later she writes that it is only by putting her "shocks" into words that she can achieve wholeness. She writes "this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me" (p. 72).

The desire and the capacity for Woolf and the soft architect to work away from "severance" towards wholeness is a quality that sets them apart from other major walking typologies, especially the flâneur. Two examples given by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* illuminate this point:

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man

wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to sate his appetite. Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts – until, utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and has a strange air. (2002, p. 417)

For it is not the foreigners but they themselves, the Parisians, who have made Paris the promised land of the flâneur – the “landscape built of sheer life,” as Hofmannshah once put it. Landscape – that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely: the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room. (2002, p. 417)

In both these passages the room is also entangled with the act of walking, but is treated with hostility and suspicion. In the first passage the room receives the exhausted male walking subject “coldly” and the room “has a strange air”. The conjuring of the room’s atmosphere gives this passage a spectral charge, but the room does not assent to his presence; he is no medium. In the second passage, this is taken further, with the room functioning as a claustrophobic, uncomfortable space where further possibilities are foreclosed. This final sentence, “It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room”, seems to recall the original phenomenology of the Romantic walkers who treated the landscape as manifestations of their inner dialogue. In another articulation, Benjamin likens the dwelling place of the street to the interior of the home: “he is as much at home among house facades as a citizen is within his four walls” (Benjamin, 1996, p. 19). Via this logic, the private is extended into public space, so that male walking subjects experience the streets of Paris with the entitlement of taking leisure in their own lounge rooms. At the same time, the room itself is conjured as a claustrophobic metaphor, a kind of holding cell that inhibits as much as it allows. In the logic of the flâneur the room inhibits, closes off and entraps; in the logic of the walking subject espoused by Woolf, the room is a threshold to other planes of experience that receives her gladly.

If Paris or the city is indeed “landscape built of sheer life” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 417), Woolf and the soft architect are much more open to experiencing its full repertoire of offerings. Just as Woolf goes in search of a pencil in *Street Haunting*, the soft architect considers the greater complexities of consuming pleasures – shopping, eating at restaurants, as part of the make-up of the city, and that experiencing these elements is a way of knowing it fully. Rather than pursuing an “ascetic” method of occupying space, they move to absorb as much as possible. And where the movement of the flâneur is



figured in these examples as an inevitable narrowing of possibilities – the street a site of freedom and possibility, and the room a form of reluctant entrapment – for Woolf and the soft architect, walking facilitates acts of radical composition where doors are always left open.

## The guide

My guide deliberately swirled the final sugars into the steaming fluid in the cup. “The fragile matinal law makes room for all manner of theatre and identity and description of works, the tasting and the having, bagatelles, loose-vowelled dialects – lest we get none in paradise.” (“First Walk”, p. 191)

In this passage from early on in *Seven Walks*, the soft architect and guide are making their preparations for the first of their walks through the city. The aim of their project – its “fragile matinal law” – is to prepare a “document of morning” (p. 191) and this tasks them as urban researchers, inflected with the spirit of the flâneur, the Situationist, the “she-theorist” (p. 202) and the “natural philosopher” (p. 202), to name a few of the many signifiers attached to the shapeshifting, mercurial figure of the guide. The presence of the guide “makes room”. They enlarge the soft architect’s range beyond the sensing capacities of their own form. In the passage above, the gesture of mixing the sugars into the “steaming fluid” inaugurates the guide’s appearance as a kind of ectoplasmic flourish. Rainey, quoted in Koutou, describes ectoplasm as “part of a protofeminist language of the body [...] a mirror image of libidinal desire” (2009, p. 148). Ectoplasm is the physical materialisation of spirit energy from the medium during the séance, and typically takes a viscous or vaporous form. Kontou adds that ectoplasm “is both part of and alien to the medium, is the glue that binds together past and present” (p. 81). The throwaway line at the end of this passage, “lest we get none in paradise”, can be read as an ironic statement, because, as the soft architect states elsewhere, in their twenty-first century urban milieu, “there was no longer a paradise. Hell was [...] outmoded” (p. 191). This line instead performatively gestures to the trope of the guide in classical literature, conjuring the figure of Beatrice, who, in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1320/2012), escorted the poet Virgil into the underworld and then took his place for entry into paradise.

