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Walking against the current: Generating creative responses to place

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Abstract

This article is based on the paper I gave at Place-Based Arts: Brighton Writes on 29 May 2015. Walking allows for an immersive experience of place. As the tradition of the *flâneur*, the interventions of Situationists and the practice of contemporary Walking Artists demonstrate, walking and creativity share a manifest connection. In this article I present my use of alternative walking practices and discuss how these can be used to generate new creative work. Inspired by psychogeographical methods, I have developed a series of exercises, which I use to create text and which I employ as Learning and Teaching tools with writing students. These include:

- Liberties – using the *dérive* to break convention and explore place afresh
- Constraints – using randomly generated directions to steer experience and facilitate discoveries
- Subverting mapping and signage – using superimposed mapping and reinterpreting signage in search of synchronicity
- Gathering materials – using alternative walks to observe and record materials including found text, sound and image.

This article draws on my own practice-based research and recent case studies using these methods.

Keywords

walking

creativity

writing

ideation

psychogeography

labyrinth

dérive

INSERT: **Figure 1:** Signage, Canterbury dérive, 24 May 2015.

Introduction

Walking allows for an immersive experience of place. Necessarily slow, it engenders thoughtfulness. Walkers ruminate. When walking, we notice details lost to the automobile. We take in atmosphere: we breathe in scents. If place is a subject, walkers study with the feet, following whatever avenues of interest present themselves, moving unencumbered across topography and terrain.

In her influential study on the history of walking *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit charts the connection between thought and walking from our bipedal origins, through the Peripatetic philosophers of ancient Greece, to twentieth-century protest marches (2014). There are numerous examples one can draw upon to demonstrate the connection between walking and creative thinking: the solitary reveries of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or the naturalistic idealism of Henry David Thoreau; the literary output of celebrated London Psychogeographers Iain Sinclair, Will Self and Peter Ackroyd; the interventions and records of contemporary Walking Artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton.

Walking and writing are close companions: William Wordsworth's feats of walking, for example, are intrinsic to his method of poetic composition. 'Wordsworth made walking central to his life and art [Ö]and walking was both how he encountered the world and how he composed his poetry' (Solnit 2014: 104). Walker and 'Deep Topographer' Nick Papadimitriou's intense relationship with the Middlesex and Hertfordshire escarpment is

itself the catalyst for his writing. Twenty years of walking the area around his home, of collecting historic accounts, personal impressions and discarded objects, culminated in Papadimitriou's genre-defying book *Scarp* (2012), weaving together local history, flora and fauna, autobiographical flashes and the voices of living, dead and imagined inhabitants of the escarpment.

As I began to learn the basic outline of these topographic details and hold them in my mind, my internal balance would oscillate between the ego's surrender in the face of a larger entity – the land that contained me – and a desire to gain ownership and mastery of that same entity through cultural production. The idea grew that there was a new form of prose or poetry waiting to be invented, a form of writing sufficient for the purpose of capturing the essence of the broader frame-work to which I had surrendered, a form that would allow me to re-create the voices and experiences of those *Scarp* dwellers who came before me as a counterpoint to my own. (Papadimitriou 2012: 8)

Scarp (2012) is a book that would not, indeed could not have been written without extensive walking: the kind of attentive walking that embraces possibility, accident and synchronicity.

Walking without agenda

The decline of walking is about the lack of space in which to walk, but it is also about the lack of time – the disappearance of that musing, unstructured space in

which so much thinking, courting, daydreaming, and seeing has transpired.

Machines have sped up, and lives have kept pace with them. (Solnit 2014: 259)

Walking for its own sake has been gradually squeezed out of our lives. The daily constitutional now seems a nostalgic ideal, a custom that belongs to a less crowded time. By walking for its own sake, I do not mean the idle wanderings of the *flâneur*, or Poe's man in the crowd¹: a filling of excess leisure time only available to a privileged class, or those forced to tramp the streets out of necessity. Nor do I mean the determined activities of hill-walking or rambling, where the walk serves a social or investigative purpose. I mean, very simply, solitary walking without agenda: to pass time, to meet people, to witness events. To allow things to happen.

