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Sharing Walks as a Witnessing Practice: Exploring Movement-Based Pedagogies

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Jorge Lucero for his feedback and guidance and to String Figuring participants for exploring this activity with me. My gratitude with Natalia Espinel for thinking-with me and inspiring a lot of this work, and Jody Stokes-Casey, Ahu Yolaç, Angela Baldus and Paulina Camacho Valencia for offering support, space, and feedback in my practice.

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Introduction and Rationale

How we walk—or our inability to do so—is telling of who we have been. Consider the following: Have you had any health issues that affect how your body functions with each step? Do you move like your family or peers? Are our walks different because of our sex at birth? How about our social class and race? Does any of that affect how we carry our bodies? These questions reveal that the subtle details of our movements—or lack of mobility—may be entangled with the complex social histories that precede us¹.

I propose this simple movement practice as a pedagogical engagement with the concept of *faithful witnessing*—developed by Lugones (2003) and expanded by Figueroa-Vásquez (2015, 2020). To *faithfully witness* is to attend to power imbalances that may go unnoticed and to people's creative and resistant possibilities. With this approach, I am interested in problematizing the inherent politics of constructing difference as inferiority, from the standpoint of feminists of color (Ahmed, 2000, 2006; Mohanty, 2003; Ortega, 2015). In this activity, *faithful witnessing* informs a pedagogy of engaging with different experiences, refusing to equate them with otherness.

The activity can be used as an introductory experience to a course seeking to set up an environment of awareness and sensibility to different experiences in the group. It can also open or close a unit focused on sociocultural differences, specifically. This practice is also suitable for non-classroom spaces, like group-building workshops, and can be adapted to different sized groups using pairs and small group discussions. The activity introduces a simple *score* (creative prompt) to explore walking with others, create instructions to teach others to walk/move like their peers, learn others' movements, and delve into conversations concerning the layers embedded in such a simple exchange.

Attending to others' movements with our bodies and delving into their histories together, rather than reading them *a priori* from our stereotypes, *sharing walks to witness faithfully* is a practice that interrupts our normalized ways to inhabit prejudiced constructions of others. Thus, leaving the cultivation of critical consciousness on race, gender, or other differences at the level of discourse without turning to the body is insufficient (Lewis, 2016). Embodied awareness of both, the kinesthetic qualities of our pedestrian movements and the relationship of those details with our histories, takes a cultivation process.

This pedagogical intervention places learning in the body. Using *scores*, it *tests* the *pliability* of pedagogy as a creative practice, as Lucero (2020) theorizes, as well as traditional approaches to difference. *Scores* are creative prompts used in contemporary dance, art, theater, and composition to embark on focused experimentation. They can take many forms: written instructions for movement exploration (Monson, 2017), performance provocations (Ono, 1971, 2000), drawings and diagrams (Halprin, 1989; Forti, 1974), and music sheets. In this activity, scores are devices that set up a situation where participants *faithfully witness* each other's histories, while identifying connections across them.

¹ For instance, Adeyemi (2019) discusses “verticality” as a form of embodiment and movement reserved for white subjects, and is considered threatening when Black individuals inhabit it (p. 9). This may affect how Black individuals carry their bodies in public.

Learning Objectives

- Problematize our taken-for-granted ways to approach people and their histories.
- Explore embodied and creative possibilities for learning from oneself and with others.
- Explore embodiment of social histories through our walks/pedestrian movements.