Where the idea of a guide suggests a hierarchical relation of authority and submission, one of the most notable traits of Robertson's guide in *Seven Walks* is its companionable – and companionate – nature. Their appearances throughout the poem are scripted in the language of a shared and mutual endeavour: “We rose from the wooden bench. We felt limber and sleek and ambitious: Ready” (p. 191). The significance of this comes into focus later in the poem, when the guide shapeshifts into a form beyond the human, the form of a dog. In this section I provide an overview of the guide's function within spirit-mediumship discourse. Then I consider the various manifestations of the guide throughout the poem, before focusing closely on the transformation of the guide into a dog, which happens in tandem with the soft architect's own transformation into a reader. This, I argue, showcases how Robertson's application of mediumistic tropes becomes an eco-poetic strategy of expanded awareness regarding more-than-human worlds.

Within spirit-mediumship discourse, the medium performs as a receptacle or vessel for spirit voices. These spirits are commonly referred to as spirit controls, or guides, and typically during a séance a spirit control will “possess” the body of the medium and express through them their messages and experiences from other realms. Natale observes that within the phenomenon of trance mediumship, it was common for these spirit controls to “deliver discourses that touched on pressing social and political issues” (p. 2011, p. 241). Part of the complexity of the medium's performance was this display of passivity, which also afforded women the means of speaking their mind to a public audience. Kontou refers to this dynamic as an “intricate pattern of subversion” (p. 9). Spirit controls often had strong personalities and identities and were generally associated with specific mediums. Florence Cook, one of the most successful mediums of the Victorian period, was known for materialising the spirit of Katie King, a sensational personality who riveted audiences with accounts of her grisly crimes (p. 85). King in turn had a history and genealogy of her own: she was the daughter of another “infamous spirit”, John King, “an audacious buccaneer, who had frequented seances on both sides of the Atlantic” (p. 85). This play of identities, hierarchies and generational associations signals mediumship as a form of performative authorship, concerned with “all manner of theatre and identity and description of works” (Robertson, 2011, p. 191).

Drawing on Linda Hutcheon, Kontou situates mediumship in relation to two other major nineteenth-century cultural developments, the realist novel and historical writings (2009, p. 2). Mediumship shared with these genres the desire to problematise human experience through the creation of new representational forms. Yet while the realist novel and history circumscribe experience into a set of narrowly defined organisational tropes, Kontou writes that, by contrast, “the characteristics of the séance challenge the concept of a ‘closed’ experience – spirits ebbing in and out of materiality” (2009, p. 3). She adds: “there is no filtering of messages during the séance. No detail is more or less important, no spirit is more valuable than another, no conscious decision is made over who or what is being summoned up” (p. 3). In *Seven Walks* the soft architect channels multiple spirits as their guide, and the resultant proliferation of material, disorganised and idiosyncratic, offers an open field of interpretation that is itself a source of pleasure. We can reconsider here the lines quoted earlier in the chapter: “we had recourse to material and rightly or wrongly we assigned the word rapture to its strangeness and obscurity” (p. 208). This is where the soft architect’s mediumistic function parts ways with the conventional medium. As well as channelling this material, they take on the task of interpreters – they become readers. This is a transformation that takes place formally towards the end of the poem, as I will analyse later in this section.

The soft architect retains their own agency within *Seven Walks*, in contrast to the performative sublimity that occurs in the séance room. Yet the collapsing identity markers, the frequent ambiguity as to who is speaking in the text, the alternating uses of “I” and “we” gesture to this phenomenon of authorial instability. In *Seven Walks*, the guide is not positioned as any one particular entity, rather the guide conjures a number of literary associations. Across this exegesis I have touched on several of these: first we learn that, like the soft architect, the guide is dressed in a waistcoat “embroidered with roses” (p. 190). The first association, given the urban setting, is of the Baudelairean dandy, the flâneur, an association that underscores Robertson’s prototypical interest in mediumship almost two decades before her own mediumistic encounter with Baudelaire. This image also suggests the Situationists, who followed on from the flâneur by exploring figures of walkers who were responsive to the changing political environment of Paris in the mid-twentieth century. One scene where the presence of the guide most strongly invokes the Situationists is in “Fourth Walk”, where the soft architect and guide dérive through the light industrial area. In the following passage they transmit to each other the images and impressions from this “defunct light-industrial district” that has so moved

them. In Chapter One we saw how in their reverie here, the soft architect absorbs the temporal knot of the district's many uses: the "lapsed symmetries" (p. 210) of factories, clapboard family houses and "vast, mercantile" (p. 210) storage facilities. Once sites of production and labour all three images are of surfaces drenched with affective potential which, now abandoned, are empty of content. They observe:

As we walked we presented one another with looted images, tying them with great delicacy to our mortal memories and hopes. It was as if at that hour we became strands of attention that spoke. In this way we tethered our separate mortalities to a single mutable surface. This was description, or love. "We must live as if this illusion is our freedom," said my guide. (p. 211)

Their transit through the light-industrial quarters is a *dérive* among the walks, where "*dérive*" refers to a walker's shift or "drop" into an intuitive and idle state lead by the ambiances and cues of their surrounds and away from the demands of work or consumption (Debord, 1956, p. 2). As Solnit suggests in *Wanderlust*, with the *dérive* Debord theorises anew the function of the *flâneur* – she writes, "that *flâneury* seemed to Debord a radical idea all his own is somewhat comic" (2000, p. 212). Solnit adds that a significant contribution of the Situationists to the tradition of urban walking was the formalising of walking as "experimental": as we saw in Chapter One, this approach was present as far back as Rousseau, who applied to walking the attitude of scientific inquiry. The Situationists' "authoritarian prescriptions" (p. 212) however were far more assertive as a means of political resistance.

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that "the images which detached themselves from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream where the unity of life can no longer be re-established" (2012, p. 4). This statement is recomposed by the soft architect in the quoted passage above, in a manner that both signals the influence of the Situationists while refuting their claims. What the soft architect experiences in this scene is a moment of commune and connection with the world, a dissolving of difference, the opposite of severance or alienation from "the unity of life". Writing, or the preparation of their document, has the connective capacity to make meaning from the schisms and alienations of Vancouver's history. What the Situationist-as-guide helps the soft architect to channel here is the collective unconscious embedded in the place itself, its materials and atmospheres. The "single mutable surface" is something made between, something sacred almost as an intimate thrall created by their shared attention, company and focus.

It's a parable of the writer's gift, for the conclusion they draw is that what they produce from their trance is "description, or love" (p. 211). When the guide then speaks of illusion, they underscore the utopian role of language to hold meaning beyond itself, to transmit as a "single mutable surface" greater than the sum of its parts, and the way multiple subjects, through language, contribute to a co-authoring of place.

The guide also at moments suggests the spirit of women intellectuals, such as "she-theorist" who "knew something more crimson than place" (p. 202). In Chapter One I speculate that this reference is connected with Doreen Massey, however it is suggestive and ambiguous enough to summon a range of feminist spatial theorists active during the nineties. For example Diana Agrest, in the influential anthology *The Sex of Architecture* (1996), the first anthology dedicated to women architects and theorists, offers the provocation: "Woman as gender constructing a new nature. It displaces the city to another place, which does not depend on the fetishistic object-building to achieve an "urban pleasure" (1996, 67), while Elizabeth Grosz in *Architecture from the Outside* (2001) argues that "the utopian is not a projection of the future; rather it is the projection of a past or present as if it were a virtual future" (2001, xxi). The first quote from Agrest speaks to the pleasurable textures of Robertson's Vancouver that resonate so forcefully for the soft architect, and to the primacy of walking as the mode by which the city can be best known. The second quote recalls Robertson's engagements with utopia as touched on in Chapter One and the frequency with which reveries collapse into the and hyperreal sense-realm of virtual experience.

The guide also represents the figure of the natural philosopher. As I state in Chapter One, Lucretius in particular is a common reference point across Robertson's oeuvre, and his influence is particularly present at the end of *Seven Walks*, where the group of solitaries are described conducting their research:

This one remembered flight. This one remembered the smooth cylinders glimpsed at evening through the opened portals of the factory. What discipline is secular? This one remembered each acquaintance by an appetite. This one remembered each lie, each blemish, each soft little tear in the worn cottons of the shirts. (p. 225)

The persuasions of an older mode of philosophy are remembered here, more than any particular detail itself. Robertson affirms the value of a style of seeing that is "outmoded", superseded by twentieth-century scientific innovation but worthwhile for

the pleasure of its aesthetic, decorative, poetic function. This passage performatively reconfigures the close observation and wild theorising that was the hallmark of Lucretius, whose theory was led by the experiences of his senses – for instance, in *On the Nature of Things* (2007), a first-century BC philosophical tract published as a poem, he considers the phenomena of colour, meteorology and theories of matter and space.