The protagonists of the Mr Men and Little Misses children's books, created by Roger Hargreaves, demonstrate this tendency (1971–). While the karmic comeuppance of Messrs Greedy, Nosey or Uppity delivers a clear moral message, the hidden lesson of many Mr Men books is that nothing happens until the protagonist goes for a walk, or is met by another character who is out for a walk. Until there is walking, there is no narrative, no challenge to the habitual, no reconsideration of identity. The walk is a catalyst for change, the essential ingredient of the story. Writers too need to embrace their inner psychogeographer.

Psychogeography and the *dérive*

The term 'psychogeography' is rooted in the radical experiments of the Situationists, whose writings and interventions attempted to shatter the 'spectacle' that they perceived

obscuring mid-twentieth-century societal issues.² Guy Debord's definition of psychogeography – a practice 'not inconsistent with the materialist perspective that sees life and thought as conditioned by objective nature' (1955: 8) – establishes it as an essentially urban practice. Walking down a city high street now, one can easily experience something of the Situationists' suspicion about a culture of dazzling, distracting consumerism that constantly calls our attention away from deeper, non-materialistic concerns. Along with the lure of shop windows and advertising hoardings, town planning and traffic routes contain and coerce the walker, controlling pedestrian movement, signalling set routes and closing off areas of exploration.

According to Debord, geography 'deals with the determinant action of natural forces... on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world' (1955: 8). By extension, psychogeography 'sets for itself the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (Debord 1955: 8). The techniques proposed in Debord's 'Introduction to a critique of urban geography' can be opened out to any 'type of investigation... situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery' (1955: 8), an invitation to be taken up by those of us who see the potential of walking as a tool for inspiration, concentration or intervention. To walk without agenda is to drift, to be led by the psychology of landscape. Debord's 'Theory of the *dérive*' describes the practice of the drift or *dérive* as 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' (1959: 62), suggesting the scope of possible experience presented by an extended, attentive walk.

Walking allows writers access to extensive, ever-evolving material. With a little Situationist attitude, we can walk to see afresh, to defamiliarize the familiar, to challenge the autopilot of the everyday: to walk against the current.

Walking and clarity

Although walking offers the writer the opportunity to explore subject and setting, to observe and record, it also serves as a preparation for work: walking as head-clearing, as a means of attaining focus. Walking helps us to tune-out the banal and tune-in to the possible. This decluttering can be difficult to achieve seated at a desk, but taking a stroll outside – even along the busiest of high streets, bristling with attention-seeking signage and street furniture – brings a heightened sense of clarity.

On his documented walk from London to New York ('Walking to New York'), Will Self expresses the state of sensory receptiveness induced by long-distance walking.

Normally, on my long-distance walks, anoësis descends within a few miles: the mental tape loop of infuriating resentments, or inane pop lyrics, or nonce phrases gives way to the greeny-beige noise of the outdoors. (2007: 39)

Critical thinking is temporarily disengaged; immediate concerns are replaced by external impressions. There is a shedding of loads: as 'Mythogeographer' Phil Smith (also known as Crab Man) describes it: 'for the first time he [the writer] is truly leaving things behind, dropping his burdens, facing something, as the sound of traffic is drowned by the rising wind' (2010: 30).

Walking cleanses the brain of the superfluous, allowing new ideas and sensations to emerge. The physically repetitive action of walking aids this clarity: ‘the steady, two-mile-an-hour, metronomic rhythm’ of the walker’s legs ‘parting and marrying, parting and marrying’ (Self 2007: 13) induces a hypnosis of sorts, countered by the wakefulness of body induced by aerobic exercise. Recent scientific studies carried out by Marily Oppezzo and Daniel Schwartz of Stanford University explore the effect of walking on perception and creative thought, demonstrating that exercise increases our ability to think creatively:

Four studies demonstrate that walking increases creative ideation. The effect is not simply due to the increased perceptual stimulation of moving through an environment, but rather it is due to walking. Whether one is outdoors or on a treadmill, walking improves the generation of novel yet appropriate ideas, and the effect even extends to when people sit down to do their creative work shortly after. (2014: 1142)

While Oppezzo and Schwartz point out that walking on a treadmill improves our thinking, moving through place is fundamental to the walking writer or artist in search of new ideas. In Oppezzo and Schwartz’s fourth experiment, individuals were assessed under the varying conditions of sitting indoors, walking indoors, sitting outdoors and walking outdoors: when asked to generate analogies for three prompts, those subjects walking gave the greatest number of high-quality and novel analogies. Those walking outdoors scored highest of all. Here is advice that any writer or academic, stranded for long periods at a desk and struggling with lapses of concentration, should heed.

