

## **Walking as Embodied Research: Coloniality, Climate Change, and the ‘Arts of Noticing’**

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### **Abstract**

‘Walking is the speed for noticing...’ In 2014, I began convening walking seminars together with the researcher Christian Ernsten and the documentary photographer Dirk-Jan Visser. Each seminar involves a mix of scholars, artists, curators and activists and results in various work: journal articles, musical scores, photographic essays, and creative non-fiction. This chapter sets out the thinking behind the walking seminars, drawing on a variety of sources: recent interventions in the environmental humanities, decolonial thinking and practice, arts-based research methods and ideas around embodied research and the senses. Not least, it draws on the long history of writing about walking as a way through which to engage the world and intervene in social scenarios. As we enter the ambiguous new epoch of the Anthropocene, and as familiar landscapes change and degrade, we need—more than ever—to pay attention, to notice, to take care. For scholars, this arguably involves leaving the ‘white cube’ of the seminar room for more materially involved and implicated forms of engagement with our research subjects. The humble, everyday act of walking offers one route towards such modes of engagement.

**Keywords:** Walking seminars, embodiment, Anthropocene, decolonial thinking, arts-based research, Table Mountain

Walking is the speed for noticing—and for thinking. The Table Mountain Walking Seminars suggest just how much we need walking to imagine alternatives to the intertwined human and non-human catastrophes of the Anthropocene.

—Anna Tsing (in Shepherd et al., 2018, p. 1).

### ***‘Part Living Laboratory, Part Performance, Part Decolonial Enactment’***

In 2014, I started convening ‘walking seminars’ together with Christian Ernsten, a researcher based at Maastricht University, and the Dutch documentary photographer Dirk-Jan Visser (Ernsten & Shepherd, 2021; Shepherd & Ernsten, 2021). My research profile is that of a scholar who has pursued a fairly orthodox research track. Trained as an archaeologist, I work in the areas of STS, Critical Heritage Studies and decolonial thinking and practice. From 2017 to 2018, I held a position as an artist-in-residence at the Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK), a departure from an otherwise conventional scholarly career. Our starting idea with the walking seminars was simple: invite the most interesting possible group of people to walk, talk and share ideas and approaches. Since then, our ideas have evolved. We always invite a mixed group of scholars, creative artists, curators and activists. One of the intentions of the walking seminars is to flatten out hierarchies between theory and practice and between

scholarly and creative practices. We favour hybrid collaborations involving, for example, an architect, a philosopher and a choreographer in thinking about the micro-politics of collecting water from a particular city spring. We also favour a model of quick publication, whereby work is produced in multiple formats inside and outside the formal academic apparatus (Shepherd et al., 2018).

This raises questions about the possibilities and limitations of institutionalized peer review systems and standard academic formats like the journal article. It also raises questions about the terms of engagement between scholarly and creative practices in the process of research and the production of knowledge. Typically, in such engagements, creative practices play a supplementary role, and the real business of knowledge production is understood to take place in the scholarly disciplines (Borgdorf, 2012). We specifically reject such a characterization. Drawing inspiration from the field of STS and the debate around artistic research methods and practice as research, we are interested in a richer dialogue between these modes. On the one hand, we are interested in the forms of knowledge that emerge from creative practices and artistic research methods (Busch, 2009; Kara, 2015; Klein, 2010; Leavy, 2018). On the other hand, we are interested in using creativity and imagination as resources in more conventional forms of scholarship and empirical research (Klein, 2010; Shepherd, 2015a).

At the core of the seminars is the practice and craft of walking as a form of embodied research and as a means of engaging the new and emergent landscapes of the Anthropocene. In her beautifully realized book, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, Rebecca Solnit writes: ‘The history of walking is an unwritten, secret history whose fragments can be found in a thousand unemphatic passages in books, as well as in songs, streets, and almost everyone’s adventures’ (Solnit, 2001, p. 3). She notes that: ‘Walking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilling rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labour that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals’ (Solnit, 2001, p. 5). In this regard, she writes of ‘walking’s peculiar utility for thinkers’: ‘The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it’ (Solnit, 2001, p. 5–6).

As Solnit suggests, walking is good for thinking in general, but it can also be good for thinking in particular and working away at a problem or issue. Each walking seminar is convened around a theme. Our most ambitious and successful walking seminars have taken place along the chain of mountains linking Cape Point to Cape Town in South Africa. Lasting a week, they traverse the approximately 80 km of the Hoerikwaggo Trail. Accommodation is in tented camps along the way. A Table Mountain Walking Seminar that took place in December 2015 in the aftermath of the events of #RhodesMustFall, the student-led social movement that contested the legacy of Cecil Rhodes—itsself deeply inscribed in the landscape of Table Mountain—was themed around ‘Decolonizing Table Mountain’ (Shepherd, 2020; Shepherd, 2022). A Table Mountain Walking Seminar in March 2018 was themed around ‘Fire and

Water’, picking up on the contemporary water crisis in the city (Robins, 2019; Shepherd, 2020; Shepherd, 2021). A walking seminar in Berlin in 2017 with students from the Amsterdam University of the Arts was themed ‘My Berlin’ and explored subjective responses to the city.

