“Lately I’ve taken to walking…”
Embodying the space of the campus

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…I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else I knew as well.

—Thoreau, 1854/1983, 45

Lately I’ve taken to walking…
…I am after all, as one doctor recently reminded me, a woman of a certain age, with a less than active circulatory system, and problematically, a relatively sedentary job. “Every half-hour or so you should get up from your desk and walk about,” she advised me. “Every
“Lately I’ve taken to walking…” I muttered to myself taken aback. “How will I get anything done?” My research work, particularly, and by this I refer to academic reading, archival research, and writing, requires a contemplative space of seclusion, attentiveness, and concentration. Fragmenting and bisecting my day into even more minute traces, punctuated by episodes of aimless wandering, is not conducive to the richness and joy I seek to experience in those uninterrupted moments, when I am caught in the text.[1]

Entangled in something I find difficult to articulate but which I increasingly desire ever more. It is not about the writing for me—it is about expressing and being heard, to claim, “these are things that matter to me” (Lesser, 2002, 32)—as much as it is about the process enacted between self and text and text and world. It is also about recognizing that I am the process and ultimately a part of it. There I go again sounding like a writer! Yet, all I understand about this instinctive relation is that when I sit to write, something akin to joy takes me over and, for a brief time, I am thrust into a space of unknowing where I unwittingly perform the Writerly Life.

My attachment to writing has been incremental and at times painful. As a “new Canadian” (a euphemistic term used in the late 1960s to refer to new immigrant students), my elementary verbalization far exceeded my writing skills. Trying to master the rules of grammar, as I sought to desperately engage with my peers, was more than I could accomplish and writing became relegated to the margins of communication. A strong orientation toward the visual world around me further constrained my efforts to write in an articulate way, and perhaps what is more important, in a committed and meaningful manner.

Gratefully, reading, a social practice, culturally and historically contingent, became an intellectual sanctuary, a liminal space, which held lightly my writing desires until I could
find a voice with which to speak or at least be spoken/written into existence. I am conscious today of the way my accumulated reading—academic and otherwise—inflrecs itself into my writing and thinking. Writing has only increased my reading, and reading, it seems, always brings me back to writing. On reflection “…I was in the middle before I knew I had begun” (Austen, 1813/1972, 388).

Writing, writing, and writing (a spiraling and creative process of reading/writing/reading/interpreting/meaning-making/writing) research in academe has opened up new possibilities for me to experiment, examine, and reflect upon different ways of approaching my work and, perhaps more crucially, of contemplating my place (dwelling, to use Heidegger’s term) in the world. While writing is clearly part of my “job description” today as an academic, it also has an embodied history in my body, for as a child, I craved to write, but could (or would) not pursue it because of my technical inabilities. Such momentary lacks, serve to represent children in particular ways, allowing teachers, administrators, and provincial educational authorities to make generalized assumptions about children’s intellectual capacities, creative desires and interests and, ultimately, the course of life they may have envisioned for themselves.

Today I share the story with my students about how in high school a well-meaning guidance counselor marshaled me and a group of my Greek and Italian girlfriends to provide us with up-today information [his term] on hairdressing and beautician schools! Apparently, he had a hairdresser who was Greek and so he naturally concluded that my friends and I had a biological predisposition to the work. I don’t ever remember being asked by anyone in school what was in my soul. Many educators, parents, and politicians would argue that those questions are not the purview of the education system. But if they had asked, I might have told them about my fiery aspiration to have a significant life of my own making, steadfastly circumventing the conventional possibilities offered to a young
woman of my generation and culture in Diaspora.[2]

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Writing, of late has become synonymous with my “quiet moments.” While writing in isolation may seem a removal from the world, for me it gestures toward my own embedment in the inevitable flow and ebb of daily life. The pedagogical tension that ensues between the desire to write and the necessity to act in the world is a difficulty with which many professors are all too aware. Writing is an intervention into the world (and certainly manifest in the courses I teach). To a degree, this involves being reflectively attuned to the things (micro and macro matrixes) around me. To the shape, character, and colour of the landscape I see everyday, to the people I encounter and the animals I watch from my window, to the broader signifying practices of my time—the languages, texts, images, and discourses which tell me how to be, the cultures, identities, and subjectivities they orient me to, and to the dominant forms and practices I am implored (spun might be a more appropriate term here, given one’s understanding of our capacity for agency in the world) to unquestionably embrace and ultimately reproduce. Clearly, we write to be seen, and we write to disappear.