Walking outside produced the most novel and highest quality analogies. The effects of outdoor stimulation and walking were separable. Walking opens up the free flow of ideas, and it is a simple and robust solution to the goals of increasing creativity and increasing physical activity. (Opezzo and Schwartz 2014: 1142)

The benefits can also be retained for a while after walking:

Walking also exhibited a residual effect on creativity. After people had walked, their subsequent seated creativity was much higher than those who had not walked. (Opezzo and Schwartz 2014: 1145)

At this point, it is tempting to leave my desk and stretch my legs. I suggest you do the same.

Not only does walking outdoors make us think more creatively and originally: the physical act of passing through place, of propelling our bodies independently across a landscape, also generates an exchange *with* that place. For Rebecca Solnit, 'imagination has both shaped and been shaped by the spaces it passes through on two feet' (2014: 4). To walk is to experience our surroundings fully, allowing us to record and reimagine place and to openly receive its impressions, and to add something of ourselves to it.

Nick Papadimitriou describes the collective memory of place as something that can be tapped into by walking, a bank of other people's experiences and memories accessed on

foot. In John Rogers' documentary film *The London Perambulator* (2009), Papadimitriou explains:

When I walk I seem to access all sorts of levels. Processes taking place under hedges, or the memories of people I've never know. They're memories that aren't mine, and yet they seem so tangible. (Rogers 2009)

Papadimitriou explores this method of accessing memories and trying on the voices of others in *Scarp* (2012), blurring the distinction between fact and fiction to create a multi-layered textual response to place.

Wandering and getting lost

When embarking on a walk for creative purposes, there is something to be said for getting lost, physically and metaphorically. By losing our critical, rational selves in a walk, we can get closer to mapping that stream of consciousness which allows for the self-revelation and realization we would otherwise put off, or perhaps choose not to dwell on. Rousseau's rambling, philosophical and autobiographical confessions are possible because he becomes lost in his own thoughts while walking. The meandering nature of walking provides a useful analogy for thought processes: the 'writing up' of a walk can, in turn, chart the mind at work. As Solnit points out:

As a literary structure, the recounted walk encourages digression and association, in contrast to the stricter form of a discourse or the chronological progression of a biographical or historical narrative. [Ö] James Joyce and Virginia

Woolf would, in trying to describe the workings of the mind, develop the style called stream of consciousness. In their novels *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*, the jumble of thoughts and recollections of their protagonists unfolds best during walks. (2002: 21)

In his *New Yorker* article 'Why walking helps us think' (2014), which cites Joyce and Woolf's 'mapping' and the studies by Opezzo and Schwartz, Ferris Jabr suggests that walking pace and unconscious internal monologue reflect each other. It is this synergy that frees the imagination, allowing us to project ideas and images onto place, while becoming increasingly receptive to new thoughts:

Walking at our own pace creates an unadulterated feedback loop between the rhythm of our bodies and our mental state that we cannot experience as easily when we're jogging at the gym, steering a car, biking, or during any other kind of locomotion. When we stroll, the pace of our feet naturally vacillates with our moods and the cadence of our inner speech; at the same time, we can actively change the pace of our thoughts by deliberately walking more briskly or by slowing down. Because we don't have to devote much conscious effort to the act of walking, our attention is free to wander – to overlay the world before us with a parade of images from the mind's theatre. (Jabr 2014: 2)

Opezzo and Schwartz's findings lend some credence to this idea. Setting a comfortable pace when walking distinguishes it from intensive aerobic activity, something the researchers observed in their studies. 'We asked people to walk at their natural gait. When

people walk outside their natural stride, it demands more cognitive control' (2014: 1148); 'While the long-term effects of aerobic activity may be general, the concurrent effects of mild physical activity were selective to divergent thinking' (2014: 1144). In other words, a speedy 'power walk' requires more effort and concentration than a comfortable perambulation. Going too fast, which many of us do when focusing on getting from A to B, may impede the mind from making its own journey. Jabr may be right to suggest that brisk walking changes the pace of our thoughts, but if we rush, we may simply be too busy to listen to them.

