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Walking With and Caring For

Attending to the Self and the Other in the Pedestrian City

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Walkable cities are caring cities, argues Pedram Dibazar. Viewing the pedestrian city through the lens of care, Dibazar discusses the importance of walking together as a means to sense the city anew.

[Ed. note: this article is part of a dossier on Caring Cities.]

In recent years walking has become a subject of much professional and popular interest. Urban researchers, designers, and policy makers discuss walkability and its benefits. Cities around the world are introducing radical plans to expand pedestrianism. Networks of pavements and footpaths are being expanded and conjoined with the corollary infrastructures of public transport and cycle paths to propagate a culture of walking. A kind of vibrant urban lifestyle predicated on walking is believed to cultivate qualities that shape good living. Lively cities are ones that encourage walking for different purposes, where streets are rich with

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amenities available within walking distance and people feel safe and encouraged to walk and enjoy the kinds of pleasure it brings. Walkable neighbourhoods, it is widely believed, could ultimately enhance liveability and sociability, leading to safer, happier, and friendlier cities where social encounter of varying degrees is a daily occurrence and people feel less socially isolated.[1]

Besides such socio-cultural considerations, the urgency of walkability today comes mostly in response to the overwhelming effects of globalisation. Rob Shields et al. explain how the popular discourse of walkability in urban planning, policy, and scholarly research is principally "driven by aspirations and needs for sustainability, health and perceptions of economic advantage for walkable commercial streets."[2] That walkability is good for business is a convincing argument for the capitalist society already acquainted with the success of walking as a consumption-inducing mode of mobility in shopping areas. Environmental and health concerns are more recent. Of course, walking is good for the environment for it assists in expanding greener cities run on low carbon infrastructures. A pedestrian city is one that limits the expansion of environmentally hostile networks of highways and automobiles, reducing urban pollution as a result. Urban research is thus interested in walking as a sustainable and reliable mode of mobility.

Walking is also good for the wellbeing of people. Health specialists seem to agree that a mere thirty-minute daily walk could have extraordinary effects on a range of physical and mental states, from obesity-related conditions such as diabetes to states of anxiety, depression, and stress. A healthy city, urban research suggests, is an "active city" that facilitates and promotes walking as a regular activity, and in doing so propagates general wellbeing.[3] Such an approach to walkability necessitates discourses that pay attention to what Shields et al. refer to as "physical accessibility by differently-abled bodies" and "an overwhelming interest in the instrumental usefulness of walking as a healthy exercise."[4]

Walking as Caring

These are some of the main frameworks that shape the discourse on walkability today. However, to rely on such interpretive

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frameworks for exploring walking and cities might conceal the full potential of this coupling, especially because the concept of walkability itself does not seem to have a straightforward definition at its core but could be seen as a conceptual framework to describe what Shields et al. call "a set of investments, theories, or an orientation to cities".[5] Here, I am suggesting a new orientation and conceptual investment for the discourse of urban walkability: when seen through the lens of care, walkable cities are caring cities. Orienting the discourse in this way does not completely overwrite the previously mentioned concerns but slightly shifts their meanings. It is easy to assume that a walkable city is one that cares for the environment and the general health, wellbeing, sociability, and livelihood of its residents. This caring involves a close and thoughtful consideration for the one who walks and the infrastructure that supports the walk. Care here connotes attentiveness, a deep appreciation and careful treatment, a closeness.

Most of the urban literature on walking embraces such an understanding of care but different writers use slightly different vocabularies and frameworks of analysis. For the practice of urban design, for instance, caring could mean attentiveness to the needs and desires of everyday urban walkers. The urban theory of Jane Jacobs, who defied the prevalent approach of urban planning in mid-twentieth century America by giving primacy to pedestrians and their messy walking habits, could be read in this vein.[6] Michel de Certeau's well-known rhetoric of walking also puts the designer and urban professional close to the ground to attend carefully to the flow of everyday footsteps.[7] By orienting his thoughts towards everyday forms of walking, de Certeau paints the conventional urban designer as a rather careless and irresponsible character who sees the city abstractly from above, professionally far removed from the thick texture of urban life. Other accounts of urban walking in arts and literature suggest that for the everyday walker caring implies an attentiveness to interactions with the city in the minutiae of its materialities and urban lives. The celebrated figure of the flâneur, introduced in the writings of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, is a good example of an urban walker whose attention is profoundly on the city, carefully observing its crowd and everyday scenery. The flâneur's seemingly uncritical urban explorations found a more directly political counterpart in the work of the Situationists,

