Walking as a Way of Knowing: An Autoethnography of Embodied Inquiry

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Walking as a Way of Knowing:
An Autoethnography of Embodied Inquiry

by
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the role of walking in my own ways of knowing and to explore how walking itself is an epistemological process by using personal narrative to examine and story my experience. I used an embodied narrative research method, known as evocative autoethnography, in which I explored my own innate ways of knowing, including intellectual, embodied, emotional, and spiritual knowledge. I collected data using field notes, reflective journaling, reviewing past writing, and artistic interpretations of experiences such as photography and poetry. I compiled my data into a series of short essays, stories, poems, and photographs to take the reader into my personal experience. Through my year of collecting data and the process of narrative inquiry, I found that walking made me feel alive and connected to the world around me, while also exposing some of the ways Western structures of knowledge, which privilege objectivity, are inadequate to support holistic human growth and development. I found that walking made me confront many of the ways in which society is hostile to embodied experiential learning, and this hostility is a form of epistemological injustice and violence. I also found that walking provided a way of healing as the experience was one of deep connection to my own ways of knowing and meaningful experiences of being alive.
Dedication

This research is dedicated to the people, places, and experiences that have shaped my worldview and pushed me to question the assumptions of the society in which I was raised. I want to thank my partner, my family, my professors, and my advisor for believing in this work and helping me to find the words to express these complex and often paradoxical ideas.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation is a written expression of embodied knowledge; knowledge that lies within me as a person and has been gathered through my lived experiences. These are ideas that don’t simply exist in the abstract, but rather they exist in the world because I express them through the way I live my life. My body becomes a physical expression of written words. I believe that we are all walking books, walking dissertations, walking stories (Ware, 2014). We are the embodiment of the knowledge we hold. Knowledge can never be separate from the person who knows it, and people cannot exist in the absence of knowledge. Embodied knowledge is never static. It changes and grows and is made new over and again through the stories we tell and the ways we engage in the world around us. It is also paradoxical (Palmer, 2015). We must learn to hold conflicting ideas, as we come to understand that little in the world is a simple dichotomy. And we must decide who we are going to be. Because it is in who we are that knowledge is made and passed along. Therefore it is always what we do, and not simply what we say, that matters the most. We must embody the stories we tell. Therefore, I hope that my words and ideas do not only remain on the page, but rather are continually brought to life in the lived experiences of myself and others.

Land Acknowledgement

To begin, I would like to acknowledge that I conducted this research in places across Northwest Oregon, which is the ancestral homeland of many Indigenous tribes and bands, including the Chinook, Clatskanie, Cowlitz, Tualatin, Yamill, Tillamook, Atfalati, Multnomah, Clackamas, Kalapuya and Siletz. The people of this region were forcibly
removed from their land by European colonists and have endured hundreds of years of violence and oppression. I recognize that I am a descendent of these same colonizers, and have a responsibility to address this historical and ongoing injustice. I also recognize the resilience of Indigenous communities and their intricate knowledge of, and relationship with, the land. I am also deeply grateful for the knowledge that Tribal community members have shared with me over the years, both in personal communications as well as in books and lectures. I know that this knowledge came about through living on this land, since time immemorial, and I recognize the tremendous gift that it is to receive, especially since it is knowledge that my ancestors tried to erase. I hope that in my life, I can contribute to the healing of this land through repairing the broken relationships that colonizers and their descendants created.

**Love and Stardust**

There is something special about walking that takes me out of the socialization that permeates my life in contemporary U.S. society. Walking is a sensory-immersive, whole body experience of connecting with the physical, tangible world that makes me feel alive, whole, and joyful. Walking slows time and creates an intriguing, but uncomfortable contrast between my “normal” day to day life and how my life feels when I intentionally move about, especially in the outdoors. Walking connects me to what it feels like to be truly alive, which sits in uncomfortable opposition with the fact that this aliveness seems missing in many other parts of my life.

I have long suspected that life was more interesting, richer, and more meaningful, than presented by the dominant culture in which I was raised. It has always seemed
strange to me that mainstream U.S. society is so narrowly focused on just a few measures of what it means to live a good life, almost entirely situated around what one does for employment and whether that employment marks a person as a productive member of society.

I think the first time I was instructed on the fact that my whole life was one long preparation for, and then eventual lifetime dedication to, a job, was when I was still in pre-school. I am not sure I understood it as such at the time, but by kindergarten it was clear that what I was being taught by my (usually) loving and well-meaning teachers, had a singular focus: I was being prepared for employment 15-20 years down the road. I needed to learn to read, so that next year I could read more complicated texts, so that the following year I would be prepared to take a test that would make sure I was on track to be able to make it through high school, to make it through college, in order to someday get a job and support the family, that it was just assumed, I would inevitably want. The math I learned was the math of commerce (Emanuel, 2016), even though there are more interesting, philosophical ways to teach math, and science slowly morphed into STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), and STEM seems to always be about the jobs. My education never seemed to be about understanding the human condition, or trying to unravel the greatest mysteries of existence, or about celebrating the ways in which our childhood minds are wired for imagination and discovery. Rather, it all seemed to be about preparation for this narrow and fairly depressing future of a life dedicated almost exclusively to employment. Something about this has always felt wrong to me.

Was this what life was really about?
I am not sure what about my personality or disposition has caused me to find this notion ugly, but I have never been able to get over the fact that this world is so beautiful and magical; I struggle to understand how our entire lives have not been dedicated to exploration and discovery, both internal and external. How can we (humans) ignore that we are on a planet that (in the English language) we call Earth, which is part of a solar system, part of a galaxy and situated in a universe so vast that the human mind can barely begin to understand? There are apparently more stars in the universe than grains of sand on the planet (Krulwich, 2012) and yet somehow here we are, in an improbable and unfathomable, physical existence. It is hard for me to think about what it means to be alive, without contemplating about how wild it is that any of this is here at all. Every single atom that exists today is a component of a distant exploded star (Worrall, 2015); matter that has been recycled through all of time as we know it. My body and the space I occupy are truly one and the same, the separation is in appearance only and eventually, we will commingle into indistinguishable matter once again. How could this nearly unimaginable reality that we have been handed, go ignored in the day to day? How do we not revel in this notion on a nearly constant basis?