Losing ourselves (through moderate, attentive walking) can also enable us to tune-in to the lives of others: to observe, to absorb, to eavesdrop. The actions and interactions of the people we pass – a lovers' argument in a park, a woman nursing a stuffed bear, a man carrying a mysterious object obscured by bubble-wrap – these are the raw stuff of fiction. Snatches of overheard conversation are fodder for dialogue. Snippets of mobile phone conversations or passing remarks have the potential to grow into the voices that inhabit poems or novels. If, as writers, we gather these materials while walking, we can carry them with us and turn them over in our minds as we go, adding to them, editing them or otherwise fashioning them into useful creative material.

The familiar, the unfamiliar and the defamiliarized

Familiarity with place opens up the richness of deep examination and ongoing appreciation. Getting close to a subject yields a level of detail that lends powerful authenticity to a piece of writing. There is also the potential for defamiliarization – something that can be explored

through specific psychogeographical techniques, which I will return to in more detail later.

With the right approach, a familiar place need never become stale. To quote Papadimitriou again:

We can never truly pin down where our place of dwelling lies; each newly discovered overview of what we call home effectively places it within a new topography, forcing us to redefine what it is we mean when we say 'I live there'. (2012: 102)

When 'the mind's theatre' takes over, and our legs are working on autopilot, we can even get lost in a town whose streets we know intimately.

However, to walk in new places is also to explore new ideas, opening up areas of thought as well as material to observe, record or interact with. While poet and psychogeographer Iain Sinclair uses a daily walk in familiar territory to limber up, likening this to 'making the skin porous' and 'changing circuits to be able to write' (Campbell 2013), he also recommends walking in unfamiliar places as a process towards generating new kinds of creative work. Sinclair sees a direct connection between the treading of new paths and the burning of neural pathways, claiming that 'to go somewhere new is to feel the brain is being remapped, in an interesting way', an activity that might in turn lead to 'a new form of writing' (Campbell 2013). Treading an unfamiliar path could enable a writer to see in a new way, and write in a wholly different style.

Examples and exercises: Walking as creative practice and teaching tool

The more that I walk, think about walking and write about walking, the clearer it has become to me that walking is an essential part of my own creative practice. To me, as to the many writers, artists and walkers I have mentioned thus far, the connection between walking and creative practice makes perfect sense. Yet as my experience of teaching creative writing students has shown me, this connection is easily lost, overlooked, or does not even register as a possibility. To this end I seize every possible opportunity to get my writing students out of a seminar room and into street, alley or field-side footpath, notebook in hand.

When it comes to sharing walking as a creative practice with students, the obvious thing to do is to get them outside, physically participating, making notes and testing out various techniques.³ For each group of students I set aside a block of teaching time to allow for an immersive session of walks. To facilitate these I have developed a series of alternative walking exercises which I employ as teaching tools. Although these started as a means of engaging undergraduate writing students with place, they transfer well: I have also used some of these exercises with adult learners, social scientists and interdisciplinary study groups.

For some students, the first requirement is to break a habitual attitude to walking: to replace the blind walking of essential traversal with a heightened awareness of the self in place. Detailed observation requires an openness and level of awareness that sometimes necessitates a few preparations. Very successful (if unpopular) with undergraduates is my 'headphone-free' rule: in order to re-sensitize students to their surroundings, I ban the use of headphones in public places – on the street, in cafes, libraries, on public transport – for a

full week before using walking exercises. This, along with phone use during the sessions, is non-negotiable, and although it provokes initial groans of disbelief, there are always several converts at the end.

Liberties – using the *dérive* to break convention and explore place afresh

Dérives are a useful warm-up. When setting a *dérive* as part of a writing task I give students the choice of walking alone, or in pairs or threes, and challenge them to walk outside their customary routes. As some students may have concerns regarding their safety,⁴ I do not insist that students work alone. Although solitary walking encourages individual focus, and students walking in small groups may be inclined to distract each other or discuss irrelevancies, there are benefits to be had from the discussions and shared ideas of group walks (and I draw upon these in my group walk exercise, below). Even if participants find themselves arguing over preferred routes or the outcomes of tasks, they are still actively engaging in the experience.