who saw potential in a sort of free-floating walking, or *dérive*, to create novel and often subversive types of attentiveness and relationalities to space. By enacting such walks, the Situationists strived to create antidotes to the capitalist city and its alienating effects; they cared deeply for the city and the human experience in it and refused to remain blasé. These are but a few examples from the urban literature to illustrate how walking captures the spirit of care and attentiveness.

Returning to one of the main frameworks of the discourse of walkability I outlined earlier, let me explore health and wellbeing through the concept of care. This might seem like an easy reorientation to make, as in today's public discourse an attention to one's body and its mental and physical fitness is commonly referred to by the term *self-care*. A great deal of forms of walking fall into that popular category of self-care. Taking daily walks for physical and mental health has become a modern way of life. Many people include walking in their everyday schedules and, supported by digital devices that count steps on the go, keep track of the number of steps they take, the distance they cover, and the calories they burn to attend to their own fitness. They create occasions for such walks, even if their routines do not include much walking. They go for walks in city parks or in their own neighbourhood, clad in their daily clothes or track suits, carrying apps and gadgets that quantify their walks for careful fitness assessments. Such an orientation towards walking has influenced contemporary work environments too. Many employers of all sizes encourage their employees to take short walks during work, arguing that punctuating work with such walks not only is good for their employees' overall wellbeing but also, and probably more importantly for them, could lead to better productivity. The responsibility of self-care is put on the individual and is rendered achievable by simple acts of walking.

But walking should not be seen as only a form of care for the self in this narrow way. Walking could indeed generate a variety of quotidian situations for interpersonal care – a simple act of offering a smile to a fellow passer-by, for instance, or a brief exchange of words or offer of help. However, the prevalent discourse of everyday walkability for health mostly considers walking to be a solitary practice in which the walker develops an orientation towards the self

and personal fitness, rarely considering other types of care that could be enacted in the process. Everyday forms of walking in this solitary way, framed under the mantra of self-care and self-improvement, might in fact convey inattentiveness to whatever exists beyond the self: in daily walks we might not really look around and notice things; we might be mostly blasé and just walk. As walking is a skilled practice of the body, it might seem easy and frictionless to walk a path regularly. We might only see what is necessary for the functioning of the walk in the environment (the traffic lights, for instance) and miss a lot. The ingrained habits of urban walking predicate certain ways of not seeing the environment – although one might note that this could be quite the opposite in hikes and in curated or choreographed types of walks. Such a form of care for the self might risk neglecting the rest.

Moreover, the idea of self-care ingrained in such ways of walking for fitness is itself often embedded in a neoliberal discourse of optimisation, efficiency, and productivity, conveying the opposite of a genuine notion of care. In their *Care Manifesto*, The Care Collective identify “organised loneliness” as a major problem in contemporary societies that propel people “to feel and act like hyper-individualised, competitive subjects who primarily look out for themselves.”[8] To fight the withering effects of such atomisation, the Care Collective believes that we need to create “conditions that enable us to act collaboratively”.[9] The creation of such “caring communities” requires seeing a broader group of people included in the intimacies of care giving and receiving, expanding the traditional relationalities of family kinship to include a bigger public (friends, neighbours, fellow citizens, or strangers) under the umbrella of care. The care given and taken in such communities, the collective indicates, need to function on grounds of “mutual support” provided in different practices and forms of “neighbourliness” – different forms of looking out for each other – and “sharing stuff”, such as reliance on public libraries and other types of public infrastructures.[10] How to reconcile walking with such a radical idea of mutual support and sharing?

