Four Legs Good…

Claire Cunningham and Dee Heddon

> Where does it start? Muscles tense. One leg a pillar, holding the body upright between the earth and sky. The other a pendulum, swinging from behind.
>
> Rebecca Solnit, Wanderlust: A history of walking (2014:3)

> I have realised that for me walking is a form of reaching, because I'm reaching forwards always with the crutches. There is a reaching in the step for me all the time. It has a curiosity. There's something very active in that term 'reaching'.
>
> Claire Cunningham, interview with Dee Heddon,(2017)

Dee has been thinking about walking and diversity and diverse walking practices for some time now. She has been thinking about how much writing on walking, including her own, is ableist. In its references to rhythms, and reveries, and relationships between footsteps and heartbeats, it presumes and represents a certain type of body undertaking a certain type of walking (Heddon and Porter, 2017). Dee has been thinking that she needs to use the resources to which she has access to open this space and extend the conversation and representations.

Responding to On Foot, she invites the Glasgow-based performer and choreographer Claire Cunningham to join her on a walk (2017). Claire self-identifies as a disabled artist who sees her use of crutches as being formative both in her identity and in shaping her artistic practice. Dee proposes to Claire that they walk along the canal that runs through the west of the city. Claire messages her a reply:

> Errr... can I ask could there be another option than canal tho? Somewhere with slightly more interesting terrain?🙂don't mean it needs to be up a mountain or anything v dramatic, I just realise that a canal path I think of as

flat and tarmac and v unchallenging to me which means I feel a bit unmotivated to walk...

No reflection on the company as motivation to walk!

I guess this knowledge in itself is a conversation...

On 28 December 2017, Claire and Dee set off to walk to Burncrooks Reservoir, near Strathblane, on the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland. The sunshine is bright and the sky blue. It has snowed heavily during the night and the temperature in the shade does not rise above freezing. Claire and Dee are dressed for the weather. Claire also wears a clip-on microphone. They walk and talk.[{note}]1

Dee: You're scanning the ground all the time. What are you looking for?

Claire: I'm looking for ice on the ground. I'm looking for where the ice narrows.

D: You're going to be walking where the sun's been most. There's a partnership between you and the sun as you walk.

C: I really move into four-legged style, so everything moves individually. Right foot, left crutch, right crutch, left foot. Nothing moves without me having checked where it's going first.

D: So, you have to have something on the ground, and tested it, before taking a step forward?

C: And everything has to be quite stable. I'm on the bits sticking out of the ice. Like stepping stones in the ice.

D: It's bloody cold in the shadows. I am noticing that, as we're walking slower, I'm not getting as hot as I would normally. I'm going to have to put my scarf and gloves on now.

C: If you were using crutches, you'd be warmer.

D: Are you warm?

C: I'm not cold.

D: Right, we've got over the ice now.

C: I can actually look up.

D: Is that the first time you've looked up?

C: Everything just becomes ground. When I stop to rest, that's the moment I look up and around. Walking on the road is less interesting to me, but also less safe, because it's slippery. If I was alone I'd probably walk up that bank. Because I'm not walking along looking at the scenery, this bank is more interesting to look at. The verge of the road, the ditch, it's uneven, where the snow starts, the mix between gravel, grass and snow. It's interesting to me because it's uneven, whereas a road and a path is really uninteresting.

D: The road itself is not interesting for me to walk on either. It's just very stable walking ground. Which is why I like it. I don't have to think. I can just look around. This road allows me to be in the environment without thinking about walking.

C: The act of going somewhere for a walk doesn't interest me so much, so I want to be interested in the act of moving. I need it to make me want to walk. Walking isn't something that allows me to switch off. It's not this effortless activity.

D: What does it mean to you, then, going for a walk?

C: I think in my head I'm like, 'What's the point of that? Why would I do that?' I would like to get to those places that walking allows me to get to, but the actual act of the walking is not pleasurable or effortless enough.