Explanation

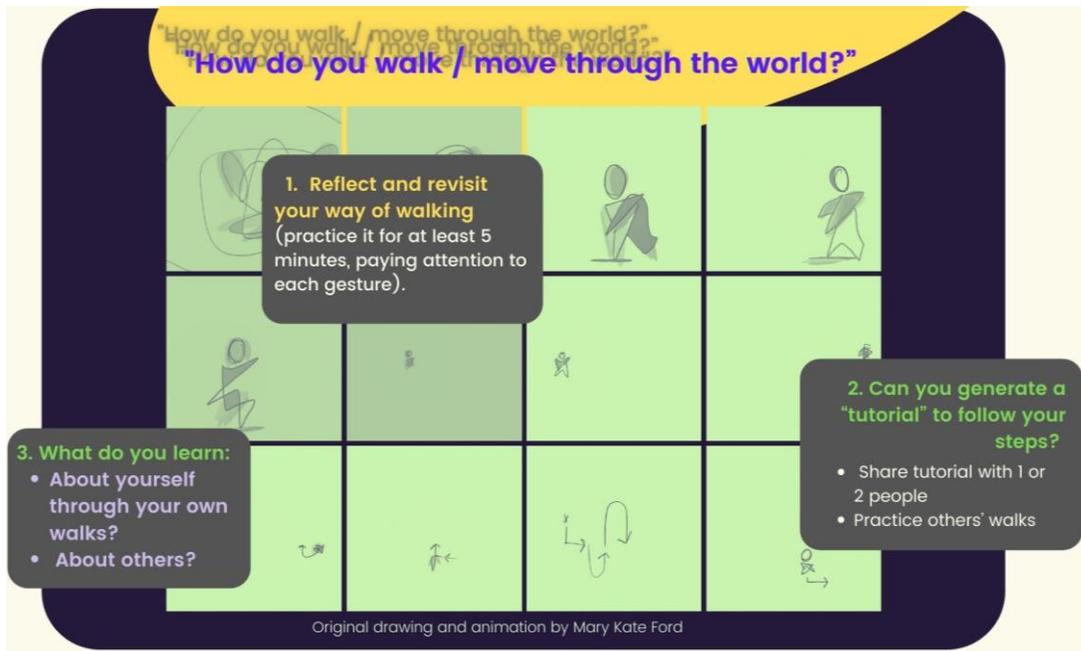


Figure 1. Score for sharing walks. Original animation by Mary Kate Ford.

1. *Studying one's walking and making a "tutorial"*

There is an initial process of proprioceptively noticing how our body physically organizes as we navigate through space. Begin with some breathing or warm-up exercises before the practice to bring participants' attention to their bodies². Having to *teach* someone to walk like you and attending to the qualities and histories of your movements places attention where it seldomly lies: at the subtlest details of our body's alignment, lack of mobility, distribution of weight, etc. This is to somatically and reflexively witness one's history *enfleshed* in one's body. Assign the entire group, for at least ten minutes, to this somatic-reflexive study.

Then, participants need to move their attention from the details of their movement to the histories and conditions woven into the contexts where they move. Participants can document their *study* of their walks through notes, video, drawings, or whatever media results helpful—or depending on the interests of the educator. Deciding *what* to teach from one's movements and histories is *curating* embodied stories. This is a process of "caring-for" the past (Lehrer & Milton, 2011), noticing what surfaces, and composing it as teaching and creative material in a

² I gravitate towards warm-up used in dance improvisation and modern dance: Pilates, Body-Mind Centering and Ideokinesis, and Deep Listening, among others. For the purposes of basic somatic awareness, I suggest short somatic exercises as those available at John Hopkins Medicine YouTube series: <https://www.youtube.com/c/HopkinsmedicineOrg/search?query=somatics>

meaningful way. Then, participants construct the "tutorial to inhabit my movements." The entire group can do this at the same time.

"Tutorials" propose a literal or imaginative route to invite others into one's experience and can have varying forms or levels of complexity. It could be from a simple set of written instructions or a more sophisticated visual or video composition (see: figure 2). These are a tool to help the "walker/mover" pay attention to specific aspects of their movements, identify associated histories/contexts, and organize the material to be shared with others. They can reflect if *where* they are walking as they practice affects *how* they move there compared to when they move in the street or at home.



Figure 2. Example of tutorial

2. Teaching others

The moment of teaching others one's tutorial should last between ten and fifteen minutes. The group is divided into pairs, and one person of each team decides to teach first. I suggest random pairing as an invitation to be open to new encounters and address surprises or challenges. However, educators should decide this according to their knowledge of the group and their needs. As participants teach others the qualities of their walks, they also explain histories or reflections that are related/behind those qualities. However, it is crucial to keep present that background histories are by no means demands for transparency. People do not need to engage with traumatic experiences or reveal intimate things that they don't want to. A fundamental part of *faithful witnessing*, paraphrasing Figueroa-Vásquez (2020), is that who witnesses needs to do the work of reading against the grain of common sense—this means, against discriminatory, normalized assumptions about difference. Witnesses make connections between immediate events—the walks and specific stories told by participants—and larger historical contexts and power relationships. This is a good opportunity to engage with concrete course themes. These depend on what the course are, but can include gender embodiment, ability, public performativity, and racialization among others.

Meanwhile, the person who learns the walk (moving and listening) has the opportunity to witness others faithfully, and to draw attention to their habitual movements. When you enact another person's walk, you realize that you must make quite an effort to inhabit their directions. (see: figure 3 for example of reflection related with the tutorial shown above)



Figure 3. Example of documentation and reflection

3. Swap roles + Small group/partner conversations

After the first member of a pair has taught their walks, people swap roles, and it is the second person's turn to lead. Both participants need to have the opportunity to teach their pedestrian movement and witness the other. This practice entirely relies on reciprocity and the commitment to share and witness.

Once both people have completed both roles, leave ten minutes to write reflections about learnings responding to the score's proposed questions: *What do you learn about yourself through your own walks? About others?* Because of the sensibility of the histories contained in the body, I suggest always accompanying this practice with reflexive conversations where each participant can examine what they noticed from their own walking technique and what they observed from others'. Assign about ten minutes for each pair to discuss their experiences and notes. Invite participants to begin by asking the questions presented above, and transition into more analytical discussion. For instance: *What difference did you notice between how you walk and how your partner walks? Where did you find this is coming from? How is your particular history or your family history related to this difference?* Make sure that participants document these answers.