Walking with: entangled caring

A city that propels walking could generate other types of care too, especially if we reconsider conceiving of the walker as a solitary person. To explore the possibility of a more varied notion of care, I

want to consider practices of walking together, walking with rather than alone. Walking with could be an occasion for the give and take of such mutual support and sharing suggested by the Care Collective. Sharing here starts from sharing the walk itself to sharing words, ideas, and even emotions that might come up in the talks. It could also include sharing other things one might do while walking, such as sharing a bench to sit on to catch a breath, sharing something to eat or drink, sharing a view, or sharing a laugh. Taking the walk together itself is a form of sharing and mutual support, if only emotionally. It is also a form of sharing the city, contributing to neighbourliness, and fostering caring communities.

Alexandra Horowitz has done a fascinating experiment with walking-with.[11] She took walks "with people who have distinctive, individual, expert ways of seeing all the unattended, perceived ordinary elements …[she] was missing."[12] To challenge her own attentiveness to the environment, she took these walks on streets and pavements that constituted her everyday reality "around the block", a geography that she traversed daily and knew well. While walking with a range of "expert eyes" such as a botanist, an urban activist, a child, and a dog, Horowitz experienced being in the world with them. The effect was orienting her own modes of being and attentiveness to the world to that of her companions. These walks-with were occasions for her to go in directions and take detours she would not normally take and see things she would not normally notice. Horowitz writes, "together, we became investigators of the ordinary, considering the block – the street and everything on it – as a living being that could be observed."[13] She studied forms of seeing the world and experiencing it that were co-constituted and were crucially based on a deep appreciation of the other and attentiveness to their world.

To explore care as attunements of walking-with, I suggest considering walking with children. In her study of the daily walks to school of a group of seven- to twelve-year-old children in Helsinki, Kim Kullman writes about the varied attunements and entanglements that children make with the city and particularly with the pavements and the everyday life that unfolds during these walks.[14] In Kullman's study, children stand out as urban carers, attending to the minutiae of the everyday city. Children notice things

and get excited about things, such as a dog walking by or a shiny object on the pavement, in ways that most adults do not (this realisation echoes Horowitz's observations). Sometimes parents accompany children on these walks. Although the primary function of the parent here is to take care of their child, the adult also gets attuned to different forms of care the child pays to the environment and indeed to the parent, positioning the parent as the receiver of a different form of care too. Urban care demonstrated – indeed, lived – by these children and parents, Kullman observes, entails "affective attunement", seeing care as an "embodied disposition whereby people fine-tune themselves to the fragilities of the world and experiment with attachments to human and nonhuman others so as to counteract such fragilities".[15] After detailing the walks and the human-material entanglements through them, Kullman poses the following challenge for urban research and practice: "how to facilitate a care-based pedagogy that creates space for children and adults alike to continue sensitizing themselves to the fragile but multifarious relations that constitute the urban."[16] The culture of urban care she is after is predicated on the potential of walking in cities to generate forms of attunement, attachment, and entanglement, all in the service of caring for the city and others, and being cared for in reverse.

Walking-with is a powerful way of creating such forms of interdependence. A mother walking her child to school, a grandchild taking a walk with their grandparent, or a health-provider walking along a patient in a wheelchair are all intimate forms of caregiving. Good caring in such cases is predicated on the level of entanglements the two parties shape through walking. A caring unit or assemblage could be said to be formed around, for instance, the concept of "mother-child walking assemblage" to account for the notion of care as an "affective resonance".[17] Additional caring objects might be incorporated into this unit. The addition of a pram for walking the child, for instance, sets up a "mother-child-pram assemblage" as a caring unit.[18] The notion of a caring unit suggests a kind of mutuality in giving and receiving care. Even if one party to the walk might seem more in need of support and caring for (an elderly person, for instance), by taking a walk together the sharp distinctions between these two positions gets blurred as both parties take part in creating a form of togetherness and mutual support.

Such units of care are reminiscent of friendships. Friends, companions, and lovers go on walks and attend to each other through the walk. For them, walking together could be a potent way of exercising companionship. A significant element in the creation of the sense of intimacy in the practices of walking-with is how walkers attend to each other's walking habits. They adjust pace and tune in to each other's walking patterns, co-creating a rhythm that in its uniqueness could evoke strong feelings of closeness.[19] In walking side by side, companions do not just walk their walk; they pay attention to each other, ceaselessly tend to each other, and take care of one another.