Like everyone else, I get one life (at least as I understand things at the moment). A life that is part of a cosmic history that brings us to this moment after billions of years of the universe expanding and becoming what it is today. Yet, there is little understanding of why life exists at all. I personally have a difficult time believing that our purpose is to buckle down and work hard for the capitalist paragon that the Western world has created and exalts as the pinnacle of human achievement. We have one life and one Earth. What
would it mean to live as if our lives were not just commodities destined simply for employment? What if we instead lived like our lives were part of the earth itself, and that to truly live, we must understand what it feels like to be alive in the first place?

The feelings I get while walking are so beautiful, profound, and alive feeling, that I question why the rest of my life is so void of these same feelings. Is that just the nature of living? That you only get to feel alive in small moments that are divorced from the day to day? This seems unlikely. Perhaps a product of contemporary, Western society, as opposed to being a fact of the human experience. Sure, every moment of every day will not be one of pure joy and vivification, but it seems that there should be more of these moments than many of us are experiencing.

I often wonder if the contemporary Western world was shaped (intentionally or not) by those in power to keep us distracted and disconnected from these feelings of being alive. The more we are despondent, lonely, hate ourselves, are consumed by empty digital stimuli, and feel lifeless, the easier it is to convince us to spend our days being “productive.” When we do not have moments where we understand our smallness, and therefore our greatness, it’s hard to stay in touch with what it means to live in awe. How could those in power keep us at our desks or in the factory, if we were regularly in touch with the feeling of being alive and prioritized that feeling over the acquisition of wealth and status?

For me, walking seems to be the main way I connect with profound moments of awe. Moments like when I notice the first flowers blooming in spring, and I am connected with the cyclical nature of the seasons. Or when I look up into the night sky
and understand just how small I am in the universe. Or when I catch a fish to eat and come to terms with the fact that all life is connected, as one organism’s energy enters another and what was once the sun’s radiation is part of my body and will take me through another day. These are all moments of connection, aliveness, and ultimately of love. The more I walk, the more I understand this. Walking is an act of love. Love for being alive.

**Background: Learning to Listen and Ways of Knowing**

“The plants will tell you what they need.” (Personal communication, my mother on gardening)

It was late summer, and soon the rains would return. The air was cool and still, and I could hear the sound of tiny waves crashing on the shore. I moved my hands across the ocean-smoothed pebbles, digging my fingers into the beach, and enjoying the touch of each cold stone. I lay down on my back with my arms outstretched, moving the rocks between my fingers. The salty air was infused with the smell of the Puget Sound; anoxic and pungent. The smell of life and death merging in the intertidal zone.

I lay there in a state of pure joy; an uncommon, overwhelming feeling. Too often, I felt unsure of my purpose in life. My body and mind fractured in my day-to-day existence. As if they were living in two separate worlds. But, at this moment I felt whole. The stones whispered to me that everything was ok. That there was nothing to fix, nothing to do, no lesson to learn. They told me that I was enough, and that all there was to do, was to be. I lay there for hours and listened to the stories the stones had to tell; slow stories, old stories, stories that I had never heard before because I had never tried to
listen. They were stories that dissolved the separation between my body and everything around me. I was no longer alone, and everything made sense. The sea, the stones, the salty air, were all animate; were ready to share their lives with me. All I had to do was listen.

* * *

The moment described in the previous paragraphs happened over a decade ago and was both unexpected and transformational. Something happened to me that day that I still struggle to explain but set in motion my quest to understand embodied inquiry and my own ways of knowing. I can still feel those stones on my hands and the stories they shared are as clear today as when I first heard them. While laying on that beach, I came to understand that there were some things that were only learnable in moments like those. That despite my love of reading, intellectual inquiry, and the scientific process, if I were to attempt to understand the world around me and what it means to be alive on this planet, in the vastness of an incomprehensible universe, that I would have to start connecting, or perhaps reconnecting, with my own ways of knowing. I needed to learn about the world in which I lived, so that I could understand myself as a part of it, and no longer a separate being. I came to understand that this was a process of embodied inquiry, a way of knowing which required both immersion and time. It turned out that the more-than-human components of the world had things to say, I just needed to learn how to listen.
Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the role of walking in my own ways of knowing and to explore how walking itself is an epistemological process, by using personal narrative to examine and story my experience. I sought to understand how walking was a process of slowing down, immersing into place, and learning with and through my body, all with the goal of reconnecting with my own innate ways of knowing.

Why Evocative Autoethnography?

This study is an evocative autoethnography, which is a form of narrative research; a method that centers the lived experience of the researcher (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Evocative autoethnography seeks “to make people feel deep in their guts and in their bones, using various forms of literary artfulness and storytelling to place the reader in the action” (Bochner & Ellis 2016, p. 63). Stories and narratives define the human condition. From individual identity formation to collective history, stories are how we pass knowledge from one generation to the next, make meaning from our experiences, build relationships, and connect to the world around us. Stories are in themselves a way of knowing. As Somers (1994) said, “Everything we know, from making families, to coping with illness, to carrying out strikes and revolutions is at least in part a result of numerous crosscutting relational story-lines in which social actors find or locate themselves” (p. 607). In using this research approach, I am challenging the idea that knowledge creation is an objective process and instead validating the way in which knowledge has been generated and passed down through all human history.
This dissertation is a study of personal experience, which is a method of research used throughout all human history and across all cultures. Despite this fact, personal experience and sharing information through stories, has been relatively devalued in Western academic thinking until quite recently, with the rise of postmodernism, and the more recent narrative turn in educational research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While postmodernism, and the qualitative research methods that have come from postmodern thinking continue to be contested in some academic circles, my own work fully embraces the epistemological standpoint that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore personal experience can be centered in trying to understand the human condition. As described by Barbour (2016), “I had discovered knowledge for myself, through my own bodily methods and through my experience” (p. 230). This is exactly what I have done in this research.