As a historian who writes interpretatively about the past, I am drawn to examine worlds not of my making and to consider critically the ways in which such structures shaped the lives
of people I have never met. Mine is not a scientific exercise but one of social imagination, a “poetic act,” according to Hayden White (1973), whose traces are organized around interpretive understandings, deliberations, and social relations that take shape on the page. It is here I meet myself and work out the past according to my own situated positioning in the present and relative to the partial outline left behind.

Although I do not mean to over-stress textuality as the normative form of academic research representation, far from it, I want to underscore the way in which these ideas enfold and unfold, disclosing the inextricable links among academic traditions, theoretical paradigms, and institutional bureaucracies. My own desires and perceptions about experiencing joy in my work, are undoubtedly informed, mediated, shaped, read and distorted through these various lenses. To speak about joy has already become very complex.

Joy in Labour
For nineteenth-century social theorist John Ruskin (1819-1900), joy in one’s daily labour was a necessary condition for the “good” life. “One of the towering public intellectuals of the Victorian period,” he remains a relevant “seminal critic of [our] modern society,” offering insight into issues of social justice, environmentalism, and the ethics of consumption (Craig, 2006, 1, 2). For Ruskin, industrialisation and mechanisation in the nineteenth century had disfigured England’s environmental landscape, leading to the erosion of human and aesthetic values.

The social and aesthetic degeneration spawned by new industrial mass-production techniques was dramatically exemplified in the overly historicist style of many Victorian aesthetic and manufactured products, typically characterised by shoddy workmanship,
insincere use of materials, inefficient forms, and elaborate and ostentatious displays of ornamentation. For many critics such as Ruskin, manufactured goods and art works were corrupted through the conditions of their production processes: design, construction, materials, and uninspired maker(s) became material evidence of England’s gradual decline.

Ruskin’s ethically grounded theory of *environmental determinism*, sought to articulate an individual’s (and a communities’) relation to the world and to each other. Ruskin counselled the virtuous to assume self-sufficiency for the dark times to come and adopt the rural moral values and economic and social organization of the pre-industrial Middle Ages —the period of early maturity in the European historical cycle (Lloyd, 1995, 329). Art represented the purest and most noble labour because it utilised all human faculties, combining both mental and manual labour and invoking the use of the head, hand, and heart. The “personal touch” of the maker was the ultimate act of virtue and artistic worth, elevating the status of the handicrafts.

By redefining the notion of “value” to encompass both the objective qualities in an object and the capacity of its possessor to use it, Ruskin changed the way goods were perceived in the marketplace and in the society at large. “What are you making?” and “how are you using it?” became much more important than focussing only on the final product. Experiencing joy in one’s labour was, according to Ruskin, the “true” act of a worker’s realisation of a product well-made and the “good life” thus enacted in the process.

My long academic association with Ruskin has given me ample opportunity to intellectualize and sensually experience joy in my labour. Having said that, I am conscious that Ruskin’s elite status provided a privileged (and oftentimes didactic and patriarchal way) of addressing the complexities of work in his own time—social, educational and political inequalities which resonate in our contemporary world and in this particular place. However, this does not preclude finding meaning, value and, yes, *joy*— not merely satisfaction—in our daily work (whatever that might be).

So, with the prospect of losing my *joy*, and with apologies to Virginia Wolff (1929, 1977), to cultivate a *space of my own*, the directive to walk every half-hour was a crushing defeat.
Walking is simply not an ideal activity for my unfurled imagination and the vociferous babble that seems to go on incessantly in my head. In fact, sitting still and staying out of the hallways is one my key success strategies, as I remember once replying to a new colleague’s request for advice on living well in the academy. As I uttered the words, a flood of phenomenal sense memory seemed to pervade by body: the stale air in our hermetically sealed offices, the noise levels in hallways, and the unpleasant and uncreative institutional environment, which I inevitably gaze upon daily. I wondered, a little embarrassed, why I had cast living well in such reductionist but spatial terms. Having said that, I am cognizant of how for all writers, the necessity to sit and meditatively commune with the ubiquitous blank page is crucial to a committed practice of writing. For when “you write: writing does writing” (Goldberg, 1990, 45).