4. Entire group conversation

After small group conversations, it is generative to have a full-group conversation to share learnings and experiences. This is a good opportunity for the educator/facilitator to guide the conversation and draw connections with specific issues that might be of interest for the course. These questions would depend on the educator's interest in using this activity, but I suggest using the small-group conversations as basis to lead into the course theme. However, the educator can prepare the themes they want students to reflect upon or identify emergent issues. The key in this reflection is identifying movement patterns and reflecting upon their genealogy,

tracing connections with themes relevant for the course where the activity is used; how are these patterns connected to gender, labor practices, use of public space, ableism, etc.³?

Debriefing

This activity needs participants *attending* to the nuances of their bodies' movements, to the entanglements of the social histories that they inherit, and their ways to grapple with them. To *attend* refers, simultaneously, to be present, to pay attention, and to care for—reflexively and somatically. Working with experimental movement can be challenging when participants are not familiar with it. People get easily distracted with conversation or other approaches that, while relevant, obstruct the exploration of pedestrian movement as an archive of experience. Thus, when using this activity in your classroom, it is fundamental to concentrate on embodiment, and dedicate enough time-space for paying attention to the practice.

It is also essential that the educator/facilitator reminds people to keep track of connections between characteristics of one's walk and stories or history behind them. Teaching walks includes the qualities of the movement alongside those entangled stories, in whichever way the person wants to tell them. Avoid that the activity becomes walking/movement for the sake of movement. It is particularly generative when students/participants keep a journal or some form of tracking the connections they make as they study and organize their own pedestrian movement. For example, they can consider: *What else am I teaching my peer as I teach them my walk/movement?*



Figure 4. Example: somatic-reflexive observations

Since some histories behind our bodies and movements can be intimate and sensitive, people need select histories that they feel comfortable sharing. Still, they can acknowledge their histories' complexity as constitutive of their tissues. The image above shows how issues with pressure of performance, visibility, and education can conduce to situations that generate a modification in a persons' hip. For this reflection to occur, reserve at least ten minutes for each

³ Pitts (2019) discusses the *production* of disability through precarious labor practices in immigrant workers.

person to study their movement somatically and reflexively. Sustained engagement with the practice of walking-with and trying to inhabit others' movements can be challenging, but it is fundamental for embodied attunement. The educator/facilitator can also assign this part of the practice as homework, giving more time or additional instructions.

To practice *faithful witnessing* and avoid walking only for its sake, plan for several instances of individual and collective reflection. Documentation at different stages of the practice supports the learning process. I have noticed that documentation of the experience and the reflections can initially remain limited to the movement's most descriptive observations. Thus, the educator/facilitator needs to be active in reminding people to make the effort of *witnessing beyond the event*. Progressively, through shared practice and conversation, observations begin to involve histories beyond the concrete characteristics of the walk and articulating embodied knowledge and connections with others' trajectories.

Remind participants that witnessing the history of another person through their walks is a sensible responsibility. I discourage assuming a distanced and neutral approach to this mode of witnessing. When moving together, when inhabiting others' steps, we are always involved.

Assessment

The general goal of this activity is to practice Lugones' (2003) radical proposition of *faithful witnessing* through a shared practice of simple movement and reflection. The practice's more practical learning objectives listed above, while specific, are openings to continued study and experimentation more than they are points of arrival. This activity seeks to motivate participants to engage in sustained cultivation of embodied and relational forms of solidarity.

Lucero (2021) understands assessment as a middle point in the process of learning. Assessment, he argues, is a moment for teachers and students to reflect upon the process of whatever is taught/experienced and make the necessary adjustments to continue the complicated relationships that constitute teaching and pedagogy. In this continuum, teaching-learning, as Dalke and Lesnick (2011) write, it is relevant that teaching practices enable surprises and new directions.

Thus, I understand this phase of the activity more as an art critique (Camnitzer, 1980), a conscientious conversation of each person's creative interpretation. For this activity, 'successful learning' exists if people studied their movement, attended carefully to their own and others' movements, found questions, and made interpretations in that process. For this reason, the *score* includes closing questions to finish the activity (see: Figure 1). The educator/facilitator can add supplementary questions like: *Did you notice details in your pedestrian movements? What did you perceive in your body when practicing another's walk? Had you connected your movement with your history before?*

As long as this conversation takes place with engagement and respect—this is taking the practice seriously (Figuroa-Vásquez, 2015)—learning is taking place. If the guiding questions are also approached with curiosity and creativity, the activity's intended provocation is "successfully" installed.

Proposing walking as an activity to *faithfully witness* is a methodological and epistemic intervention to traditional academic knowledge that relies on the body and is not afraid of not fully understanding. I lean into modes of knowing that are meaningful and radical without being completely verifiable. Learning from the body is as concrete as it is hazy, and as intimate as it is interdependent with the social and the political. As arts-based research does (Eisner & Barone,

2012), my score raises questions and foregrounds problems, rather than constructing a verifiable truth. Art education can generate forms of perceptual hesitation and sensorial interruption that can contribute to pedagogical projects committed to troubling habitual—and thus, relatively comfortable—practices of othering (Kraehe & Lewis, 2018). Using scores as creative and pedagogical devices, this activity sets up a particular kind of encounter committed to witnessing and embodied exploration.

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