Autoethnography and narrative research methods are fluid, iterative, and relational, and “[i]t seems that there are no formal regulations regarding the writing of an autoethnographic account since it is the meaning that is important, not the production of a highly academic text” (Méndez, 2013, p. 281). To me, this form of research allows the unique voice of the researcher to be present and for their ideas to be presented in novel and creative ways. This is an intentional shift away from conventional Western methods that privilege ideas that already hold power in academic space.

This work is a personal narrative of my research, which includes stories from my life as well as the story of my research: how it came to be, what I learned along the way, and how this knowledge might be useful when thinking about what it means to know and
to learn. This work is centered on my own experiences trying to understand myself as a learner and the many ways in which I have tried to navigate multiple ways of knowing, in the face of Western epistemological structures that privilege objective, institutional, and mind-focused knowledge creation. In this research narrative, it is my hope that I take you, the reader, into my world; that I help you see through my eyes and feel what I have felt. I hope that I evoke emotion in you and make you think in new and interesting ways. And most importantly, I hope that I push you to think and feel more deeply about your own life’s journey and ways of knowing.

Guiding Research Question

What do I learn about my own epistemological process and ways of knowing through the practice of walking?

Definition of Key Concepts

In this section, I provide definitions for key concepts that I use to explore my research topic. The key concepts or terms that I define include ways of knowing, nature, placemaking, phenology, slow pedagogy, and embodied inquiry or embodied learning. Other important concepts are defined, or given context, within the text itself.

Ways of Knowing and Epistemology

Epistemology is the Western branch of philosophy that concerns the study and nature of knowledge. The term ways of knowing can be understood as a non-Western way of thinking about the epistemological process. Ways of knowing is a term that is often a repudiation to the monolithic way of knowing in Western academic thinking that
privileges objective, empirical, and hierarchical knowledge creation in favor of
traditional, holistic, and embodied knowledge (Merriam & Kim, 2008).

**Nature**

I use the word nature throughout this dissertation; however, I would like to acknowledge that I think it is a problematic term. The word nature implies something separate from humans, which is the opposite of my intent in this research. However, I have yet to find another word to use that embodies the totality of all life (including the non-living elements with which we interact). Thus, I use the terms nature, natural world, world around me, material world, the land, and physical world somewhat interchangeably. I also have a section titled, *Conceptualizing Nature* in Chapter 2, which delves into this topic in more depth.

**Placemaking**

Placemaking is a term I use to describe the active process of making connections between a place and meaning in a person's life (Hill & Brown, 2014). Placemaking is a critical component of learning with and from the natural and physical world as place and nature are inextricably linked. Therefore, making a connection to place is often necessary for people to develop a personal relationship with the world around them.

**Phenology**

“Phenology is the study of recurring life-cycle events, classic examples being the flowering of plants and animal migration” (Morisette et al., 2009. p.253). In this study, I use the term phenology to refer to the process of making formal observations and recording data on the cyclical (seasonal) life cycle of plants and when and where changes
in plants occur. For example, observations on when and where I notice the first blooming Indian Plum plant in late winter or how local trees respond to a particularly dry summer. I have been collecting this kind of observational data for many years prior to this research and during this project continue these observations while incorporating them into my narratives.

**Slow Pedagogy**

Slow pedagogy honors the timescale in which humans live their lives and connects the physical, corporeal experience of being human and our relationship with place and ways of knowing (Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Slow pedagogy is a way of thinking about teaching and learning that honors our relationship with the natural cycles of life and the extended timeframe it takes to build and learn from these relationships.

**Embodied Inquiry or Embodied Learning**

Embodied inquiry or embodied learning refers to the experiences of the body, distinct from the mind. Embodied learning “implies education that trusts individuals to learn from and listen to the information they are receiving from the interaction of self with the environment. Somatic or embodied knowing is experiential knowledge that involves senses, perceptions, and mind-body action and reaction” (Kerka, 2002, p. 3).

**Conclusion**

In this section, I introduced my research topic, provided background information, introduced autoethnography, described the purpose of the study, identified my guiding research question, and defined key concepts. Additionally, I introduced the narrative style of my writing, which I continue throughout this dissertation. In the next chapter I discuss
the research and methodological literature relevant to my study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I discuss the literature as it relates to walking as a way of knowing as well as my theoretical framework which includes themes of embodied inquiry, nature and placemaking, and slow pedagogy. I also review the methodological literature related to narrative research methods including narrative inquiry, evocative autoethnography, and walking methodologies. I argue that autoethnography is an embodied epistemological process and therefore, is itself, a way of knowing.

Walking as a Way of Knowing

“Walking is the human way of getting about. Always, everywhere, people have walked, veining the earth with paths, visible and invisible, symmetrical and meandering” (Clark, 2012. p. 1).

I sat quietly under a towering Douglas fir tree, just off the Wildwood Trail in Forest Park. Through openings in the canopy, I could see North and Northwest Portland below; a mostly industrial landscape, crisscrossed by elevated freeways and flanked by the low foothills of the Cascade mountain range. The confluence of the Willamette and Columbia Rivers could be seen off to the left, and further in the distance I could see the rounded summit of Mt. Saint Helens. I know this trail and this place intimately. I come here to walk, relax, reflect, and continue to develop my relationship with the land. It was mid-March and Trillium flowers dotted the forest floor, while fiddleheads sat ready to unfurl, knowing that soon the days would get longer and warmer. This year’s spring came early, after a winter that seemed to never fully materialize. The first week of February
brought flowers blooming many weeks early, along with the melting of the mountain snowpack. I sat wondering what this summer would bring.

I got up from my sit spot and began to walk down the trail again, continuing to notice what was around me. My body propelled me forward and all of my senses came alive. I could feel the coolness of the forest air on my cheeks and there was a deep musty smell wafting from the forest floor. Various shades of green reminded me of the persistent rains that dominate our long winters and I could hear a black-capped chickadee alerting others of my presence. I could feel my connection with this place intimately, but I wanted to know more. I wanted to know this place like I knew myself; as if it were truly an extension of my own body. I wanted to deepen my relationship with and connection to the land, so that its future was my future.