Yet the Lucretius through-line isn't the only engagement with natural philosophy present in Robertson's text. In a vital, transformational scene in "Fourth Walk", the soft architect and guide are signalled into a gold cab in the forest and are both transformed by the movement between the threshold of "smoked glass" into cab's intimate interior. Within its confines – "I did not know that those surfaces would lock" – the soft architects are suddenly cut off and immune from the workings of the city (p. 215). Here the soft architect describes the guide as

like a text that coverts itself through the most inexplicable activities – erased reflexes, ineptitude, insensitive deposits [...] under the faintly saffron skin, beneath the curved black hairs that seemed engraved in their space (p. 215)

In the locked space of the cab, the guide's identity transforms. "Insensitive deposits", "curved black hairs" – they become a dog. Suddenly the relational enquiry that the poem has proposed up to this point, plural, genderless, human-focused, opens to the creaturely as well. The soft architect describes the intimacy of this relation:

It was as if my guide had extra conceptual organs washed up into the body like flotsam. This history was giving my guide life from a slightly altered or fragmentary perspective, which affected me also – perhaps magnetically, or by some other sympathetic or electrical means (p. 215).

This sudden swerve in the optics of the poem returns the reader to the question of representation, which troubled the soft architects in the earlier scenes via the mashed plaque and the spiritual diorama. Another potential direction is opened up by which to revalue the city and the forms of life entwined within it, as Robertson widens her scope to include the non-human. The urban becomes more fully an ecology, as the soft architect responds to the guide as an affectively loaded subject in the field. The surprise of this encounter invites a reassessment of other instances in the poem where organic and non-organic forms undergo phantasmagorical transformation. In one instance the foliage of the park is described as shaping "a little room" (p. 199); elsewhere "books

swell and shirts flower” (p. 216) and “shadows” become “bowers for our tentative embraces” (p. 212). This discursive method of description where the object is always changing form, while holding onto its nature, updates mediumship as a communicative method no longer responsive to the collective grief of the dead lost at war, but to the rising challenges of ecological destruction and a late-industrial cultural reckoning.

As Rigby charts, in the twentieth century natural philosophy took a creaturely turn, where several researchers working contemporaneously came up with similar theories around what Uexküll calls *umwelt*, or the perceptual world of a given organism. (2010, Uexküll). The field of biosemiotics arising from these strains of research decentres language within a spectrum of communicative senses that form the *umwelt* while recognising the relations between species whose *umwelts* overlap. Rigby writes:

By repositioning articulate human language on a continuum with the varied semiotic transactions with which all organisms are also involved, biosemiotics opens a pathway out of the dead end of human exceptionalism, affording new ways of understanding and predicting forms of multispecies *sympoiesis* (2020, pp. 87–88).

With the transformation of the guide into a dog and the revelation of the “extra conceptual” senses afforded to the soft architect, Robertson updates mediumship as a frame for the poetical potential of shared species *umwelts* to bring about new forms of knowledge and intelligence about the world. It is no coincidence that this transformational moment is inaugurated by the soft architect and guide’s arrival in the forest, about which Uexküll writes: “The meaning of the forest is multiplied a thousandfold if its relationships are extended to animals, and not only limited to human beings” (2010, p. 142).

Robertson’s manifestation of the dog and its entwined identity with the soft architect recalls one of Gertrude Stein’s famous lines: “I am I because my little dog knows me” (1998, p. 488). The dog also channels a literary antecedent in Flush, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel – of whom Virginia Woolf wrote an account in *Flush: A Biography* (1933/2022). In Woolf’s account, the forest is depicted as hallowed ground for the creature Flush. She writes, “if he dreamt at all, he dreamt that he was sleeping in the heart of a primeval forest, shut from the light of the sun, shut from the voices of mankind” (p. 95). Throughout the book Woolf sensitively imagines Flush’s *umwelt*, attending in particular to the primacy of smell and the dog’s emotional connection with

Barrett Browning. In the early part of the book, Woolf also figures Flush as a flâneur: fixated on his walks, in one passage the dog experiences, for the first time, the pleasures (and terrors) of walking London's Wimpole St:

For the first time he heard his nails click upon the hard paving-stones of London. For the first time the whole battery of a London street on a hot summer's day assaulted his nostrils. He smelt the swooning smells that lie in the gutters; the bitter smells that corrode iron railings [...] and also [...] he was dazed by the passage of human bodies. Petticoats swished at his head; trousers brushed his flanks [...] the wind of destruction roared in his ears and fanned the feathers of his paws as a van passed. Then he plunged in terror. Mercifully the chain tugged at his collar; Miss Barrett held him tight, or he would have rushed to destruction. (2022, p. 18)

The walks in London that Barrett Browning make possible for Flash are symphonic, multisensory experiences that leave him equal parts battered and dazed. The relationship is transformative for both parties. In one scene where Barrett Browning is in a state of despair at the difficulties of writing, Flush's sudden appearance opens her to new kinds of creative possibility. Woolf writes:

Her thoughts were so sad that the tears fell upon the pillow. Then suddenly a hairy head was pressed against her; large bright eyes shone in hers; and she started. Was it Flush, or was it Pan? Was she no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek Nymph in some dim grove in Arcady? And did the bearded god himself press his lips to hers? For a moment she was transformed; she was a nymph and Flush was Pan. The sun burnt and love blazed. But suppose Flush had been able to speak – would he not have said something sensible about the potato disease in Ireland? (p. 24)

The sympathetic presence of Flush imaginatively extends Barrett Browning's capacity to think beyond the bounds of ordinary, everyday concerns. Her experience of the world becomes more vivid and more fantastical. She is momentarily able to transcend her corporeal form, her age and ill-health. In *Seven Walks*, with the dog as a companionate guide, the soft architect is transformed as well. This scene in the cab charts a shift in their role within the city, from that of the performative author writing their document, to that of the reader: "I did not know that those surfaces would lock" (p. 215). In this scene the narrators are locked out of their own story. Someone else is driving the car. Another kind of transformation takes place here where the guide has become a dog, the soft architect has become something else too. They have become a reader. "We receded into upholstered anonymity" (p. 215), a description that recalls the earlier description of



“imbrication and elaboration” (p. 190), an image of the passive woman in the drawing room. The experience of being inside in the cab looking outwards at the city maps to the experience of reading: “Our loose comfort metered the pocked road, the sudden turns and pauses” (p. 215). As for the reader turning the pages of an absorbing narrative, the pace speeds up, details start to blur: “Blurred neighbourhoods slid past the glass” (p. 215). Impressions of the scenes they have walked through appear. They are observing their own history, a shorthand for the events parsed earlier in the poem:

Indulged white sculpture, burnt odour coming forward, glass grid, fringes of dust, errant movement, lit inscription and condensed ornament, darkened market, republican lustre of oil on canal water, threshold, embassy, paper, mast. (p. 215)

Where the soft architect has spent their walking registering the affects of the city, this new read – tuning into the relational energy of their companion – charges “we” with a newfound sense of optimism.

They write: “That ‘we’ in its moot atmosphere, clinking against knowledge, was circumfluent to the propriety of doubt” (p. 216). They recognise here that doubt and desire coexist as equal drives. “We were held to our wandering by permissive texts that also reconciled our itinerant lusts” (p. 216). Sitting in “humming silence” (p. 217) with this revelation, the guide assists in unpacking the efforts to document the city, their struggle to maintain the “document of morning”: “There are distances so detailed you feel compelled to construct belief. But it’s the same finite drama of utterance. Something is not being represented”. (p. 217)

Finally, locked within the cab and transformed into a reader, the soft architect disappears completely into the text. Looking through the glass, invisible from within, they witness a transference of power, a generational change: “kids in their nylon halos of beauty were passing. We saw the street lamps annotate their grace” (p. 217).

In the kids the soft architect sees themselves:

I was witness to my own desire, as if erased, and it was something like history: a frivolously maintained dependency on the cancelled chimeras of place, the obscene luxury of an analysis that rejects what it next configures as reversed. Nevertheless I wanted. (p. 217)

In substituting the guide and their authority in this role as a literary forbear or peer, as presumed up to this point in the poem, with the wild creatureliness of the dog, their

“obedience” as well as their “stolid happiness”, the soft architect allows themselves to be “questioned by change” (p. 141). The final transforming action of this scene fulfils the promise of their entrance into the cab: the soft architect disappears into anonymity, watching from behind the darkened glass of the cab as kids look towards it – “our car, still for a moment, occupied the centre of all their luminosity” (p. 217). The car becomes an offering for a generation to follow, an enclosed space that recalls the room with all its creative agency and readerly intensity. But it is a vehicle moving at a different speed, a means of carrying walking through to a new accelerated millennium.