Yet, something about the doctor’s suggestion about the need to walk did profoundly appeal to me, and I saw it as linked to my academic interests around the examination of the spatiality of the campus (a term derived from Latin to mean "field" or "open space") and the embodied epistemologies and subjectivities that reside within. My contemporary studies on spatiality and the campus are oriented, in part, by Heidegger’s profound philosophical questioning of the nature of being and dwelling, particularly: “who we are, what we are, and what our place is within the larger order of the world” (Heidegger, 1971; Dittmar, 2001).[3] I research and teach in this area, so it is something I am forever implicated in. Over the last several years, my research has focused on the historical and cultural interactions between professors and students in universities. I have looked at visual images of professors, drawn by their students in student yearbooks and magazines and maps of campuses made by students and artists (Panayotidis, 2006; Panayotidis & Stortz, 2004). The social and power relations enacted between students and professors, administration, and community, is partially visible to me today in the modern university. In essence, I write about what I know, what I have experienced as a student (through a litany of degrees), and
as a professor (at various ranks). “Fields of power and meaning shift in those moments, identities are fragmented and challenged” (Cullum, 2000, 128).

I’m not a dispassionate observer—my body knows the space of a university campus well. After all, “the sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active open form, continually improvising it’s relation to things and the world” (Abram, 1996, 49). Bodies are marked with “maps of desire, disgust, pleasure, pain, loathing, love,” according to Steve Pile (1996, 209). The university has shaped who I am today, and I continue to shape it in return, although my sense of productive agency these days seem merely a token offering from the institutional bureaucracy. It is in contemporary terms, the optics of collegial governance and faculty involvement. I pretend that they will listen, and they pretend that they have heard. We have a symbiotic effusive relationship, the university and I, and at times, I think it has been—for better or worse—a commanding teacher. Writing about the past must necessarily allude to the present and call to the future. For memory, space, and self are pleated together in an inseparable and organic whole; the embodied body is all-knowing (Probyn, 1991).

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It occurred to me, as I walked back broodingly from the doctor’s office to my side of the
campus—along the usual paths and past crowds of milling students, that most of my writing was actually conceptualized, composted, shifted, and made meaningful as I walked.[4] On reflection, my recognition of how I thought and its relation to walking, also began to fracture my own narrative of sitting and writing, allowing me to experience what Merleau-Ponty calls “the sensuous and sentient life of the body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 98-102). I stopped cold in my tracks. How is that possible? Why hadn’t I acknowledged this before? And what did it mean to me now? Now, that I needed walking to save me.

My memory it seems has also failed me. I had forgotten, until recently the tablecloth I embroidered during the writing of my masters’ degree and the way the process of needlework, not unlike the act of walking, allowed my mind to articulate the next sentence, paragraph, section, and chapter of my thesis. Perhaps I thought of it as a childhood artistic skill resurrected for pleasure (was this joy?), to ease my stress, and as a way to spend time with my family. As Heidegger noted, “transformation [or metamorphoses] into what… [we] can be…is accomplished by care” (1962, 243).

This inquiry is in part a way for me to think thoughtfully but critically about what I do and particularly how I do it. It is a way to come to grips with an aging body that clearly requires more care and attention than it once did. I expect, given my new “walk every half-hour” challenge, that this work will take some time to complete and involve substantive walking. What I don’t know is what this inquiry will look like at the end because I don’t know where I will need to go and what I might say about that. In the end, there is no guarantee that anything at all will be settled by my walking.

This is not a tale of the triumph of human will over adversity, health over illness, perseverance over vacillation—I don’t care for such simplistic modernist dualities. However, I am concerned to understand how illness escaped my attention (Gadamer, 1996) and how such willful suffering might be encoded through normative gendered categories. I wonder: are women more prone to suffering through the body?