* * *

Over the course of my life, I have understood my relationship with place, and the land, in a variety of ways. I spent years of my career in environmental education and sought understanding through learning the names and functions of local plants and animals. I earned degrees in science and in education, thinking that through conventional ways of knowing, I could connect, and help other people connect, to their world. However, for me, there was always something missing. Something that I could not name but was under the surface of those conventional ways of knowing that I had been taught; a feeling that drove me to push back against academic dogma that said knowledge was one directional and a product only of the mind. I knew that much of my own learning
came from places outside of books and classrooms and outside of my own intellect, and much of this knowing was what made my life meaningful and gave me purpose.

In the proceeding narrative, I describe walking down the Wildwood trail and looking out across the Columbia River basin and the intimate connection I have to that place. A connection that has come through walking, immersion, and building a relationship with the land, not from any formal education or conventional Western way of knowing. My knowing was not just of the mind, but also of my heart, body, and soul.

When I entered my doctoral program, I knew that I wanted to study the ways in which people come to know the world, but I did not have the language to describe my interest. I initially explored how people connected to nature, I studied place-based learning, and I dug into ideas of slowness and pace; all as ways to get at this idea that knowledge creation comes about in more ways than I had been taught. It took me almost two years of reading and investigation to find a thread, which I have come to understand as embodied learning or embodied inquiry (Snowber, 2016). I discovered that there was something important about the ways in which people learn with and from their bodies and this was a specific way of knowing. Some people may talk about this as experiential education; however, I see it a little bit differently, as embodied learning is not just a means to an end, but an end unto itself. Embodied inquiry is something that humans naturally do. Anytime humans interact with their physical space (which is really always), there is learning and knowing that takes place.

As I contemplated the time I have spent walking on trails, through parks, around neighborhoods, and into the wilderness, it became undeniable to me that walking was its
own way of knowing. Walking is always situated in a certain place, in a certain time, and is a fully embodied experience. According to Jung (2014), walking is “a different way of knowing or gathering subjective information” (p. 625). In my experience, the learning found through walking can be transitory and specific to the walk or can be a deep learning that becomes part of my life’s story. I am coming to understand that walking has been one of the most important ways I have come to learn and know about myself and the world around me.

Walking from place to place across the globe is as old as humanity itself (Solnit, 2014). Humans populated the world one step at a time and despite so many other modes of transportation today, people continue to walk long distances. Some people walk out of necessity, others walk to explore, and still others walk to learn and find meaning in their lives. Walking is a way of connecting to the land, exploring, and becoming deeply acquainted with one’s own humanity. It is a slow, embodied, immersive process of learning and knowing.

Modern day walking practices take many different forms, from wilderness adventures, to following ancient pilgrimage paths, to walks through neighborhoods and parks (Solnit, 2014). On one end of the spectrum, there are many examples of people walking across continents to raise money or awareness of important issues (Associated Press, 2013) as well as a handful of people who have circumnavigated the globe on foot (Scott, 2010). For example, a journalist for National Geographic, Paul Salopek is walking 21,000-miles following ancient human migration paths from Africa to the Americas, in what National Geographic (1996-2020) described as a “decade-long experiment in slow
journalism” (para.1). Starting in Ethiopia’s Rift Valley in 2013, he traveled through the Middle East to Central and South Asia and is currently walking across Myanmar. He has many thousands of miles to go before completing the entire journey. On the other end of this spectrum, many people across the globe walk to get to work, to collect water, for exercise, or as a spiritual practice (Hallett, 2016; Solnit, 2014)

Additionally, people have walked as a political act. Two prominent examples include the Peace Pilgrim (Pilgrim, 2013) and John Francis the Planet Walker (Francis, 2009). The Peace Pilgrim spent 28 years walking over 25,000 miles across North America. She walked without any belongings or money and slept and ate only when people offered her food and shelter saying, “I walk, until given shelter, fast until given food. I don’t ask—it’s given without asking” (Pilgrim, 2013, p. 25). She said that she walked for peace: “…peace among nations, peace among groups, peace within our environment, peace among individuals, and the very, very important inner peace” (p. 26).

John Francis, walked for 22 years while keeping a vow of silence for 17 of those years (Francis, 2009). His journey was sparked after witnessing an oil spill near the Golden Gate Bridge in California and feeling a sense of personal responsibility for the environmental destruction he was seeing. He gave up using or riding in cars, started walking everywhere he went, and took a vow of silence. He saw his journey as a pilgrimage and a way to embody the kind of change he wanted to see in the world. He walked across North and South America and along the way learned from the world around him, while also earning a master’s and doctoral degree in Environmental Studies. He continues his work in environmental education today and uses his personal
experiences as the foundation for his teachings and educational website (Francis, 2009; https://planetwalk.org/).

However, for many people, the freedom to walk from place to place is complicated and not without risk. Issues of land ownership, sexism, racism, and violence often overshadow this otherwise simple act. Additionally, capitalism and the United States’ restrictive view of private property has limited people’s access to move freely from place to place without the aid of an automobile (Malchik, 2015). In many parts of this country, walking is neither respected nor is it particularly safe. For many people the act of having to walk somewhere is an activity to be avoided at all costs. Walking as an embodied learning practice, a way of knowing, or even just a simple activity, does not have a prominent role in most communities across the United States and, in fact, people who live in the United States walk the least of any industrialized nation in the world (Chappell, 2012). In the United States, the freedom to walk in many places has been curtailed by both automobile infrastructure and the prevalence of private property without right of way access to walkers (Malchik, 2015). Therefore, if walking remains something done on the fringes of U.S. society, and the topic remains relatively unstudied, it seems likely that people’s access to opportunities for walking will continue to be small, especially when connected to learning and knowing the world.