While the students may not feel that they are performing a radical Situationist act, the freedom of the *dérive* does allow them to break from conventional walking habits. On these *dérives*, I encourage students to spend time observing their surroundings rather than moving too rapidly. To achieve this, I ask that they walk at different speeds and ensure that they stand still and listen at regular intervals. Participants are encouraged to interact with spaces, for example, going into a cloistered area, stopping at a bench or walking the perimeter of a wall. They can also interact with other people if the opportunity presents itself: this may mean speaking to other participants, engaging with street artists or simply

answering questions from curious passersby (a frequent occurrence, as the *dérive* seems to attract interest).

Participants write down what they see, hear and overhear, and can make sketches as well as notes. I ask them to consider the affect of different places on themselves and others, a level of engagement with place that reflects Debord's definition of psychogeography as the study 'of the specific effects of the geographical environment... on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (1955: 8). To maintain this engagement, I ask that participants make notes while in motion as well as pausing: different localities will make this variously challenging, for example, note-taking while walking in a busy shopping area is likely to result in short sentences and recorded sounds rather than detailed architectural descriptions.

To challenge habitual patterns, I ask participants to walk 'against the current'. If a crowd is surging in one direction, they should walk the opposite way. Similarly, they are asked to ignore directional signage and look instead for any alternative text or images to follow. For an unstructured *dérive*, participants are encouraged to be led by anything that interests them, treating all buildings and obstacles equally rather than steering by landmarks. To encourage defamiliarization, I ask them to look up above street level and down at their feet while walking, rather than the 'middle distance' sightlines by which we tend to negotiate as pedestrians. To the same end, I encourage them to look behind and under street furniture rather than accepting it at face value.

Group *dérive*: Generating narratives

On a recent *dérive* (24 May 2015) I encouraged groups of three participants to set out together and while walking, to search for synchronicity and emergent themes in their journey, and discuss these findings as they walked. To facilitate this, I asked them to look for a thread running between the places they visited and the scenes, people or objects they observed. The participants were mature students from an interdisciplinary M.A. group studying Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred.

I asked each group to create a narrative of their *dérive* to share with other participants. All nine participants were familiar with the location – Canterbury – but all reported discovering new routes, buildings or locales during the exercise. The search for meaning led a group of astrologers to find themes linking Saturn and Mars, a dead bat and bomb graffiti in a churchyard. The second group found that their *dérive* was concerned with law and institutional control, linking a skip full of rubbish labelled ‘quality containment’ with the high walls of a disused prison. The third group were struck by reversals and contradictions: the conflicting messages of welcoming tourism and prohibitive signage, an ugly ring-road lined with beauty salons and hairdressers.

All participants felt that these messages were new to them, but obvious when they looked closely: that meaning was hidden in plain sight, obscured by a disregard of the familiar.

Figure 2: Collage of notes taken by students during a *dérive* in Canterbury, 24 May 2015.

Using constraints: Steering experience and facilitating discovery

While liberties are effective, constraints can also be useful in steering less confident writers on their first psychogeographical adventures. By stepping up the levels of constraints, the experience shifts from drift, observation and interpretation to direct interaction – even confrontation – with place.

In these cases, I use randomly generated directions to deter participants from wandering back into habitual routes. Flipping a coin to decide on directions at junctions adds an element of playfulness that echoes Dadaist practices⁵: it is interesting to note that this form of decision-making occurs naturally to some participants, as students have reported that they occasionally use coin-flipping to determine a walking route without being prompted to do so.

To help students generate responses I provide writing prompts, in the form of statements that can be applied to specific locations, objects or buildings, to present the seed of an idea for further development. These can be simple statements, such as ‘I do not belong here’, or ‘there is something hidden here’, which the participant can use to produce potential plotlines, narrative voices or dialogue.

Subverting and super-imposing maps has also proved a fruitful exercise with writing students. In ‘Introduction to a critique of urban geography’, Guy Debord refers to the practice of ‘transposing maps of two different regions’ giving the example of a friend ‘negotiating the Harz region of Germany while blindly following the directions of a map of London’ (1955: 11). In recent alternative walks in Canterbury (24 May 2015) and Margate (8 May 2015) I gave students a portion of the London tube map and, marking their current

location as Victoria, asked them to use this to negotiate the streets in search of Liverpool Street Station (see Exercise 1 below).