The anomalous female body (marked by age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, disease, and other discursive frameworks), over-observed and pathologized through Cartesian medical models, in all its "leakiness," may be, according to Margrit Shildrick (1997), the very ground for a postmodern feminist ethic; it asks of us to seek critical reflexivity in our relation to the world and with others, in the face of predetermined rules and regulations. Scholars Robyn Longhurst (2001), Gillian Rose (1993), and Elizabeth Grosz (1995), have all argued for a need to attend to and interrogate actual “messy” material bodies, situated in specific places and times, and subject to particular interests, politics, and constitutions of power. Yet, I wonder: if power, politics, and place are inextricably related, why do I so easily assume my right to walk effortlessly on campus? Do other women (staff, students and faculty) on campus have similar or diverse experiences on campus?
At present I am contend to dwell in the uncertain terrain of discomfort and ambiguity, following writer Natalie Goldberg’s passionate counsel to “Trust in what [her emphasis] you love, continue to do it, and it will take you where [my emphasis] you need to go” (Goldberg, 1990, 2). Walking a world into existence I recognize Goldberg’s proposition that “first thoughts have tremendous energy. It is the way the mind first flashes on something. The internal censor usually squelches them, so we live in the realm of second and third thoughts, thoughts on thoughts, twice and three times removed from the direct connection of the first fresh flash” (Goldberg, 1990, 9).

Often when I walk on campus, my mind races, I am overwhelmed with observations, insights, meanings, and flashes of illumination, which often lead to fully, formed sentences, narratives, and new possible inquiries. Remarkable insights are held in my head repeated as mantra until I return to my office to capture them on paper. It is in on these journeys that my mind begins to awaken to the world around me. As I do, “there are parts of … [me] raking, fertilizing, taking in the sun’s heat, and making ready for the deep green plants of writing” (Goldberg, 1990, 19). Needless to say, every walk I take on campus is different and so am I, depending on the day, the hour, and the minute. The campus too is alive and animate. For as Abram notes, it is “only by affirming that animate-ness of perceived things do we allow worlds to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world” (Abram, 1996, 56).
Recently, during “mental health week” at my university I was on my way to get lunch when I was confronted with a large sign in a fairly busy hallway of my university’s shiny new Integrated Computer Technologies building, which read: “There are hundreds of people around me but I feel alone on campus.” As a former student and now a professor I understood the sentiment well. I stared at the sign engrossed, as students rushed past me in a haze. The odd student looked up to see what had mesmerized me. On the way back from lunch, I stood at a distance and watched to see if passerby’s looked up, even briefly, at the sign. Those few that did, I searched for some reaction on their faces as they past me, some acknowledgment of the veritable alienation and isolation, signaled by the words. I wondered: Did the sign refer to the work undertaken in this place? Who wrote the sign and how did they walk these halls in silence? Were they part of that mass of undergraduate students who quietly fill our lecture halls and classrooms—present and attentive, well-meaning, hardworking but oftentimes invisible to our pedagogical gaze? Why are they here and what kind of life do they envision for themselves? What does this place mean to them? And what long-term effects will such isolation and alienation have in their lives?[5]

Lastly, how do they dwell on campus? Someone brushed against me and I was brought back to the site of inquiry. A fellow colleague walked by, said hello, and made apologies for having “to run to yet another meeting… [his] third this morning.” All of a sudden, the words on the sign took on a different meaning and I glimpsed for a moment how it’s possible in the modern university to become isolated, marginal, and invisible—to yourself and others. Perhaps a cliché today, Henry David Thoreau’s (1854/1983) famous phrase nonetheless bears repeating: “… [We all] live lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation” (50).

University campuses in Canada and the United States, my own included, are marked by various symbolic references that serve to locate one on an educational landscape. Universities exhibit a kind of spatial logic, which if you’re familiar with one, allows you to
potentially navigate others. All academic conference goers are well aware that if one’s lost on some unfamiliar campus, one need only locate the campus centre and orient themselves accordingly. If looking for sustenance (and possibly lost), one need only ask a local for directions to the student centre (or book store), the usual but not exclusive site of vibrant social activity—of course, one must endeavor to distinguish a local member from one merely visiting. Such identification, at the intersection of subjectivity, spaces and education, raises the complex question of how we might recognize a student, professor, staff member, or visitor. In large urban centres, community members cutting through the university are common, adding further to the complexity of identifying an inhabitant (Panayotidis & Stortz, 2004).

Knowing Where to Walk
In his mesmerizing chronicle, “A Berlin Childhood around 1900,” recalling, while in exile, the vanished world of his privileged childhood, cultural critic Walter Benjamin noted provocatively, “Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires some schooling” (Benjamin, 2006, 53). It was not until I traveled to Oxford University in England that I began to critically attend to the meanings invoked/evoked by university and college campuses. To paraphrase Benjamin—it took losing myself in order to see the place anew—to make the familiar strange again.