Seminar participants are invited with the theme in mind, and we share readings and resources, as in a conventional seminar. We also invite ‘resource people’ to drop in and share their knowledge and experience. The seminar becomes an opportunity to walk, talk, share work and plan collaborations. More profoundly, it becomes an opportunity to dwell in a particular landscape, to pass deeply into your thoughts and the thoughts of others and to engage the body and the senses in challenging and pleasurable ways. The walking seminars—particularly the Table Mountain Walking Seminars—are a kind of experiment that grew out of our biographies as researchers and the work of our collaborators. Part living laboratory, part performance, part decolonial enactment, they respond in particular ways to the challenges and opportunities of our contemporary contexts of practice. As a particular manifestation, they respond to more general issues around what it means to do research and how we position ourselves in relation to our materials as scholars, artists and activists. In this short paper, I will address this more general context by describing some of the conceptual underpinnings of the walking seminars. In particular, I situate the idea of the walking seminars in relation to three areas of debate and discussion. The first is a discussion on embodied research methods, drawing on ideas from the anthropology of walking, artistic research methods, Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory. The second is a debate around the Anthropocene and its implications for modes of knowledge production and forms of engagement. The third is a discussion around decolonial theory and practice and the notion of decolonial aesthesis. The form of this chapter is somewhat meandering, rather like the act of walking itself. Rather than setting out to demonstrate a proposition or arrive at a set of definite conclusions, we have different aims: to suggest a set of openings, to try to break with conventional modes of scholarly and creative practices and reach for forms of engagement that feel more adequate to addressing the extraordinary times in which we live.

### ***‘Oh My Body, Make me Always a (Person) Who Questions’***

The first point of departure for the idea of the walking seminars is an irritation with the ‘white cube’ of the typical seminar room and an awareness of all that it excludes. The discourse of the seminar room imposes a stringent set of rules: we sit in chairs around desks; we meet as a disembodied intelligence, eyes that see, mouths that speak; we speak one of the imperial (‘global’) languages; we talk about ‘theory’; we cite from approved canons; we mention the five of six currently trending keywords (Shepherd, 2018a). Apart from a few important exceptions—discussions in Queer Theory, certain strands of Feminist Theory, forms of decolonial thinking and practice—we agree to leave at the door, as it were, many aspects of what defines us as embodied beings in the world: memory, experience, desire, imagination, fear, delight and the small details of daily life that saturate our affective selves. Although presented here in slightly parodied form, it nevertheless remains true that our principal forms of scholarly engagement are remarkably disembodied and tend to reinforce a set of distinctions: mind versus body, reason versus imagination and thinking versus feeling (Mignolo, 2013). We are interested in the political and epistemic consequences of this

dominant form of scholarly engagement. What happens to black bodies, or queer bodies, or women, or bodies that have grown up speaking languages other than English in such a set-up? My experience as a scholar based at the University of Cape Town in South Africa presented this situation to me daily as nothing less than a savage indictment of the coloniality of the university as an institution. In the average seminar situation, students were required to discuss abstract knowledge in an imperial language, parking at the door, as it were, the things that condition their daily experience: being black, being a woman, being worried about personal safety, being worried about money, having to negotiate the long journey to and from the university each day, being denied the forms of discourse through which to have a meaningful discussion about any of these things. In other words, their relationship to knowledge begins by excluding the very thing that so profoundly conditions their experience under and after apartheid: embodied being in the world (Shepherd, 2018a).

I would argue that this is a form of scholarly practice that is not so much about making the connections between things, as it is about making and enforcing a set of disconnections: disarticulating knowledge from experience and thinking from feeling. So, how do we bring the body into play in more embodied forms of research practice? And how do we break down some of the distinctions set up by the discourse of the seminar room in ways that are productive and open out to new research understandings? There are many ways of answering these questions, with the walking seminar being one modest answer. The idea of walking as a form of embodied research practice draws from rich literature on the anthropology of walking, referencing the work of Tim Ingold, Rebecca Solnit and many others. It also draws from a rich and productive strand in Urban Studies on walking as a methodology through which to engage city spaces, referencing the work of Michel de Certeau and others. Recent scholarly interventions explore walking as a form of collaborative knowledge practice (Anderson, 2004), comment on the transdisciplinary potential of walking (Pink et al., 2010), employ a form of walking ethnography (Yi'En, 2014) and experiment with walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011). They also explore the potential of walking to open minds and reshape thinking (Salin & Pessa, 2017). Bonilla (2011) uses embodied 'memory walks' to research histories of labour activism in Guadeloupe. Keating (2012) describes his 'art-walking practice' in which walking becomes a form of participatory action research driven by his sense of loss at declining biodiversity and the consequent diminished aesthetic experience and quality of life.