As this chapter has demonstrated, Robertson draws frequently on mediumistic tropes throughout *Seven Walks* as a means of underscoring the nature of feminist writing as a collective endeavour. Her work shows repeatedly that by tuning into the innovations and creativity of women from the past, new possibilities for the future are opened in turn. The aesthetic Robertson makes are always in conversation with those who have come before her. In her conjuring of rooms, she extends the innovations of Virginia Woolf. Via her conjuring of the guide, she is able to channel a suite of literary influences, recomposing their messages from a feminist lens. Rather than remaining a static figure, the soft architect themselves is transformed by these encounters. Their walking ultimately becomes figured as a practice of reading the city, and in this transformation from author to reader, they accept a more humble but no less enlivening stake within the more-than-human world.

## Coda

The local marks of a body to come.

— Michel de Certeau (2015, p. 6)

Regardless of whether, if we do step “outside”, we are heading out onto a rural lane or a city street, the key thing is that we seek to still ourselves sufficiently to allow things to disclose themselves to us in their own way and their own time, being mindful that in doing so they are always also withdrawing from us: nothing is ever fully revealed.

— Kate Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism* (2020, p. 41)

Mountains and clouds and paragraphs.

— Lisa Robertson, “Of mechanics in Rousseau’s thought”  
(2010, p. 21)

Over the past few weeks as I’ve been finalising this exegesis, I’ve returned to the archive of the streets, the park and the river that link the two suburbs of Ashfield and Marrickville, Gadigal and Wangal country respectively, where I’ve lived while thinking and writing through this body of work. La Niña has arrived, causing catastrophic flooding across the state and weeks of wet weather with scant reprieve. On this day in early autumn the floodwater has subsided, the air is fragrant, the groundcover is a mass of green shades and there are overgrown, buzzing patches on verges everywhere. After crossing the footbridge linking the suburb of Earlwood with Hurlstone Park I get swooped by a Noisy Miner and choose to accept its request to take the long way round.

I take pictures:

Greenish algae marked on mangrove trunks at low tide

Fluxing eddy in the river

A newly installed park bench blinding silver

Coloured plastics mottled and layered, protecting a patch of bush scrub

Paste-up of a family in masks

The passing of time has become known to me through the details I have accrued this way. The streets around me, so familiar now, present these fragmentary articles of change. Each walk reveals something new.

Even after so much time spent considering Robertson's long poem *Seven Walks*, it continues to reveal something new too. As I think about endings and returns, and new beginnings, the image it throws up is the image of a bridge, one of the poem's final scenes, offered in the penultimate "Sixth Walk". This exegesis has meditated on Robertson's focus on nineteenth-century aesthetic tropes in reviving and celebrating the points of view of the women writers who charted a path before her. Yet the moment arrives in *Seven Walks* where Robertson asks the question of what lies around her within contemporary experience to pitch her thinking further still. One response is the revelation of the dog as a guide, an opening up of the soft architect's sensory capacity that celebrates creaturely co-authorship, the possibility of producing *umwelts* "no longer constrained by the colonizing logic of human–nonhuman hyperseparation" (Rigby, 2020, p. 84). This is a bold prophetic gesture that surfaces from the work twenty years on from the climate *fin de siècle* moment that Robertson was writing in.