Malchik (2015) argued, “There is nothing more human, more natural, more fundamental to our freedom, than transporting ourselves by foot” and yet, in the current state of our country that freedom, that connection to our humanity, is greatly curtailed. Because many people lack the freedom to walk unimpeded, I wonder how this changes
people’s relationship with nature, with their community, and with their connection to themselves as embodied learners. According to a participant in Hotton’s (2015) research:

If I could encapsulate in one sentence why walking is so important: it’s where the body, the heart, and the mind meet and something different happens. And that to me is what real embodiment is; it’s when everything meets...You’re opened to different ways of knowing and being. Ontological, epistemological, inspired, in different ways of perceiving what everything means. (p. 102)

My hope is that my research can lend a voice to this topic and help to uncover how walking can be transformational and provide people an important connection to their innate ways of knowing and being in the world.

Embodied learning is an acknowledgement that all human senses contribute to what we know and that separating ourselves from embodied ways of knowing, limits our understanding of the world and ourselves. The opposite of embodied learning is disconnection, isolation, and distraction: When intellectual and physical experiences are separated and sensory information is limited. Individuals and communities who have traded embodied learning experiences (in-person interaction and time outdoors) for more interactions with technology are starting to show declines in mental and physical health and overall wellbeing (Madhav, et al., 2017; Twenge, et al., 2018). These declines are troubling as technology becomes more integrated into many people’s daily lives.

Additionally, research shows that walking increases creativity (Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014), improves feelings of wellbeing (Crust, et al., 2011), improves cognitive function (Schaefer, et al., 2010), and is a transformational experience (Saunders, et al., 2013).
Clearly, there are great benefits to walking and other forms of embodied learning and conversely physical, emotional, and spiritual dangers when people are cut off from the ability to walk, connect, and fully embody their lives.

At the time of this writing, I have had extensive personal experience with what it feels like to be disconnected, and disembodied, from the world, as I enter my tenth month of “social distancing” brought on by the Coronavirus pandemic. This is not an experience that I could have ever imagined at the beginning of my research and has only solidified my belief that humans need to be in connection with the world and others in direct physical contact. Recently, I have had many conversations with people who are expressing extreme discomfort at only seeing their loved ones through video chats and at not being able to immerse themselves in the outdoors. There seems to be wide-spread agreement that connecting digitally is not the same and a poor substitute for real connection. And on the other hand, I have seen more people than ever in my neighborhood walking and cycling, to the point where it can be hard to get outside and remain at an acceptable distance.

Before this crisis, I never saw more than a handful of people walking around. It seems that in lieu of our normal embodied experiences (e.g., work, school, shopping, eating out, and being with friends) people are finding other ways, to connect physically with something (anything), and in this case they are turning to walking or cycling locally. It seems to me that what I am observing supports the notion that humans need embodied ways of being and knowing and I wonder how this ongoing experience will affect the ways in which people seek out more physical, tangible experiences into the future. I do
know that the first time I get to hug my mother and siblings again, or the first time I can gather with others in celebration, it will feel like a kind of rebirth. Through all of this, there has been a feeling of loss even for those who have not physically lost loved ones. We have lost many of the embodied experiences of our daily lives and the meaning we make from having our bodies interact with other people and the physical world around us.

**Theoretical Framework: Embodied Learning (Inquiry), Nature/Placemaking, and Slow Pedagogy**

In this section I describe my theoretical framework and the connections between slowing down, embodied learning, connection to place/nature and the central theme of walking as a way of knowing (see Figure 1). I describe how these ideas are often in juxtaposition to how people live and learn today and why they are necessary when we are thinking about other ways of knowing, such as walking. First, I discuss the ideas and literature relevant to slow pedagogy and connection with place/nature, and then, explore the ideas and literature relevant to embodied learning and embodied inquiry. I also conceptualize my understanding of nature/place and the human body.
To begin, I share some of the ways I conceptualize ideas of nature and place. People have been writing about nature, as a concept, for hundreds of years, and just like I later discuss with the body, the idea of nature occupies a highly contested space in cultural discourse. Also, my own ideas about what nature is, and how I relate to the natural world, are constantly evolving and often paradoxical.

My earliest memories of nature were a contrast between growing up off the grid in near wilderness—and the deep appreciation I gained through those experiences—and my realization that humans were rapidly destroying the planet. I remember playing in redwood groves, thousands of years old, while seeing some of those same trees pulled down the highway on logging trucks. I loved the outdoors. I loved plants and animals and
all things non-human. I was also deeply affected by seeing the destruction of the places and organisms I had come to love. At a young age I became actively involved in trying to save and protect the environment. I raised money for environmental organizations, I volunteered at a local nature museum and animal shelter, and I spent much of my time trying to learn everything I could about the natural world and the plight of our planet.

As a child, I was told by adults that this love of nature translated into a love of science (and have since come to realize that people often use the word science and nature interchangeably, as if the only way to know nature is to study it in this way), so I studied science in college. As an undergraduate, I studied Environmental Science, in which much of my understanding of the human relationship with nature came from a Western scientific perspective, which positioned nature as something outside of humans and an object of study and fascination. Even though my early experiences with nature taught me otherwise, during college I began to see the world through a somewhat rigid scientific point of view that placed humans outside of natural systems. Nature began to be implicitly conceptualized for me by my instructors and through the words and ideas of well-regarded men of “discovery.” People like John Muir, Charles Darwin, Alexander Humboldt, John Audubon, and Aldo Leopold were exalted by my college faculty and the broader environmental movement, for their contributions to ecology, science, and modern environmentalism. Their worldviews of conservation, protection, study, exploration, discovery, and control became my worldview, despite an internal disquiet that something important was missing in this way of thinking.
In school, and through my environmental work, my teachers and peers imparted the idea that humans were explorers and protectors of nature, not necessarily part of a complex ecological system. I came to believe, like many do, that humans are a problem with which to be dealt. That we are somehow parasitic (as if parasites do not also have a role and purpose) and the only way to “save” nature was to get rid of humans, or at least keep us away from the most “pristine” places so that they may be saved. No one ever suggested to me that there was possibly a different story of humans and our role in the world. That perhaps humans had a relationship with the land that much of the Western world had just decided to ignore. In my studies I was learning that humans were problematic, but not that we were in fact the very same nature we were trying to save and that our responsibility was to the whole, including ourselves.