Young adults enact friendship, care, and support in their everyday walks together and hanging out. The dynamics of such socialities are analysed in John Horton et al.'s research about children and young adults' hanging out in new urban developments in the UK.[20] The research shows how a significant part of young people's everyday lives are spent walking together, in pairs or in groups. What stands out is how in walking together "young people took responsibility and cared for one another" and "habitually worked together to keep each other safe: looking out for one another, collaboratively checking their surroundings and looking after one another's possessions."[21] They made sure of the safety of their companion by being watchful of approaching vehicles while crossing the street or of shady people and situations. The research highlights the "gestures of care and responsibility" that are tied to young people's walking practices, providing a contrasting image to the popular representation of this demographic and their walks as merely antisocial, care-free behaviour.[22]

Cities that connect walkers: materialities of care

Walking-with creates different sorts of entanglements, attunements, and interpersonal care. Here, I am arguing for a wholesome notion of a walking city as a caring city by considering practices of walking-with – ways of taking walks with another person or persons. A lot of these types of caring walks unfold commonly in everyday life. Although they are not always framed as caring practices, neither are they always seen as practices to analyse – there is nothing more common than just walking. Additionally, there is a lot of potential in

creating novel types of creative walks-with where care and interdependency could be experienced. Cities, with their rich infrastructures of walking and networks of creative people and institutions, have a lot to offer in this regard. There are so many ways that walking-with could be creatively enacted. Consider Myriam Lefkowitz's brilliant project *Walk, Hands, Eyes*, which has been enacted over the years in different cities around the world.[23] The project puts two people's hands together and sets them off onto the streets. One of the participants has their eyes covered and is led by the other person. The unit walks together for an hour in silence. The project explores sensing and navigating by creating a form of interdependency. The walkers depend on each other for seeing and noticing, and they sense together as they walk with hands touching. Participants form novel relationships with space and each other, being attentive to each other's bodies and habits of walking for the duration of the walk.

A caring city oriented towards acts of walking-with embraces occasions for such walks. Universities and institutes for education, with their motivated communities and inclusive facilities and networks, have good potential for creating programmes or events for people to get in touch and take walks together. University of Amsterdam's UvAWalks initiative, created by student Tim Wagelaar, is a fascinating example. The project was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic and has unfortunately been inactive since. UvAWalks connected students to make pairs and go on walks together. In the Netherlands, the regulations during the lockdown made it possible to take a walk with another person while keeping a safe distance of 1.5 metres, and it was generally encouraged to go out for fresh air and meet a friend in the open air rather than inside (for the most part of the lockdown it was also acceptable to host a limited number of guests at home). Under such circumstances, UvAWalks was a timely response to the extreme physical isolation and mental despair that the student community, which included a lot of international students away from their families and friends, was struggling with. The initiative foregrounds the communal aspect of the walks, indicating care and support for loneliness. Participants used the university's platform to find a walking partner and they decided on the time and location together. A fascinating idea was to pair students randomly before putting them in contact with each

other so as to give them the chance to get acquainted accordingly. In walking with another person in this way, one would get the chance to meet a new person, socialise, and make a new acquaintance and possibly a friend in the physical world.

The university plays a central role for enacting such walks. It is through the network of the university that people meet each other, and it is probably because of the university's framework that people feel encouraged and safe to do so. The infrastructure of the university and the city combine to orient students to form walking units. The walks, then, are carefully curated to function as a support mechanism. The whole setting of these occurrences indicates care. It is noteworthy that issues of physical wellbeing and fitness do not really feature in this programme, even though the immobile lifestyle effected by Covid restrictions could have made a good justification for it. Instead, there is a lot of emphasis on mental wellbeing and social livelihood. Caring for the self and the other combine through the act of walking. One gives and receives care; the whole practice of walking together, from its start in finding a companion to the end, performs as a caring unit. When loneliness hits hard, either due to a social condition like the pandemic or because of personal mental states, what could be more caring than walking with another? Caring builds on the creation of a sense of togetherness, co-presence, and mutual commitment.