In the waking seminars, we draw on affective and sensorial research methods to ask questions about what it means to encounter emergent Anthropocene landscapes through the surfaces of the body. We also draw on the debate around artistic research methods and practice as research, asking questions about the productive uses of imagination, creativity and desire in the pursuit of empirical research and the use of experience as a resource. We are inspired by artists like Richard Long and Francis Alÿs, who use walking as a core part of their method, as well as by the many artists, activists and practitioners who walk as a form of creative practice, to explore emotional states, as a way of engaging landscapes, or as a form of protest. This long list includes artists and practitioners as different as Abrahamovich and Ulay (1988), Mosher (2007), Amanda Coogan (2018), and the Zapatistas, who are articulate on the question of walking as a form of political pedagogy. Karen O'Rourke (2013) describes a set of

walking/mapping projects by contemporary artists, some of whom chart ‘emotional GPS’ or engage in speculative mapping. Other established projects closely parallel our work with the walking seminars. *WalkingLab* is a Canadian, USA and Australian research-creation project ‘to advance the theory and practice of walking methodologies.’ It aims to foster collaboration between activists, scholars, educators and artists (WalkingLab, 2019). The *Walking Artists Network* is for ‘everyone who defines themselves as a walking artist, and everyone who is interested in walking as a mode of art practice, as well as related fields including, but not limited to, architecture, archaeology, anthropology, cultural geography, history, spatial design, urban design and planning’ (Walking Artists Network, 2019).

Finally, we ground our conception of embodied research by drawing on contemporary discussions in decolonial thinking and practice around challenging hegemonic modes of knowledge production. In his recent work, Walter D. Mignolo has described the forms of knowledge attendant on colonial modernity as an ‘ego-politics of knowledge’, grounded in the Cartesian dualism between mind and body. Against this ego-politics of knowledge he proposes a ‘body-politics of knowing/sensing/understanding’, grounded in an understanding of the place from which knowledge proceeds (Mignolo, 2013, p. 132). In conversation, he talks of linked processes of ‘reasoning’ and ‘emotioning’ (Mignolo, 2014). Some of Mignolo’s most engaging writing takes place in his evocation of this embodied other place of knowledge, imagined not as an essentialised outside of Western reason but as an embodied inside/outside: the place of ‘border thinking’ and things known ‘in the bones.’ As a source for these various ideas, Mignolo cites the ‘prayer’ with which Fanon so memorably concludes *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Oh my body, make me always a man who questions!

He writes: this single sentence expresses ‘the basic categories of border epistemology’ (Mignolo, 2013, p. 132).

### **A History of Fragments**

One of the things that I like about the walking seminars is that they involve passages of hard work and are sometimes physically challenging. We become aware of our bodies in new ways as we sweat our way to the trail’s end. We rely on basic things like water, good shoes, a map and the ability to find our way around an unfamiliar landscape. We are thrown back on ourselves and the idea that our technology will not save us. All of this seems like good training as we journey deeper into the Anthropocene. I like the idea that walking involves a certain kind of dwelling in the landscape, with ideas around duration (being in the landscape for a passage of time) and exposure (being open to, or exposed to, external influences). This works in busy urban environments and in the more contemplative environments of the Table Mountain National Park. I also like the idea that the physical work of walking points towards a certain practice of respect, like a pilgrimage, as we pass through known and beloved or new landscapes (Frey, 1998). As climates change and beloved landscapes are transformed before our eyes, as is happening in Cape Town right now, the act of walking takes on an elegiac quality as we say goodbye to the landscapes that we know and begin our ambiguous journey into the future—into landscapes shaped by fire and drought and as yet uncharted social

formations. As raced and gendered bodies, subjected to local histories of colonial modernity, our relationship to these landscapes will be very different and run the spectrum from hedonism to bare life. Table Mountain, one of the most heaviest touristed sites in Africa and a recently proclaimed 'natural wonder of the world', was historically a site of refuge for escaped slaves from the Cape Colony and is currently a refuge for migrants fleeing conflict and economic hardship on other parts of the continent (Shepherd et al., 2018).