While this instruction appears to close down the 'drift', it also introduces a level of problem-solving and game-play to the walk. Map use encourages participants to interpret potential pathways and junctions as intersecting lines of travel, and found text, signage and landmarks as alternative signposts or tube stations. Thus a Job Centre in Margate becomes Mansion, the high street ATM readily lends itself to Bank, and pamphleteers outside Canterbury cathedral's gates replace the ancient booksellers of St Paul's Churchyard.

By applying constraints to a walking exercise, I aim to engage students with the idea of place and palimpsest: to look for the layers of history visible in a town's shape, architecture, street and building names. When looking for evidence of the endless revisions and notations of human activity in place, we begin to take note of the details, the interesting and surprising juxtapositions, and the glimpses of potential narrative these contain. These are rich pickings for creative practitioners which we can rediscover with attentive walking.

Labyrinths and contained walking

Labyrinths 'offer up stories we can walk into to inhabit bodily, stories we can trace with our feet as well as our eyes' (Solnit 2002: 71). Walking a labyrinth is an excellent exercise for concentrating thought, but the emphasis on this kind of contained walk is on shutting out the external world to facilitate meditation, rather than gathering potential material. Unlike a maze (an intended puzzle), the path of a labyrinth is laid out for the walker: there are no decisions to make regarding which direction to take and therefore no distractions that

complicate the physical act of walking. The labyrinth walker can experience something akin to the effects of treadmill walking, with all its attendant benefits (Opezzo and Schwartz 2014), with the additional sense of being in a ritualized or symbolic space. If the labyrinth is outside there will be external stimuli, but these tend to fade away when the walk 'takes over'. Such a labyrinth also offers the creative boost of outdoor walking noted by Opezzo and Schwartz.

I have used indoor and outdoor labyrinths extensively as creative tools, in my own practice and as a learning and teaching tool with students. They are ideal for problem-solving. Contained walks are useful for narrowing the mind rather than opening it, for selecting an idea or image and giving it one's sole attention. A large outdoor labyrinth will fit several walkers at once, and with the single path there is no danger of participants bumping into each other and breaking concentration. This makes it ideal for group work.

In such sessions, the defined shape of a labyrinth becomes an arena for thought. The path of a labyrinth takes the walker close to the central 'destination point' before diverging away and circuiting the space in arcs of varying length. Each turning point in a labyrinth roots the walker in the space: the path is continuous but meandering, river-like. Without the need to keep track of the path, a participant can easily walk a labyrinth and write at the same time. If breaks for note-taking or reflection are needed, the turns in the labyrinth path present ideal opportunities to pause without disrupting the flow of the walk. The distances between turns can also be used to structure a piece of writing, providing punctuation points, stanza breaks or setting line lengths (see Exercise 2 below).⁶

Although elaborate designs exist and labyrinths are proliferating in public and private spaces, a basic Cretan labyrinth can be created by making a temporary path out of simple materials. Drawing with chalk on a hard surface or marking out lines on sand produce quick and effective labyrinths. A path can be created by painting onto or cutting into grass.⁷ For instructions on creating a temporary labyrinth see the website Labyrinthos (Saward and Saward 2015), home of the Labyrinth Resource Centre, Photo Library and Archive and *Caerdroia* Journal. For the purposes of creative walking, all that really matters is the existence and clarity of the path.

Exercises

These exercises are examples from my teaching practice. The first of these could be transposed to any urban location with the supplement of an appropriate map.

1. *Mapping over Margate*

Exercise used on a field trip with Creative and Professional Writing undergraduate students, 8 May 2015.

Students were given the following instructions, a contemporary street map of Margate and a snapshot of the London tube map, and given a time and place to reconvene at the end of the exercise:

Look up at your current view of Margate, fix your eye on a landmark and walk to it as directly as possible.

- Make a note of your current position (building, street name) and mark it on the Margate map.
- Now use the tube map. Taking your current position as Victoria, walk the streets as if you were taking the tube. Try to get to Liverpool Street Station.
- Look for signage and found text (adverts, billboards, street or shop names, etc.) on the way that might act as alternative signposts. Write these down.
- When you 'arrive', record your final position and mark your place on the Margate map.

At the end, make some notes and consider the following questions:

- What was in front of you in place of Liverpool Street Station when you 'arrived'?
- How easy was it to find your destination? Were you forced to turn back, or take circuitous routes?
- How was the experience of following the map different from the experience of moving freely through the streets?
- Did you encounter any unexpected obstacles, or notice anything interesting on the way?
- Did you speak to anyone? Did anyone notice what you were doing, or offer to help?