However, through this research process of trying to understand my own ways of knowing, I have developed a vastly different sense of what nature is. Some of this sense has come from new books and articles I have read (many of which I have cited throughout this paper) and some from these innate ways of knowing that I have come to explore through walking.

One of the authors that had the most significant influence on my new thinking is Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), who wrote *Braiding Sweetgrass*, in addition to many other books and articles. Her work challenged my assumption that we need to protect nature from humans; that humans are separate and therefore expendable in the quest to preserve that natural world. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer described that as a professor she often found that her students saw the relationship between humans and nature as
negative, and they would struggle to imagine what a positive relationship would even look like. As someone who felt similarly in college, her work challenged me to try and see humans, and my own relationship with the natural world, in a new light. Kimmerer wrote, “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond” (p.124–125). These words have stuck with me, and in many ways served as a guiding principle, as I have worked to reimagine my relationship with the natural world. I knew that I loved the earth, but what did it mean for my life to accept that the earth loves me in return? She went on to say, “Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart” (p. 222). This idea spoke so clearly to my research, that in many ways it has become the foundation of my work; walking and embodied learning are not simply one-way processes of knowing, but rather a deep form of communication between a person and the land. A form of communication that is an act of love and care between living systems. Reading Kimmerer’s work manifested a cataclysmic shift in my thinking: away from traditional Western concepts of the world, such as objectivity, paternalism, and separation, towards an integrated, reciprocal, and relationship focused way of knowing and being.

Kimmerer’s (2013) work also set me on a path to understand the impacts of colonialism on the land and on our ways of knowing. I came to see it as critical for people who are interested in healing themselves and the planet to start using a lens of decolonization in their work and learning, which can be described as the process of
interpreting and deconstructing colonial notions from society (Kerr, 2014). As Kimmerer described, “For all of us, becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children’s future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it” (p. 9). In this light, connecting to nature was not just learning about the natural world, but rather becoming a part of it and developing a deep and lasting connection to place and the land.

**Slow Pedagogy and Connection with Place**

I wrote the following before the wide-spread shutdown of daily life due to the Coronavirus pandemic. I never could have imagined a situation in which the entire country would be forced to slow down in the ways that it has. While the obvious sadness and loss of life that has come with this pandemic continues to consume our thoughts and actions, there is another aspect of this crisis that I think people will grapple with for years. That is the way in which our response, strict social distancing, and a shut-down of many institutions and businesses has forced a sudden change in lifestyle for many people. For some people, such as nurses and doctors, grocery store workers, and delivery drivers, this change has resulted in working more and their lives have become increasingly hectic and stressful. But for many others, it has presented as a slowing down like they may have never experienced before. It seems like for many people there has been a distortion of time in which people describe the sensation of being completely out of touch with its passage. Days can feel like weeks and a month can pass by in the blink of an eye. There is a general feeling that time does not make sense anymore.
Because I advocate in this piece for the necessity of exploring our relationship with time and specifically with slowing down to connect with our embodied ways of knowing, I imagine that people will respond to this notion with a variety of different emotions and thoughts, all tied to this recent experience. Some may for the first time, see the beauty in this kind of slowness, now that they have felt what it is like, and others may feel a deep desire to get back to “normal” and reenter the fast-paced world that was known and existed without a deadly virus. There may be a conflation of feelings with slowness and the tragedy of this time. I bring this up, because in my initial drafts of this paper, the idea of slowing down was just an idea, but now it is embodied knowledge for many, and embodied knowledge carries a different kind of weight than just a theoretical abstraction. Many people will be able to relate to what I am saying not just from a place of imagination, but rather a place of experience and this will give people more of a stake in how they feel about my words. I also find it a strange state of affairs that many people suddenly have more time than ever, and yet our opportunities for meaningful embodied learning experiences are curtailed, which is opposite of what I argue more time is supposed to give us. This is truly a strange moment and what people learn from it are still unknown. In some ways my thoughts on slowness and slow pedagogy are even more relevant than ever, and in some ways the following already feels outdated when cast amidst these recent events. However, I wanted to keep the work intact as it framed my thinking for this research and was a huge part of my intellectual journey around ways of knowing.

* * *
Time, and its linear conception in modern Western societies, has all but consumed people’s lives and the ways in which learning has been disconnected from the experiences of the body and place (Chow, et al., 2010; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Payne & Wattchow, 2009; Shahjahan, 2015). Time has become a commodity (Duncheon & Tierney, 2013); a resource which is finite and whose value can be found in its proper moral use (Shahjahan, 2015) in which it is unwasted and revered for its power over our lives. “The proper use of time has become a measure of moral character” (Shahjahan, 2015, p. 492), and the faster one goes, the more respected of a moral actor they become.

In this race to beat back or get in front of the inevitable flow of time, learning becomes an act of obedience to the clock; one in which the body is ignored (and often punished) and the physical spaces we occupy become irrelevant. There is no time to slow down, to immerse into place, and meaningfully explore the world as its natural, cyclical rhythms unfold.

In my own journey as both a learner and educator, I have come to understand that dominant culture and dominant modalities of learning in the United States are not only obsessed with moving quickly, but that time itself has been relatively unexamined in connection with what it means to learn and be educated. Time, this amorphous, ambivalent, and debatable concept, is the framework for learning within schools and educational institutions across the United States, and yet how time is used and how learning is measured through the passage of time seems to be taken for granted (Duncheon & Tierney, 2013).
Additionally, time often feels to be in short supply and yet having it has been shown to be a key component of happiness. Recent research looking at the relationship between time and happiness (Whillans et al., 2017) concluded that people can use money to buy time and that buying time is one of the only ways that money can increase happiness. Whillans et al. (2017) described “a rising sense of time scarcity” (p. 8525) and that buying time can “buffer against this time famine” (p. 8525). I have found this line of thinking particularly interesting from a neoliberal capitalist perspective, in which people are pushed to gain wealth at the expense of their life satisfaction, but then have had to buy back happiness through buying time. This idea has seemed convoluted at best, although it can be seen in the heart of education where students have been asked to give up their youth to have a future, and then often have to “buy back” their lives, if they have been so fortunate.