In June 1996, my husband and research partner Paul and I traveled to Oxford, to attend the international centenary conference of the death of renowned nineteenth century designer and social theorist William Morris (1836-1896). I was giving a paper and writing a doctoral thesis on Morris’ (and Ruskin’s) social-aesthetic influence on Canadian education. We added on a few days to our trip to allow us to explore the city and to see some of the sites that we had both read about in our own scholarly work.

Our brief tour of the place was undertaken on a cold, cloudy, and rainy summer day—a common occurrence we were told by the locals (townies to be exact)—as they gazed upon us shivering, dashing into any warm haven to escape the stinging cold. Although the dampness chilled as to the core, the exorbitant exchange rate and our status as impoverished graduate students at the time did not make buying warmer clothing feasible or desirable. Not mere “tourists,” we were in Baudelaire and Benjamin’s terms the modernist’s Flâneur, who strolling the city, goes about “botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin, 1997, 36). The spectacle of Oxford’s historical colleges, institutions, and common areas provided, what I have come to call the educational Flâneur, with the opportunity to embody the place, to experience it through the body, to walk the ancient streets and to capture something of the past.

So, we set off to experience all that we could see: the church where William Morris and his wife Jane married, the Ashmolean Museum of Art and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. Ten years later, these sites remain etched in our reminiscences and, perhaps interestingly, in our intellectual parleys. The classical marble halls and stairways of the Ashmolean still conjure images of power, wealth, and art collecting. And my husband Paul still wonders why, at the Ashmolean, I chose to take in John Ruskin’s exhibition of drawings, and did not make time to see the exhibition on Leonardo Da Vinci. Surely, a Renaissance master trumps a nineteenth social theorist?

In stark contrast, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, with its zoological,
entomological, geological, paleontological, and mineralogical specimens and collections drew our attention, but we were spellbound by the Gothic Revival design of the museum. Its spectacular nineteenth century cast-iron construction, supporting a glass roof, beaten upon by the wind and rain on that day was perhaps the most evocative remembrance of our time in Oxford.[7] The work of architect Benjamin Woodward and Thomas Deane, the building was heralded by Henry Acland and John Ruskin as one of the finest Neo-Gothic buildings in Oxford. Over the last ten years, the sensory sound of rain against glass still summons the embodied experience of that day and place (Pallasmaa, 2005).

That is saying a lot, for the day was suffused with the vestiges of the past—with historical references that perhaps only two nascent historians might appreciate and fetishize. The cobblestone roads and barely-one-room pubs, listing their origins as 1340, were often times beyond articulation and left us with a visceral feeling. We sat with new friends at the Eagle and Child Pub, were C.S. Lewis and his own intellectual cohort sat and drank, and saw the room in the Natural History Museum where legendary battles on science and creation were debated by notable opponents such as Thomas Huxley (1825-1895), a supporter of Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution, and Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford (1805-1873).

Romanticism aside, Oxford University’s educational landscapes were also strewn with bloodshed (Bender, 1988). Contested and conflicting battles over restricted space led to recurring violent confrontations among towns people, university students, and scholars, and often times between nomadic scholars from different parts of Europe at the same university (Seybolt, 1921; Renaissance Student Life, 1927; Autobiography of Johannes Butzbach, 1933). The most notable of these town and gown clashes, the Battle of St. Scholastica Day, took place on 10 February 1355. An altercation in a local tavern escalated into a two-day battle in which 66 scholars were killed and countless maimed. The tragedy was mourned for over 500 years, with the mayor of Oxford swearing an oath to uphold the university’s rights and privileges, and paying a token compensation for the lives lost. The delicate balance between town and gown—the university and the present city of Oxford is, as one local mentioned to us, under constant negotiation.

No trip to Oxford would be complete without a tour of Oxford’s 21 colleges. Each College holds its own revered treasures and links to multiple pasts. Our walk was intellectually enjoyable, if not awe-inspiring, but it was not until we walked into the gated enclosure of Christ Church College that we were confronted with social and cultural directives about who could and could not walk on its manicured grounds and, perhaps more importantly, what this might mean. A simple wooden sign, posted on the stone wall into the entry of Christ Church Meadow, read:

The meadow keepers & Constables are hereby instructed to prevent the entrance into the meadow of all beggars, all persons in ragged or very dirty clothes, persons of improper character or who are not decent in appearance & behaviour & to prevent indecent, rude or disorderly conduct of every description.