Look through your notes and any writing you have done; work these up if you have time.

Wander further if you can. Let the environment lead you. Take any extra time to record further observations in your notebook.

2. *Labyrinth line lengths*

Exercise used with groups of undergraduate English and Creative Writing students and adult learners at the University of Kent outdoor labyrinth, Canterbury, 2012–2014.

After a few warm-up activities and group walks of the labyrinth, students were given a choice of exercises, including the following instructions:

As you walk you will construct a poem or piece of flash fiction using the shape of the labyrinth to suggest the length of your lines. Each turn in the labyrinth will act as a fixing point for you to write.

- Before you start the walk, choose a single line or image that you wish to work on and write it down.
- Write out a list of associated words suggested by this line or image.
- Now start the walk, thinking through an opening line as you go. (This could be your original line, but it doesn't have to be.) When you get to the first turn in the labyrinth, stop and write down your opening line.
- Begin walking again and think of a following line. Stop when you get to the next turn and write down the line.
- Repeat this with each turn in the labyrinth. You will notice that the distances between turns vary: check to see if your lines reflect this.

If you have difficulty finding 'following' lines, refer to your list of associated words for ideas.

Try to keep writing into the centre of the labyrinth, but if your piece ends naturally, stop sooner. When you have finished, work back out of the labyrinth again, checking how each line fits (reading back from the end).

Conclusions

Attentive walking as a creative practice enables writers to explore new places beyond the prescribed, or to see the unfamiliar in the familiar. It allows us to reach a greater understanding of, or develop a new relationship with, place. Walking outside increases our capacity for creative thinking (Oppezzo and Shwartz 2014); it allows us to refresh our minds and put aside everyday concerns (Self 2007; Smith 2010), which may otherwise crowd in and suppress creative capacity. In practical terms, the alternative walking exercises I outline in this paper engage participants in an intense experience of setting that can in turn enhance their creative responses to place.

While walking, writers can harvest ideas and ruminate on them; gather found text and speech, glimpses of narrative, images that contain a poem. We can sharpen our skills – of description, evocation of atmosphere, detailing minutiae, making connections – to give greater authenticity to our writing.

Writing students often tell me that they have nothing original to say, nothing new to offer. Most writers have felt like this at some point. To tread new ground, or to revisit a familiar place and see it afresh, is to remind ourselves that we contain, and are surrounded by, an endless mine of potential material. Sometimes we just forget to go out and look for it.

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Contributor details

Sonia Overall writes fiction and poetry. She has a strong interest in form, intertextuality, and the use of game-playing, randomness and constraints to generate text. Her current practice and research has developed from her interest in place and psychogeography, and her recent

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Notes

¹ See the short story 'The Man of the Crowd' in Poe ([1840] 1974: 139–88).

² The use of the term 'psychogeography', from the Letterist group and Situationist International to the early twenty-first century, is explored in Merlin Coverley's study *Psychogeography* (2010).

³ I attempt to make accommodations for participants with limited mobility who are unable to walk long distances or for extended periods: while experiences differ, any level of engagement with the activities is welcome. 'Dwelling' in a place and participating in observational note-taking are, in themselves, useful exercises for writers.

⁴ I am aware from my own experience that women walking alone can become targets for abuse, something that scholars of gender and mobility studies will be familiar with. For more on gendered responses to walking, see *Wanderlust*, Chapter 14, 'Walking after midnight: Women, sex and public space' (Solnit 2014: 232–46).

⁵ Dada's embracing of 'Chance methods' to produce text and image is well documented. For André Breton's account of Marcel Duchamp using a coin-flip to decide matters, see *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Robert Motherwell, [1951] 1989: 209).

⁶ More on my use of the labyrinth with creative writing students can be found in Alison James and Stephen D. Brookfield's teaching resource book *Engaging Imagination: Helping Students Become Creative and Reflective Thinkers* (2014), and *Learning with the Labyrinth: Creating Reflective Space in Higher Education* (Sellers and Moss forthcoming).

⁷ A technique I used to create the turf labyrinth at Canterbury Christ Church University for a conference workshop, 'The labyrinth: contained walking, creative thinking' (Overall 2015). The labyrinth remains in use and is maintained by the grounds and gardens staff of CCCU.