The idea of time as a commodity has been central to the lives of everyday Americans, to the point where it has become a capitalist commodity which can be bought and sold (Duncheon & Tierney, 2013). However, I have found little examination of time within the field of education and learning theory. While there is some critique of fast paced learning at the university level, I have found little research or literature explicitly critiquing this same issue in K-12 education, outside of the loosely organized and relatively obscure, ‘Slow School Movement’ that appeared to have been sparked by an article written by Holt (2003). At the university level, slowness has been somewhat examined and linked with a decolonization of time (Shahjahan, 2015), a push back against neoliberal corporatization of universities (Chow et al., 2010), critical pedagogy
and embodied learning (Payne & Wattchow, 2009; Nguyen, & Larson, 2015; Shahjahan, 2015), and student learning outcomes and wellbeing (Honore, 2005; Shaw et al., 2013).

As one example, Harvard University recognized the problem with their student’s relationship with speed, and since 2004 has sent a letter to all incoming freshman titled, “Slow Down: Getting More Out of Harvard by Doing Less” in which suggestions are given for how to make the most a student’s experience at the University (Honore, 2005). This letter, and these suggestions, came out of an observation that freshmen entering the university were focused on graduating early and cramming as much as they could into each day. The school became concerned that students were missing important aspects of being a student such as joining a student group, doing a study abroad or internship, and exploring academic interests before selecting an area of concentration.

Education in the United States has been moving at a frenetic pace and has been pushed ever faster by colonial notions of time that disembody people from their own learning and from the places in which they live (Shahjahan, 2015). Life in the fast lane has become such a “normal” way of living that it is relatively unquestioned in our systems of education and learning. However, this breakneck speed is leading to a myriad of consequences for our society’s health and wellbeing. The World Health Organization cited stress as a global health problem (American Institute of Stress, 2011) that is a byproduct of rushing through life and being overworked and overburdened by the increasing demands and expectations of modern-day existence. Recent polls suggested that adolescents are under increasing levels of stress linked to their academic lives.
(Bethune, 2014; Neighmond, 2013), which may lead to mental and emotional health problems.

While formal education is not the focus of my dissertation, I think it is important to view embodied learning practices in the context of the modern/dominant ways that learning is conceived and practiced. Embodied learning is not something new, and in fact modern education is largely responsible for its disappearance in people’s lives. Where are people going to find the time to learn by walking, or sitting quietly, or meditating, or gardening, or building community, when their whole lives are consumed by a model of education that dictates every last minute of someone’s day? Embodied learning practices are a key component to the holistic development of a person, and slow pedagogy is the necessary framework to make this possible. In today’s educational environment where speed is an assumed virtue, I see a need for a thorough critique and challenge to this dominant paradigm as a way to advocate for the reintegration of embodied learning practices into people’s lives.

To engage with other ways of knowing, especially in and around the natural world, slowing down and immersing in place is necessary (Hill & Brown, 2014; Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Slow pedagogy honors the timescale in which humans live their lives and connects the physical, corporeal experience of being human and our relationship with place and ways of knowing (Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Slow pedagogy is an effort to reconnect ourselves with the natural systems that can only be experienced over time and phenologically (Payne & Wattchow, 2009).
Slow pedagogy is an essential component of place-based and embodied learning. “Slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace without knowing outcomes” (Shahjahan, 2015, p. 497). Developing a sense of place is truly a lifetime endeavor; for learning to be place-based, it must be seen as something cultivated over many, many years. According to Payne and Wattchow (2009), there is the need to adopt a slow pedagogy in which people learn through experiencing their body in relationship to place. “A slow pedagogy, or ecopedagogy allows us to pause or dwell in spaces for more than a fleeting moment and, therefore, encourages us to attach and receive meaning from that place” (Payne & Wattchow, 2009, p. 16). This slowness, therefore, allows for immersion into place that would not be otherwise possible.

Time plays a key role in both embodied pedagogy as well as in placemaking; it requires particular attention in both areas. Slowness becomes necessary for people to connect to the world around them by experiencing the world at a pace in which sensory information can be fully absorbed. Connecting to place is not just an intellectual activity where people learn about the spaces around them; connecting to place is about immersion, often over multiple occasions and contexts (Hung, 2014; Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Slow pedagogy, placemaking, and embodied learning are all ways to honor the human experience and to ensure that learning is meaningful, humane, and holistic; giving attention to the mind, body, and spirit as people navigate what it means to be alive today.
Conceptualizing the Body

Before I discuss the literature on embodied learning, I would like to take a moment to be clear about what I mean when I talk about the body. The concept of the human body is highly contested in American culture, politics, and learning, as there is little agreement in our society as to what it means to have and care for a body and whose bodies are considered to have value. From a Western viewpoint, bodies are seen as objects rather than subjects, and an object is something that lacks value unless it meets certain criteria. The objectification of bodies in Western society has led to many dangerous ideas about what a body is for and how it should be treated. A subject on the other hand is something to be in relationship with and by being in relationship with our bodies, we move beyond an objectified understanding of who we are and how we relate to the bodies we have.

For many years, my relationship with my own body was from this objectified perspective. I found myself in a broken relationship; one in which I wanted my body to be different than it was and spent many years of my life trying to manipulate it through food and exercise. I always did these things with the intention of striving to be “healthy,” however, I have come to learn that even the idea of health can be manipulated to serve the interests of capitalism over the interests of true personal and community wellness.

During my embodied research journey, when I began to regularly connect with my body in a way that was not about controlling it, I discovered that I had a pained and broken relationship with my physical self, which pushed me to find ways that I could begin to heal. In that process, I read two books that completely transformed my
relationship with my body and how I now conceptualize the body in my work: *The Body is Not an Apology* (Taylor, 2018) and *Anti-Diet: Reclaim Your Time, Money, Well-Being, and Happiness Through Intuitive Eating* (Harrison, 2019).