To allow no handcarts, or wheelbarrows, no hawkers or persons carrying parcels or bundles to obstruct the walks.

To prevent the flying of kites, throwing stones, throwing balls, bowling heaps, shooting arrows, firing guns or pistols,
or playing games attended with danger or inconvenience to passers-by, also fishing in the waters, catching birds, bird-nestling or cycling.

To prevent all persons cutting names on, breaking or injuring the seats, shrubs, plants, trees or turf. To prevent the fastening of boats or rafts to the iron palisading or river-wall, & to prevent encroachments of every kind by the riverside.

—Signed, Christ Church.

The transformation of peripatetic culture in England in the nineteenth century from a wandering and unproductive labour to one that was virtuous and had positive associations with a “human life before mechanization” sheds complexity on the sign’s fixed rules and regulations of decorum and propriety (Wallace, 1994, 13). Although this was a historical sign we wondered who got to say who was a person of ragged, dirty demeanor, or improper character, indecent, rude or disorderly conduct? It led us to consider, to whom does the campus really belong? How do we recognize each other as fellow mortals and not as insiders/outsiders, inhabitants/intruders? Spaces/places are undeniably bound up in politics and power, contested and negotiated, and constantly under revision. Remembering that several years ago, at my university, a homeless man was escorted off-campus makes these questions all too compelling and its act most shameful!
Where to write on campus

Some of the books on writing that I have been reading lately suggest that writers should write diligently everyday and everyplace they find themselves! I understand the directive to write everyday but I am less sure about this notion of everyplace. I have never been able to write outside my university and home office—and seldom can I write anything lengthy that is not typed. A colleague’s confession, years ago, that she did her best writing and marking at the local coffee shop drew inspired awe from me but not an actual commitment to try it. Coffee shops and the cultures that they produce are just not a stimulating enough context for me to think deeply, let along write meaningfully.

Over the past several months, I have been reading about and experimenting with my prose, attempting to cast my narratives in lyrical elegance and with a certain rhetorical élan. Poetic poetry, as Heidegger would say, for “the voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings.” (Hofstader, 1971, x.) Such stylistic crafting (which seems to call to me) is more suited to the interpretive approaches I have been engaged with over the last little while.

Teaching an introductory graduate course on “Interpretive Inquiry,” I have sought to support students to write with greater freedom and to suffuse their work with the sensual richness of detail and imagery—“thick description” in Geertz’s terms (1973), as writing is an essential tool for interpretative inquiry. “Write in a more open-ended fashion,” I counsel. “Be more ambiguous, less certain, and more speculative.” “Get behind and underneath the words and images you take up.” “See your relation to the topic, the conversation, event, phenomenon, or the world you seek to understand.” “Listen to the way in which the self is texturally entwined in the world.” “Allow yourself to wallow in the wonderment of not knowing.” “Embody your knowing.”

Interpretive work requires a largeness of vision and is not unlike “telling your dreams in public” (Frederick Seidel cited in Kunkel, 2007). For those not already versed in interpretive work, it is admittedly a tough sell in the first couple of weeks of the course. Students’ earnest looks and unnerving questions reminds me that generalized concepts and terms must be contextualized—grounded deeply in the well-waters of particular experiences, circumstances, histories, and cultures. “How do I write lyrically,” a student asked me? “Where should I begin?” “How will I know when I’m finished?” “Is that academic?” “So I shouldn’t have a literature section?” What should I write about?” “Is that valid and objective?” “Are you saying I can write a song or dance my inquiry?” “Are you sure that’s academic?” In thinking about where to begin, Goldberg’s phenomenological advice (articulated through her own Buddhist understandings) is to recognize, “There is the earth below our feet and there is the air, filling our lungs and emptying them. We should begin from this…There is the sunlight coming through the window and the silence of the morning. Begin from these” (Goldberg, 58).