The second point of departure for the walking seminars is an interest in deep time and in history as a form of material inscription on the landscape. Bringing an archaeological sensibility to bear, one can interpret the landscape as a palimpsest of a particular kind. The site of Peers Cave on the northern edge of the Fish Hoek valley has archaeological deposits that attest to half-a-million years of hominin occupation (Shepherd, 2015b). Further south, the ruins of Red Hill Village and the dystopian dormitory town of 'Ocean View' speak of apartheid-era forced removals and the racial cleansing of urban spaces (Shepherd et al., 2018). What would it mean to push these sites into the same frame, or to read them together as part of a story of human dwelling and being in this space? Viewing history as a form of material inscription in the landscape opens up ideas around attentiveness and the possibilities for a close reading of the landscape based on fragments and traces. Our engagement with the past and elapsed time is then potentially mediated by something other than text, image and the forms of narrative history, and rather by fragments, traces and the signs of ruination. In recent work (Shepherd, 2015a; Shepherd, 2015b), I explore this mode of engagement with the past under the heading of 'a history of fragments'. If some forms of narrative history are premised on text, voice and a certain kind of plenitude, which may be the plenitude of the archive, then the idea of 'a history of fragments' works from other sources: shells, bones, bricks, pieces of ceramics, graffiti, the temporary shelters of the dispossessed, plastic containers for holding water, house foundations, remains of footpaths, discarded toys, orphaned photographs, trees scorched by fire. I like the fact that these fragments do not tell a story with a recognizable beginning, middle and end and that their status as sources is ambiguous and unreliable. I also like that they present us with the entangled processes by which they were made and discarded and the accident of their survival as assemblages without reason. This kind of detritus forecasts the future, in that it is precisely by such signs that our civilization will be known in the archaeological way.

One of the key points to be taken from the current debate around the Anthropocene is that it gives us a strong mandate to try out new formats and modes of scholarly and artistic production. I would argue that this goes well beyond the familiar debate about inter- and transdisciplinarity and that it challenges us to rethink foundational ideas and practices in scholarship and the arts. In his influential and widely cited essay, 'The Climate of History', postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty makes a startling admission. He writes: 'As the crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all of my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not prepared me for the making sense of this planetary conjunction within which humanity finds itself today' (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 199). He wonders what it will mean to think and practice, as he puts it 'under the cloud of the Anthropocene' (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 212). This sense in which

conventional ideas and formats are challenged has been a starting point for many scholars as they begin their own Anthropocene journey. In their opening editorial to the first issue of the journal *Environmental Humanities* titled ‘Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities’, Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, Matthew Chrulew, Stuart Cooke, Matthew Keenes and Emily O’Gorman write: ‘We are required to re-imagine the proper questions and approaches to our fields. How can our accumulated knowledge and practice, built over centuries, be refashioned to meet these new challenges and to productively rethink “the human” in more than human terms?’ (Rose et al., 2012). More succinctly, Bruno Latour says in a recent exchange with Isabelle Stengers and Anna Tsing: ‘I think that, in a way, it is one of the slight advantages of being in the ruins; it demands a new kind of dialogue with science’ (Latour et al., 2018, p. 12).

Of course, there are many ways of having a new kind of dialogue with science. The walking seminar is our modest attempt to refashion knowledge relationships and try something new. I like the everydayness of walking, the fact that it is often overlooked or regarded not as a practice in its own right but as a means to get from A to B. I also like that it throws us back on our resources and that—apart from some exceptional cases—technology is of very little use in the act of walking. Like clean air and clean water, we take the act of walking for granted until we cannot walk, and then it strikes us with the force of a catastrophe. It seems appropriate that we should turn to something humble and taken-for-granted as we think and speak, as Latour puts it, ‘in the ruins’. Writing well before the current debate around the Anthropocene, Rebecca Solnit says: ‘If there is a history of walking, then it too has come to a place where the road falls off, a place where there is no public space and the landscape is being paved over, where leisure is shrinking and being crushed under the anxiety to produce, where bodies are not in the world but only indoors and in cars and buildings and an apotheosis of speed makes bodies seem anachronistic or feeble. In this context, walking is a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences’ (Solnit, 2001, p. 12).



Figure Table Mountain March 2018.

**Source:** Glenn Ashton.

If there is a single question that haunts us, then it is this: What does it mean to think and practice in the midst of what Anna Tsing calls ‘the intertwined human and non-human catastrophes of the Anthropocene’? Many of us are so enmeshed in institutional and disciplinary relationships and accustomed ways of working that it feels difficult to mark a sudden departure in how we think and practice, and yet it seems that nothing less will do. A key implication of the debate around the Anthropocene is that the distinctions between categories begin to break down and become entangled. This includes not only the distinction between nature and culture, but also the kinds of distinctions that underlie more conventional forms of research, between the self of the researcher and the thing that is researched, studied and observed. This is an enormous challenge for scholars, as we have to rethink our sense of involvement and implication. Bodily and sensorial implication becomes one way of addressing this challenge, and walking becomes one way of implicating the body. For conventional disciplinary scholars, the idea of a walking seminar can seem daunting or unserious, but really it is easy: you just put one foot in front of the other.

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