In addition, and most interestingly, the programme also provided the option of taking a walk together with someone only present via phone at a distance. That is, two parties could be walking separately in different locations while connecting to one another with a mediating device. They could both be texting or talking while walking. Or one person might be walking and texting while the other sitting and texting, in which case the effect of live chatting with the other's walking could generate a feeling of being taken on a walk. New media and smart devices we carry with us have created new forms of togetherness and feelings associated with presence. Digital tools today indeed provide the possibility for connection and interaction almost everywhere at any time in a way that feels unmediated. It is possible to create a sense of co-presence through distance with the help of synchronous media such as video calling, messaging, image sharing and other instant sharing applications.

Arguments could be made for the value of intimacy and attentiveness in such forms of mundane co-presence, for how such connectivities could enable new types of care and kinship.[24] This is an exciting addition that on the surface might seem to go against the promises of the projects (taking a physical walk with someone outdoors), yet does in fact provide possibilities for the expansion of caring in time and space. For if it is possible to create a sense of co-presence online through media environments, why can we not create a sense of co-presence in walks when those technologies also accompany our walks in our pockets or wearables? Walking-with could make use of the spatial expansions and temporal synchronicities that locative media bring about to add elements of co-presence and care-from-distance.

Walking together does not have to be device-free; it could even be predicated on the device's connectivity and intimacy from afar and other affordances that digital devices provide for arranging time and space. In fact, this is what a lot of us do in our everyday walks without noticing, when we text or live chat while walking or when we follow a friend's lead on a map. At the very least, we depend on our smartphone for making the plan for a walk together, finding the spot, reaching out, and later for keeping in touch. Smartphones equipped with locative media and all sorts of apps that count steps or trace paths have affected walking practices substantially, both in how we walk and in how it feels to walk. In their study of walking with navigation apps, Eric Laurier et al. argue that smartphones have reconfigured walking practices in a way that the idea of "the classical lone walker" does not make much sense anymore, as today we walk "together with touchscreens."[25] In a sense, a lot of walking practices today are walkings-with. Walking with a smartphone in the pocket is not an altogether lonesome act, even if the smartphone is not used or touched deliberately during the walk. What about walking while listening to a podcast or an audiobook? Does that count as a solitary walk? The effects of digitisation on walking need to be studied further to enrich the literature of walking.

The idea of walking being equipped with and depending on technologies and materials itself is nothing new. In her analysis of the embodied nature of urban walking, Jennie Middleton writes about "mundane technologies and the 'equipmentality' of walking"[26]

and how “walking attire” affects the dynamics and nature of walks. Examples of walking attire include footwear, clothing, bags and other accessories one carries, and phones. The literature of walking has been mostly neglectful of this significant element affecting walking practices. To consider how care might be built into the practices of walking-with one needs to consider how the equipmentality of walking changes with the introduction of a partner to the walk. The choice of objects and materials one wears or carries and the type of apps one uses have effects on the type of attention one pays to their companion in walking. How to equip for a caring walk with a person in need of emotional support, for instance? How does one choose their walking attire for taking a walk with a person in a wheelchair or a person with a slow pace or a person who insists on wearing high heels? And what about digital apps and screens? Locative media have created a form of dependency in a lot of people in the sense that they might feel disoriented, lost, or ontologically insecure with no access to digital maps on their devices. For some people just having access to the phone and its smart map and database is enough to feel okay, even if they do not really get to use the map. What happens when people with different attachments to such media go on a walk together, if one person gets a sense of assurance and safety from them and the other gets only distraction and therefore avoids them? To really care for a simple, ordinary walk together one needs to take such careful considerations.

In what I have outlined, a whole range of human and non-human entanglements converge to establish assemblages of mutual care. These include a range of pedestrian-oriented urban networks and infrastructures, such as pavements, parks, public transport, and necessary public amenities; institutions such as universities and cultural centres that could facilitate walking practices and bring people together in reliable ways; and all the accessories, devices, and media that contribute to the equipmentality of walking. At the centre of such an assemblage are the walking bodies themselves, entangled in a mutually constructed form of giving and receiving care, attuned to each other’s needs and ways of being. This is how walking-with encapsulates what Emma Power and Miriam Williams conceptualise as “materialities of care”: “how objects, bodies, buildings, or materials are enrolled and how they shape the nature and possibility of care.”[27] Caring here is dependent on the

coherence and functioning of materialities of care in everyday life, in how "urban lives and care are practised, navigated, and negotiated within the urban."[28] In the caring city that I have outlined, objects and bodies are enrolled in the practices of walking-with to create the possibility of care.