In "Sixth Walk" the soft architect wakes to find they are on a bridge constructed from ordinary detritus, junk and offcuts. For the first time in the poem, they are also alone, separated from the guide, whom they are trying to reach:

When I started off towards my guide the bridge seemed to be made of astonishingly tawdry materials. Branches, twine, tiny mirrors, smashed crockery, wire, bundled grasses, living fronds, pelt-like strips, discarded kitchen chairs of wood their rungs missing, sagging ladders, bits of threadbare carpet, cheap shiny grating, rusted metal strips, gilded frames of nothing, lengths of fraying sisal rope, straw mats unravelling, limp silken roses on green plastic stems, tattered basketry, twisted papers, flapping plastic tarps lit from beneath, woven umbrella spokes, stray asphalt shingles, stained toile de Jouy curtains their wooden rings rattling, a ticking cot-mattress bleeding straw, swollen books stuffing the chinks of the swaying sounding structure, everything knit as if with an indiscernible but precisely ornate intention which would never reveal the complexity of its method to the walker. (p. 218)

While throughout the poem flashes of the ordinary are occasionally recognisable in their Romantic accoutrements (such as the “foliate porcelain” coffee cups (p. 191)), at no other point are these materials left to speak unadorned. The bridge represents another “paradoxical ornament” (p. 196) within *Seven Walks*. It moves and it sounds, its textures multisensory, and in so doing it becomes no more and no less than the city itself and its own patchworks of componentry, its construction and its waste, its hazards and pleasures.

Brought together, this flotsam from the street becomes a “superb structure” (p. 218) transfiguring loss – for the guide is now gone – and setting a foundation for possible futures. The bridge elevates, but in its ordinary constitution, stops one step short of transcendence. It is an everyday monument to change itself. The soft architect in this transportive moment can’t quite tell where they are, but in their listing of materials they issue a kind of spell and cast themselves forth on the rhythm of it. A “swaying sounding structure” is also a womb, and it is also the infant rhythmically wearing through cotton sheets (p. 18) – as Robertson describes in the first sentences of “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto”:

The worn cotton sheets of our little beds had the blurred texture of silk crêpe and when we lay against them in the evening we’d rub, rhythmically, one foot against the soothing folds of fabric, waiting for sleep. That way we slowly wore through the thinning cloth. Our feet would get tangled in the fretted gap. (p. 18)

The bridge is always a beginning, because as we know from fairy tales, there is no turning back once the hero(ine) steps out – and the bridge always heralds an awakening, a coming into power, and a reckoning that the heroine can only survive by the grace of their courage and their acceptance of the plot set in motion.

The bridge in Robertson’s handling offers more than a signification of the hero’s journey. It offers passage to a host of others: “Animals were crossing. Mules and dogs and cattle. Children too. Bicycles with devilish horns. Some of us were men and some were women [...] some wore secular velvets and I touched them in passing” (p. 220). And there are “bridge urchins [...] at their card games and games of dice” (p. 220). The bridge allows safe passage, but it also allows for temporary respite and pause. The soft architect relays: “I dawdled and sauntered and loitered” (p. 220). Robertson’s “gently

swaying” bridge combines the connective function of the street with the room’s protective matrilineal aura.

That we might think of the present as a bridge; that past and future might cross in both directions; that what we discard is what someone else might need; that the act of recomposition births entirely new propositions.

The proposition I have offered is that the soft architect is a unique typology of urban walker who claims their place alongside the flâneur, the Situationist, and the Romantic solitary walker. I have argued that the soft architect carries strains of these early types but adds the performative intuitions of the medium and models a “contemporaneous plurality” (Massey, 2015, p. 9) in speaking with and through a chorus of solitaires – among them Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Virginia Woolf.

Another version of this exegesis would have made more of Robertson’s frequent use of pseudonyms across her oeuvre. There wasn’t the reach to trace her affinities with Baudelaire, for example, who first manifests in the collective “The Giantesses”, which Robertson participated in alongside Christine Stewart, Catriona Strang and Susan Clark in the early 1990s. Baudelaire’s poem “The Giantess” offers the lines: “I should have liked to see her soul and body thrive / And grow without restraint in her terrible games” (Baudelaire, 2015, 39). Hold that thought a moment, as it turns out there is a giantess in Virginia Woolf’s *Street Haunting*, too: “she was shabbily dressed but she was ready to lavish any money upon her shoes” (2014, p. 62). It is hopefully clear by now that through her occupation of male figures Robertson expands and generously redefines the spatial terrain in which women can create, imagine and experience pleasure. But I’m aware that I’ve only begun to trace the contours of how Robertson performatively extends her authorship through these figurations.