D: Now, Claire, what do we see in front of us?

C: That's exciting. I guess it's where the stream is running across the road.

D: We've basically got a sheet of ice.

C: With bits of gravel poking through, and mud.

D: Do you think you read terrain really quickly, quicker than most people?

C: I think so. I often think of Terminator movies, where you see through his eyes, he's kind of scanning. I feel like that's what I'm doing.

D: What's going to determine the best way across this? What are you looking for?

C: Rough patches, where the crutches are really going to have traction. The more uneven it is, the safer it is to brace the crutches against, so if you've got bigger stones, or where there's places where I could step across or I could do little jumps across. I can actually jump across quite big areas with the crutches as long as I can find places to brace them. If this was running water, it would be four or five feet wide, and I could just put my crutches in the middle of the water. Like a vault.

D: The sun is already going down. A walk to you doesn't mean going out and having a relaxing time then?

C: Not really. It's not a relaxing thing for me. It requires a lot of energy. If I'm walking I'm just pretty much just concentrating on the ground. I think that's one of the advantages, though. Because I spend a lot of time looking down, I then really make an effort to look up. I really treasure the choice of looking up. So, the fact that I need to stop and rest more, that becomes the point at which I stop and look around.

D: I am noticing as I'm walking with you that I am looking at the ground more.

C: There's something about the snow: it looks purple. Here, because it's started to go up hill a little bit, I want to move onto the verge because it's rougher. I get nervous that the road might be too smooth under the ice.

D: Is this your normal pace?

C: Probably a bit slower than in the street. But then you get moments like this, where there's a little puddle, and I quite like this shift into another time frame of almost slowing down and moving into this super careful mode.

D: I like to just walk. To go. I can't even read a map.

C: What does 'going for a walk' mean to you then?

D: It does mean getting out. It is something about the movement. That's one of the reasons I don't like hill walking, because I've got to stop after about twenty paces to breathe. So, for me, it is about the body getting into a rhythm, a momentum, I guess. It does relax me. I like to feel the momentum. I just want to walk. Which is why I like paths. I like long-distance walking because you just get on the path and walk. And it isn't intellectual at all.

C: So how does this feel for you then? Because you can't get into a rhythm.

D: It’s more convivial. I like that.

C: I’ve carried this thing about not really going on a walk with anyone because I didn’t want to spoil their walk. There’s a whole element of guilt around disability that manifests in lots of ways but that’s not really talked about. That’s a big part of it for me. The people I know that go walking, they walk because they want to go for a walk; they want to walk for escapism; or for energy, or to get to the top of something. Potentially, I can’t do that with them. I would think, ‘Why would you want to go with me?’, because I’d spoil their walk. When I walked up the hill, the Whangie, with my friend Cormac, he said he didn’t care if we only got 50 feet from the car park and turned back. He didn’t care. But I needed someone to say that to me. And then realizing that we could then make a deal and negotiate something that was really interesting for both of us.

D: I think the negotiation is a really important part of it. Anytime I go out for a walk I’m negotiating where it is and how long it is.

C: This is the thing that I sometimes do when I teach workshops. I started just sending people out at the start of the workshop: ‘Go for a walk with someone you don’t know. Go for a walk for 15 minutes.’ When they return I say to them, ‘According to my definition, that’s choreography, because you spent 15 minutes negotiating time and space with somebody. How do you read those negotiations? Some of them are physical, where somebody slightly turns towards a direction—“Oh, we are going up here are we? OK”—or you have to have a conversation, where some things have to be talked out—“I want to go here; you want to go there”—and what are you learning?’

D: So that for you is choreography, then?

C: Yes, bodies in time and space. And how you are doing that. You are doing it in a hundred different ways every second, like us altering our pace to find a pace that works for each other. When do we need to stop? How are we negotiating stopping? Are we saying it? Is somebody just doing it? When do you just need to ask somebody using spoken language?—Oh, I just saw the loch.

