

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

One Walk a Day: The Freedom and Restriction of Movement through Space

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On Monday 23rd March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared that Britain would now be on official lockdown but that most British residents could leave the house for one form of exercise per day. It was later suggested, by the Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove, that the exercise should either be a walk of up to an hour or a run or cycle ride of thirty minutes.

At the start of lockdown, I was in the process of writing up my PhD thesis on the Shropshire authors Mary Cholmondeley and Mary Webb, how their work depicts women walking, and what this says about their desire for more freedoms in society. My research engages with concepts of space and place and I am particularly interested in how ideologies of gender play a role in the experience of space. As the government suggestion of ‘one walk a day’ became part of the daily routine of many British residents, I wish to analyse whether this walk restricted rather than encouraged people’s sense of freedom and also how our concept of the space of home was affected by the enforced enclosure.

Rebecca Solnit, in her study of walking entitled *Wanderlust*, explains how walking can help people experience the world in a more profound way:

When you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back, the more one comes to know them, the more one seeds them with the invisible crop of memories and associations that will be waiting for you when you come back, while new places offer up new thoughts, new possibilities. Exploring the world is one of the best ways of exploring the mind, and walking travels both terrains. (Solnit 2014: 13)

With most British residents' freedom of movement being restricted to a one-hour walk per day, the opportunity to explore new places both physically and creatively was severely affected. Whilst some people started walking who had never walked before, and discovered hidden joys on their doorstep, others felt that their daily exercise had been prescribed to fit within new parameters to which they didn't wish to subscribe. The nature writer Robert Macfarlane, in *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, notes how walking can be a way of 'enabling sight and thought rather than encouraging retreat and escape; paths as offering not only means of traversing space, but also ways of feeling, being and knowing' (Macfarlane 2013: 13). But, can a walk still encourage creative thoughts when the walker is restricted by time and distance?

As I walked every day during the lockdown period, I struggled to find the inspiration with which the walking process usually provided me. The reality that the space that could be covered during my walk had been reduced and restricted greatly affected my ability to wander freely both in mind and body. This walk was vastly different to the *dérive* envisioned by Debord in the *Theory of the Dérive* (1956). Debord defines the *dérive* as a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' (Debord 1997: 2). It is an unplanned journey through a landscape, usually urban, in which participants drop their everyday relations and 'let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there' (2). Instead, my walk was planned, rural, and I was unable to distract myself from the concerns of the Corona virus pandemic which was affecting the country.

The countryside can be seen as a place of escape which provides walkers with a sense of freedom away from the restraints of everyday working life. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), reflects on this sense of freedom that women experience when surrounded by nature:

...among plants and animals she is a human being; she is freed at once from her family and from the males – a subject, a free being. She finds in the secret places of the forest a reflection of the solitude of her soul and transcendence; she is herself this limitless territory, the summit flung up toward heaven; she can follow these roads that lead toward the unknown future, she will follow them; seated on the hilltop, she is mistress of the world's riches, spread out at her feet, offered for the taking. (De Beauvoir 1957: 363-64)

This sense of freedom had now been taken from me. The countryside space, rather than providing an opportunity for me to escape, now became an exclusive area which was only open to people who lived a short walk away. It was no longer 'limitless' but instead parameters had been placed on it which restricted my movement.

Even when I returned home after my walk, the sense of space within my household had been altered. My home had now become a place where I worked as well as relaxed; a place I could only leave for a few legitimate reasons. Through Zoom meetings, my space became even smaller as my workplace was restricted to a little square on a computer screen. Bachelard reflected in *The Poetics of Space* that 'our house is our corner of our world' (Bachelard 1994: 4).

My corner of the world had, therefore, just become narrower. The freedom to move inside as well as outside was affected by who was watching me through my computer camera.

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan stated that a space becomes a place when through movement we invest it with meaning (Tuan 1977: 6). The question arises then: if our movement is restricted how can we find meaning in the space around us? As I struggled with creative inspiration throughout the lockdown, I reasoned that maybe I should instead concentrate on the detail in nature close by rather than concern myself with the vaster landscapes. One of the writers that my thesis focuses on is Mary Webb (1881-1927). She was a writer of nature essays as well as poetry, short stories and novels. Her writing delights in the beauty of the Shropshire countryside and her attention to detail provided me with the inspiration I needed to focus on my immediate surroundings. Her essays encourage the reader to notice every tiny detail in the world on our doorstep:

It is not only that the delicate traceries of silver birches are tenderly dark on the illumined sky, that a star springs out of it like darting quicksilver, that the music of tone and tint has echoed last April's song. It is something deeper than these. It is the sudden sense – keen and startling – of oneness with all beauty, seen and unseen. This sense is so misted over that it only comes clearly at times. When it does come, we are in complete communion with the universal life...Then we know that we are not merely built up physically out of flower, feather and light, but are one with them in every fibre of our being. (Webb 1948: 127)

Like Webb, I decided to engage all my senses when I next went on a walk and I began to observe the intricacies of the natural world: I wished to see the seen and the unseen. As the lockdown brought less traffic to the roads where I live, I noticed more wildlife and louder birdsong. As I began to focus more on the minutiae, the world began to open up around me and the space I inhabited seemed to become larger rather than smaller. I had found my own form of meaning and, although my walking could not take me as far as previously, the place I wandered became full of adventure. As Webb points out:

We need no great gifts – the most ignorant of us can draw deep breaths of inspiration from the soil. The way is through love of beauty and reality, and through absorbed preoccupation with those signs of divinity that are faint, miraculous foot-prints across the world. We need no passports in the freemasonry of earth as we do in the company of men; the only indispensable gifts are a humble mind and a receptive heart. (Webb 1948: 128)

Maybe, then, this enforced restriction of movement had enabled me to fully appreciate the space that I inhabited. By discovering more about my own small part of the world, I had redefined the place that I had lived in for over fifteen years. I had become more receptive to the land around me and, like Webb, I began to draw inspiration from my surroundings. My

walk may have become shorter but the creative possibilities that walking opened up to me had suddenly become larger.

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