I often carry students’ questions out into the campus with me, reflecting on how to best articulate and exhibit possible entry points into the work. Often, I recall hallway conversations (partaken in causal walks around the building!—I need to keeping walking after all) I’ve had with students about nonacademic matters: traffic, their teaching schedules, illuminating comments made by their students, grocery shopping in our city. Contrary to a geographer’s notion of hallways as non-spaces, a pedagogy based on social relations is needful of such hallway passages. Even difficult conversations (not confidential) about the work seem more comfortable as we walk and talk—“time gathers as we walk.”[8]
In a recent letter to the editor of the student paper entitled “Hooray for Hallways,” geographer Dennis Fay Brown approvingly commented on our universities initiative to redefine nondescript hallway spaces. She bemoaned the fact that people didn’t “realize that the corridors and hallways of the university are a relic of the past, and that they should now stop and build relationships … [she added that people] resist the spatial transformation of now, and fixate on the obsolete non-places that were the hallways and corridors of yesteryear” (2006, 3). Leaving the confines of an authoritative space provides for a different kind of dialogic engagement. We know how to be and act in particular spaces.

Years ago, while doing research on arts-centred learning, I was invited by a principal in our study to discuss her interests and school’s vision around teaching core curriculum through the arts. I got to the school early and presented myself to the office as a “visitor.” The secretary beckoned me to take a seat as the principal had an emergency meeting with parents and was running quite late. I nodded knowingly, and sat in a hard-edged steel and leather chair next to a young boy of about 8 or 9-years-old, who was studying his shoes with great intensity. He looked at me shyly and I smiled and whispered “hi.” I remember putting my purse and school bag to the side and clasping my hands in my lap. Taking a cue from the boy, I bowed my head and began to study my boots. After a short while, perhaps seeing me as friendly compatriot, the young boy leaned over, looked up at me, and in a low voice asked: “What did you do that you have to see the principal?” We know how to be and act in particular spaces. But how is it that we come to know and perform these subject positions, particularly on university campuses?

**Concluding Thoughts: Where do I go from here?**

I’ve walked into something I can’t seem to shake. In the midst of a busy term, engrossed in an interpretive inquiry class, I began to write alongside my students my own understandings, questions, musings, and apprehensions; trying to make sense of my new directive to walk. Thinking back, I now realize that I did not want to “lead,” “instruct,” and “lecture” about interpretive inquiry, but to journey with my students to new vistas and possibilities. In walking as a form of knowing, meditation, aesthetic practice, and as a way to examine the campus spaces around me, I came to see the futility of how I (and many others) conceptualized academic research.

By unsettling the nature of professorial work—particularly writing in the academy—in the aftermath of illness, I have attempted to reconstitute professorial research work within a more complex relation, realigning walking/writing/thinking. My once described aimless wandering revealed itself to be a deeper form of provocative wondering about my work and place in this particular space and at this historical and cultural juncture.

Having said that, I am all too aware that my writerly academic life, and even the occasion to walk, is a privilege, and one that must constantly be problematized; I have the means, the time, the educational background and, perhaps ironically, the occupation that allows me to pursue both writing and walking in ways that they may not be available to others. Likewise, this inquiry and the interrelation among walking/thinking/writing also highlights the spatial/political relations in the academy which increasingly promote certain forms of writing and expression over others, not to mention certain ways of being in the world. My interpretive writerly approach in this paper is thus intended as a challenge to the strict and regulatory disciplinary way in which neoliberal academic institutions attempt to enact their agendas.

So, where do I go from here? My wandering/wondering has produced new questions about
the campus as a place of knowing, making, and acting. I have come to think critically about the historical and cultural spatial arrangement and organization of universities. Walking my campus and an array of others over the years, I have been struck with the ubiquity of a “campus centre.” I ask, what does this mean and, perhaps more crucially, the centre of what? How do university campuses come to look the way they do? Who gets to say? And what might this mean for us university dwellers?

Historical and phenomenological perceptions, narratives, and understandings of campus spaces, held by students, professors, staff, and community members, and as detailed in the voluminous historiography of “campus” novels (or academic novels), beginning after World War II, have created intriguing vignettes of historical campus social life. One of the most amusing fictional accounts of a historical university campus (and its attendant robust caricature of a university president and male faculty!) in the Canadian literary genre is Stephen Leacock’s infamous Plutoria University, in his classic Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich (1914). Leacock, a political science professor at McGill University (1900-1936) created a campus arcadia that provides some interesting insights about how scholars have conceptualized their own workspaces.