D: Yes, and just 20 minutes away from Glasgow. It's part of the long-distance path, the John Muir Way, which runs from Helensburgh on the West Coast to Dunbar—Muir's birthplace—on the East.

C: I've been in the John Muir Woods, just outside of San Francisco. Wow, it's so beautiful. Why don't I do this more often? It's just amazing.

D: I know you've got this ongoing project, 'Four Legs Good'. When did you become interested in exploring walking?

C: In part it was out of a desire to think about how to get outside more, how to connect with nature. Can I connect with nature? Actually, do I have any connection to it, as somebody that feels like they never go out in to nature? Walking feels like this thing that doesn't make sense for me, but I still have a desire to have tried it or gone somewhere beautiful or gone out into these beautiful places. I guess it started with Cormac being really open to that idea of going for a walk.

As part of my practice I've noticed how the lived experience of disability is made manifest, how I behave in the world and how I notice the world. I began to wonder what other people noticed. I became aware that I really notice the ground; my spatial awareness is really heightened, my coordination is really quite good in certain ways. But there's certain things about my body, for example, my visual focus is correlated to my feet, so I'm always looking at where the crutches go, particularly the crutches and the feet; it's very hard to move them independently. Especially if I know I am somewhere that has any degree of risk, that's uneven, slippery or trip hazards. Then my eyes and my crutches move together. I began to get interested in what it was to go on journeys with other disabled people and see what they were noticing. And what do I notice, even when I walk through a town, that's maybe specific to using crutches or to feeling a little bit fragile? I don't want somebody to trip over my crutches or bump into me. What are the things I notice and what are the paths I choose, not just in a city, but in a room, or at a party? Where do I put myself? Where do I feel safer? Also, as a way to try and connect with a local place and a local person more when I go on tour, so I see more than just the theatre. I invited people—so far they have mostly identified as disabled—to go on little walks or journeys with me.

D: You call them journeys?

C: I started by calling them ‘walks’, but then decided on ‘journeys’, to get away from the bipedal. I started to try and think more in terms of journey, maybe also acknowledging that walking might not be the way people travel. If someone wants to take me on a taxi ride to take me through their favourite journey, or by boat or by bike, then I try and be open to that.

D: What have you learnt from journeying with other people who are physically disabled?

C: I think there is quite often, particularly with physical impairment, a very specific sort of relationship with the ground; people develop an awareness of the ground. I’m always interested in where our attention goes. Maybe we pay a lot more attention to our environment perhaps than bipedal, normative-bodied, people? Or notice things in our environment that other people don’t notice so much, whether that is the ground, or the camber of a road? There’s a subtlety of terrain that we notice, I think, that’s missed on foot, that you don’t feel. You don’t feel that this bit of ground is that much lower, or the angle, and the shifts, and the way that the ground can move. Shoes shield you so much from that feeling and connection. Also, things about energy. There have been a lot of conversations about understanding how to ration energy. My friend Dan, to walk with me, has to slow down. If he walks slower, though, he feels like he’s perpetually falling. In order to keep his balance, he has to move at a certain pace, to keep upright, to feel more stable upright. And brilliant moments like with my friend, the scholar Julia Watts Belser. We were in a park in Manchester at one point, and we got to a little hill. We had to negotiate the fact that she needed to push on, shoot up the hill ahead of me, and leave me behind because for her to go slowly up the hill in a wheelchair was just exhausting. She needed to just power up it and get to the top and wait for me. We develop a whole way of negotiating the world where we read what each other needs really quickly.

D: Do the people you journey with have the same feelings about going for a walk as you?

C: Not all of them, though the first couple of people I spoke to, we thought we might start calling it ‘The Reluctant Walkers Club’. But Julia uses a chair, and she will say,

‘I love going for a walk.’ She’ll use that language. For her it does give her an escape, and an energy.