Of course, people could decide to go on walks in cities, alone or with companions. One does not need permissions or complicated arrangements to go on walks. One could decide, provided that the basic infrastructures for walkability are available, to walk to work, school, and the shops. Walking as such may not seem an exceptional idea to make theories about. But the true question is whether cities could, and are socially and politically ready, to implement programmes to encourage forms of care that could be attached to walking and to put residents in contact for taking walks together. Could they encourage contact between strangers in this way and promote a culture of care for the self, the other, and the environment? Maybe smart technologies could be put into good use to bring people to share walks in smart ways.

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Notes

↑**1** This exhilarating urban imaginary of such pedestrian friendliness is deeply indebted to the pioneering work of Jane Jacobs.

↑**2** Rob Shields, Edmar Joaquim Gomes da Silva, Thiago Lima e Lima, and Nathalia Osorio, "Walkability: a review of trends," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 16, no.1 (2023): 20.

↑**3** Jenny Roe and Layla McCay, *Restorative Cities: Urban*

Design for Mental Health and Wellbeing (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), 119.

↑**4** Shields at al., "Walkability," 20.

↑**5** Shields at al., "Walkability," 19.

↑**6** ane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

↑**7** Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

↑**8** The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 45.

↑**9** The Care Collective, *Manifesto*, 45.

↑**10** The Care Collective, *Manifesto*, 47–53.

↑**11** Alexandra Horowitz, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes* (New York: Scribner: 2013).

↑**12** Horowitz, *On Looking*, 3.

↑**13** Ibid.

↑**14** Kim Kullman, "Children, Urban Care, and Everyday Pavements," *Environment and Planning A* 46, no.12 (2014): 2864–2880.

↑**15** Kullman, "Children," 2876.

↑**16** Kullman, "Children," 2877.

↑**17** Susannah Clement and Gordon Waitt, "Walking, Mothering and Care: a Sensory Ethnography of Journeying on-Foot with Children in Wollongong, Australia," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 24, no.8 (2017): 1189.

↑**18** Susannah Clement and Gordon Waitt, "Pram Mobilities: Affordances and Atmospheres That Assemble Childhood and Motherhood on-the-Move," *Children's Geographies* 16, no.3 (2018): 252–265.

↑**19** Jo Lee and Tim Ingold, "Fieldwork on Foot: Perceiving, Routing, Socializing," in *Locating the Field: Space, Place and*

Context in Anthropology, ed. Simon Coleman and Peter Collins (Oxford: Berg: 2006), 67–85.

↑**20** John Horton, Pia Christensen, Peter Kraftl, and Sophie Hadfield-Hill, "'Walking … Just Walking': How Children and Young People's Everyday Pedestrian Practices Matter," *Social & Cultural Geography* 15, no.1 (2014): 94–115.

↑**21** Horton et al., "Just Walking", 106.

↑**22** Horton et al., "Just Walking", 107.

↑**23** The project has been enacted in various cities, including Plymouth, Edinburgh, Amsterdam. Vignettes from earlier enactments are collected in a publication.

↑**24** For mediated forms of long distance care and kinship, see: Larissa Hjorth et al., *Digital Media Practices in Households: Kinship through Data* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020); Mira Madianou, "'Doing Family' at a Distance: Transnational Family Practices in Polymedia Environments," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, ed. Larissa Hjorth et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

↑**25** Eric Laurier, Barry Brown, and Moira McGregor, "Mediated Pedestrian Mobility: Walking and the Map App," *Mobilities* 11, no.1 (2016): 132.

↑**26** Jennie Middleton, "Sense and the City: Exploring the Embodied Geographies of Urban Walking," *Social & Cultural Geography* 11, no.6 (2010): 568.

↑**27** Emma R. Power and Miriam J. Williams, "Cities of Care: A Platform for Urban Geographical Care Research," *Geography Compass* 14, no.1 (2020): n. page. DOI: 10.1111/gec3.12474

↑**28** Power and Williams, "Cities of Care," n. page.

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