Reading in and out of these historical novelistic accounts of university life and campus intrigues, I am cognizant of the veritable absence of women faculty. We inhabit these novels only as disenfranchised subjects; occasional lecturers, devoted secretaries, adoring students and, at times, faculty wives, who were cast as glorified hostesses and copyeditors, supporting an employed academic spouse and his research and writing. We had little if any claim over the space of the campus as a place of our own making.

Serendipitously, my inquiry on walking/thinking/writing has illuminated John Ruskin’s notion of environmental determinism in our present world. Contemporary campus planners, in their effort at “greening” the campus—an environmental strategy aimed at creating and building upon lush yet sustainable green landscapes—have consciously adopted (or drawn in part on) Ruskin’s philosophical beliefs about “good” urban planning; concerned with preserving natural beauty, shunning widespread development, and industry encroaching on the environment. We are all (both humans and the more-than-human world around us) bound together in an intricate and sustainable interplay, giving life to Gadamer’s (1996) notion that health of the individual and the health of society are inseparably linked. Yet, I am reminded that the space of the campus today is not, as many might have it, an ivory tower set among the academic groves, but is more akin to a hyper commercialized entity with often destructive effects.

Walkthrough (slideshow)

As I grab my running shoes to lace up for my walk, an e-mail flashes across my screen and I am riveted by its address. In preparation for the building of a new library, a patch of green—a home to rabbits, birds, small animals, and 40-year-old trees—just west of the present library, has been unceremoniously and quietly bulldozed over a holiday weekend to avoid a demonstration from the campus community. My frustration and anger is palpable as I sit staring blankly at my computer, wondering about the loss of habitat for the animals, and reflecting on previous administrative assurances that our campus would retain its green footprint. So what does it mean, I wonder, when contemporary campus planners speak of “greening” the campus? What do they mean to signal by this language, practice(s), and process(es)? And what kind of claims do universities make through such public gestures? I rather think (or at the very least, hope) that such green planning evokes more ecological
perception and understanding of our being and its potential for dwelling and acting in the world. Perhaps, it is the communities that gather together that make this particular place—this campus possible. I finish lacing up my running shoes, grab my coat and head out to wander/wonder…I have been sitting for far too long!

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Notes

[1] Entanglements and encounters may also arise serendipitously from a good class discussion, with a book/art work and its author/maker, and joyfully in conversation(s) with colleagues and students.

[2] Contemporary research has shown that ethnic communities in Diaspora retain more traditional culture mores and attitudes. Children caught in these worlds live out hybridic social relations.

[3] This paper is part of an ongoing manuscript that examines the intersections and interactions among spatiality, identity, and gender on the contemporary and historical university campus. Drawing on an interdisciplinary literature I seek to unsettle what it might mean to dwell in a particular university campus.

[4] An extensive interdisciplinary bibliography on walking “as a form of knowing”; “as an aesthetic practice”; “as an examination and inquiry of place”; as an “embodied and bodily encountering of the Other”; and as a “form of meditation” exists. See for example: Careri, 2002; Basso, 1996; Lippard, 1997; Rodaway, 1994.

[5] Social and cultural geographer Joyce Davidson’s work on phobic geographies and social–spatial anxieties (2003; Davidson, Bondi, & Smith, 2005) suggests an important lens through which to analyze and interpret space, emotion, and embodiment on campus.

[6] As the figure of the flâneur is typically coded as a male bourgeois bohemian, feminist scholars (Munt, 2001; Gleber, 1997; Wolff, 1985; Wilson, 1992; and Rendell, 1998), have problematized the notion and even possibility of a female flâneuse. Their arguments have raised intriguing questions about the intersection of the gaze, the gendered experience of modernity and the multiple, contextual, vagaries and contingencies of time and place, including issues of class, race, and ethnicity. Such literature has expanded my analysis of the implications of gendered (and transgendered) experience of campus spaces.

[7] In “Berlin Childhood,” Benjamin, spoke of the “dreams that took shape…first the unformed ones, traversed perhaps by the sound of running water or the smell of the milk, then the long-spun ones: travel dreams and dreams of rain” (39).

[8] I am grateful to Tim Skuce for his insightful articulation of the embodied character of walking and its relation to time/place/relations.

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