D: I’m much colder than I would normally be. Are you cold?

C: I’m not actually. This is quite warm and energizing for me.

D: There’s an enormous amount taken for granted about what walking is and how it’s done. Can you describe how you walk?

C: At the moment, this is secure ground we are on. The snow gives it a little bit of friction and that friction means I can walk mostly by planting two crutches and then move my two feet. I am more walking on my feet and the crutches are a little bit stabilizing, taking a little bit of weight as I step through. But when things get more icy and treacherous everything shifts far more into the arms, and I trust the arms, rather than my feet. Everything shifts because that’s the strongest part and occasionally I do little suspensions to get over tiny little points. I think there’s a whole process that goes on very fast: planting the crutch, almost a little grind of the crutch point into the ground to dig it in, there—it’s hit gravel, it slides and there it grips, and once I feel it’s really secure I’ll lift my body weight up and into them and suspend. It’s that thing that happens, that need to be very vertical that people have to do when they walk on ice; they change where their weight goes. With me, my centre really shifts up and down. If I move along with my crutches just touching the ground, but not really taking any weight, then my centre is really down in my pelvis, like most bipedal people. As soon as I start planting my crutches, I become a little more diagonal, my pelvis goes back a little more, and my centre shifts up to my chest, so this becomes the point around which everything is moving. The crutches come in much tighter at certain points to the body. I am really aware that my elbows are much tighter in on this terrain, rather than being out and low and my elbows out wide. My elbows are holding quite tight to my body to brace, but also they keep me a bit more vertical above the crutches so the weight is pouring more straight down because the more I’m at an angle on the crutches the more chances something will slip. When it gets more precarious, I go more four legged. The crutches and rib cage become more like a frame that everything is hanging off. Almost like a trapeze frame, an aerial frame.

D: That sun is nice. So, your walking research, where is it going to go?

C: I don’t entirely know yet. I am working on a bigger project which I’m calling ‘Hermit Crip’, which is a series of residencies I'm undertaking, choosing to spend an intensive period with another disabled person—so far mainly artists—looking at how the lived experience of disability manifests for us both, and where overlaps might be but also what is created and inspired by that time and the ‘exclusivity’ of a disability lens or aesthetic, with the potential for influencing both our fields of work and maybe future collaborations as well. Another project, ‘Crip Wilderness’, is an idea that grew from one of these ‘Hermit Crip’ residencies, spent with Julia Watts Belser at Cove Park—an artist residency space in Scotland.[{note}]2 ‘Crip Wilderness’ is more specifically interested in a Crip politic and body relationship to environment—particularly places that might be deemed ‘wild’ and questioning that. It continues an ongoing interest in the relationship between the disabled body and nature. Working with Julia, we hope to bring artists and scholars together to think about the knowledges that these different bodies have which could open up, for Julia, her interest in climate change and the knowledge that disabled people have. Disabled people really understand living with change—the fact that disabled people are very aware of the fallacy of independence, and the need to know how to communicate with people and how to facilitate support. If you’re dealing with any of these sports where people are out climbing or anything that has any degree of risk, you need to know how to communicate and to know when to say when something is enough or when you need help or even what helps is. Like that thing of knowing when to step in for somebody, that they don’t even need to ask because you know how it all works. That was what was so interesting being out with Cormac on the hill, the realization that these skills being used in these extreme worlds are all the same skills that I recognize in disabled people’s everyday lives: navigating, rationing energy, negotiating with people, risk.

D: Perfect timing, Claire. The sun is just about to go down and the moon is up. I am very cold. We have walked for one hour and 49 minutes.

C: That’s amazing. If you’d said we’d walk for two hours I’d be like, ‘I can’t walk for that long.’

Notes

1 The transcribed interview uses chronological extracts taken from the recording.

2 Julia Watts Belser is Associate Professor of Jewish studies at Georgetown University.

References

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