While researching I came across another of Robertson’s “terrible games”: across the same period in which she was writing as the Office for Soft Architecture, she was publishing horoscopes under the Proustian name of Swann for the interior design magazine, *Nest* (1997–2004). The Swann horoscopes were a discovery from the archive that I tried very hard to include within this doctorate but ultimately set aside. Upon returning from Vancouver I purchased a whole set of the magazines, now highly collectible, and have gained some pleasure from their company on the shelves beside me

as I've been writing. Plucking an issue off the shelf now, the horoscope for Aries (my own) reads in part: "Take your strength from the sublime Arian Vivienne Westwood, who in 1976 stencilled on a shirt 'we are not in the least afraid of ruins'" (Swann, 2003, p. 156). The horoscopes add a new dimension to the traces of mediumship present in Robertson's work. They also expand the remit of the soft architecture project: "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto" was published first within the same magazine (Office, 2000, p. 124). Every horoscope implores the reader towards change and experiment: my horoscope also suggests I "cover [my] ceilings with gold and silver cigarette paper" and "sleep in a hammock under coarse ikat sheets" (Swann, 2003, p. 156). In their evocative recasting of the domestic interior as a site of creativity and invention, the horoscopes further deepen my argument about the street and the room as facets of the same continuum.

This consideration of embodied experience and architectural space brings to mind another virtual version of this doctorate, which would have considered Robertson's soft architecture project alongside the projects of fellow experimental writers mining the world-building potential of architectural thought. For example, to my knowledge no one has yet teased out the affinities between Robertson and Madeline Gins. Gins started out in the 1960s writing experimental poetry and then formed an enduring creative partnership with her husband Arakawa, with whom she published the books *Architectural Body* (2002) and ran an experimental architecture firm, Reversible Destiny. The buildings and texts Arakawa and Gins produced sought to interrupt routine spatial habits in order to animate the latent life force in their subjects and confront the finitude of death. Yet to my mind it is Gins' early poetry which animates a starting point for this research. Gins' conceptually driven poetry, written in the 1960s, brings together many of the concerns also present in Robertson's writing: an interest in reading practices, philosophical thought, and the subjectivities of women's experience. "I introduce the tensile subject into her", Gins writes in her prose poem "The Waterfall or An Introduction", published in the collection *Word Rain* (1969). "I am her introduction to the room, to the word rain, to the waterfall plummeting over membranous rocks. I find her room. I move in the damp ocean. Words cannot say how I am she" (Gins, 2021, p. 89). Influences both Romantic (those waterfalls and rocks) and Modernist (the Steinian diction) signal vividly here.

Yet another version of this doctorate would up the traces of the archival that figure into Robertson's writing of *Seven Walks*, and her practice more broadly. Recent research examines Robertson's practice of recomposing works from her own archive (see Polyck-O'Neill, 2018), and I would argue that this habit of reworking old material is an enactment of the soft architect's philosophy on the page. It was a great surprise to me that this research turned towards literary-historical questions of influence and lineage: I attribute the emergence of this throughline to the time I was fortunate to spend with Robertson's own archive and the alive feeling of the miscellany stored there. One of the challenges of writing up this exegesis was precisely how resonant Robertson's writing is, it wears right on its surface the influence of so many others while remaining singular in its own aesthetic. What is also compelling is how much Robertson generates from her own material, returning and reworking ideas, concepts and even her own notebooks. As I noted briefly in Chapter One, Robertson's three books on Rousseau recursively present workings of her own archival notes, each revisit implicitly tracing the movement of time on Robertson's form of seeing.

On her Instagram, just a few weeks ago, Robertson shared a snippet from one of her forthcoming books:

*this* could be my beginning  
the desire to speak with the dog  
from all the black moods of the organs  
near the public lilacs of the station lawns (Robertson, 2022)

In considering this snippet I was struck by just how many of the ideas within *Seven Walks* Robertson continues to salvage, recompose, reclaim, draft anew. Each iterative manoeuvre reveals a new shade, a different facet. Here again is the dog as a companion, a creature to speak with. Here again is the desire to speak as a plural subject, their "black moods" shading the optimistic sentiments of a new beginning. Through the poem runs a bridge, both real and imagined. Robertson's repetitious striving suggests that the power of walking is in its nature as a social activity where generative reflection yields not necessarily to fixes, but to further avenues of potential and a clear-eyed acceptance of the world in all its griefs and pleasures. Here again is Lisa Robertson's offering of a democratised, "public" vision, its station lawns of lilacs a place to rest, to pause briefly, before the next ride.



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