In *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, Taylor (2018) made a case for “radical self-love” and body liberation. Taylor (2018) argued that the ways in which our society objectifies our bodies is not only oppressive, but a form of violence and "body terrorism" (p. 50). Taylor described body terrorism as “nothing short of devastating” (p. 50), in which, “[l]iving in a society structured to profit from our self-hate creates a dynamic in which we are so terrified of being ourselves that we adopt a terror-based way of being in our bodies. All this is fueled by a system that makes large quantities of money off our shame and bias” (p. 53). In reading Taylor’s words, I realized that in my own work I cannot talk about the body without acknowledging the many ways that bodies are oppressed, maligned, mistreated, and harmed by a society that profits from making people hate themselves and their bodies. I recognized this was important, because when I and others begin to engage in the process of embodied inquiry, our relationships with our bodies (that have been shaped by this society in which we live) comes into full view.

To really *be* in the body is to be with the shame and guilt and pain that most of us have adopted into our self-concept. Therefore, to connect with the innate ways of knowing that all people and bodies have access to, we must begin to shed the violent structures that want us to be other than we are; that want us to use our precious lives in service of self-harm instead of self-actualization. Embodied learning puts a person in
direct contact with who they are, and in order to trust the knowledge our bodies have to share, we must learn to love, trust, and protect them.

From a health and wellness perspective, *Anti-Diet: Reclaim Your Time, Money, Well-Being, and Happiness Through Intuitive Eating*, Harrison (2019) presented extensive research about the ways in which body-shaming, dieting, and dubious medical research has had on people’s health and well-being, especially as it relates to body size. This book shattered my own misconceptions about what a “healthy” body looks like and the ways in which ideas of “health” have been weaponized against our bodies that actually make us less healthy; while also acknowledging that health is rarely a choice to be made and also not a requirement for earning other people’s respect or care (Harrison, 2019).

Taylor (2018) and Harrison’s (2019) books make it clear that I need to be explicit about what I mean when I talk about the body. I am not talking about some abstract object that is to be used or manipulated, but rather a body that is whole and complete in its own right and liberated from any ideas or values that oppress its/our ability to express our humanity fully in whatever body we have. A body's worthiness is not up for debate, no matter what it looks like, its age, its size, its gender, or anything else. Our bodies are our link to the innate ways of knowing that exist within us all and must be universally respected just as they are.

Additionally, in this dissertation, I explore my own stories of embodied learning, embodied inquiry and specifically the practice of walking. However, I would like to acknowledge that not all bodies experience the world in the same way and that not all
bodies are able to walk or have the same sensory experiences as others. While I am focusing on the experience of walking as an embodied learning practice, this is not to say that walking is the only way to have these experiences or to know the world. All people learn in embodied ways and walking is just one of many ways to engage in embodied inquiry.

**Embodied Learning and Inquiry**

To Touch and Feel is to Experience. Many people live their entire lives without ever really Touching or being Touched by anything. These people live within a world of mind and imagination that may move them sometimes to joy, tears, happiness or sorrow. But these people never really Touch. They do not live and become one with life. (Storm, 1972, p. 7)

The human body sits in an essential relationship to its surroundings. It is connected in every way to the external world: The body breathes in air that it will later breathe out, participating in a complex, global atmospheric system that maintains all life on the planet. The body reacts and responds to light, temperature, sound, emotions, and so much more. A single loud boom can make the heart race in response to sensory input and embodied knowledge. When it comes to dominant modalities of learning, the mind is often privileged over the body, and yet, “for the brain to make meaningful connections, learning needs to be tied to physical, embodied experience” (Merriam, 2008, p. 95). According to Taylor and Lamoreaux (2008), “[T]he brain’s physical responses to the sensory data are recorded—literally, embodied—as experience, hence accessible to reconstruction as memory; without such physical responses, there is no basis for
constructing meaning (Scheckley and Bell, 2006)” (p. 53). In other words, “[T]he brain is, after all, a part of one’s body” (Merriam, 2008, p. 95). Therefore, to dismiss the experience of the body is to deny the true process of learning and ways of knowing.

Embodied learning is at its core, understanding that, “we do not possess bodies, but rather we are bodies making connections to the world” (Nguyen, & Larson, 2015, p. 334). This is in stark contrast to contemporary ways of learning which have been heavily influenced by Western academic thought and neoliberal ideology, that privileges the “mind-intellect,” time-based outcomes, and individual self-improvement (Chow et al., 2010; Shahjahan, 2015). These central tenets are often so ingrained into education and ideas about learning, that to challenge them feels like challenging the very foundation of modern society.

The mind has been afforded such a dominant place in learning that our bodies have been all but forgotten (Shahjahan, 2015). Embodied pedagogy (Nguyen, & Larson, 2015) seeks to rectify this mind-body separation in academic life by “acknowledging the body in the learning journey and respecting and paying attention to it in the classroom” (Shahjahan, 2015, p. 497). This does not just mean engaging in physical activities, but rather opening opportunities to learn through sensory perceptions and embodied practices. According to Kerka (2002):

A somatic approach to education implies education that trusts individuals to learn from and listen to the information they are receiving from the interaction of self with the environment. Somatic or embodied knowing is experiential knowledge that involves senses, perceptions, and mind-body action and reaction (p. 3).
I see embodied inquiry as more than just a process of knowledge acquisition, but rather a way of knowing that is relational; knowledge that becomes who we are, not just part of what we know. Walking, as an embodied learning process, is just this kind of relationship; it becomes part of us and the learning integrated into our sense of self and how we conceptualize the world around us. Our bodies become part of the world when we interact with place and the land. Walking as an embodied practice is integrative and relational.

**Review of the Methodological Literature: Narrative Research and Walking Methodologies**

Unlike many forms of qualitative research, narrative forms of research are often seen as “both the phenomenon and method” (Moen, 2006, p. 57), in which the theoretical framework of a narrative study is situated within the theoretical framework of narrative itself, not the specific topic being studied (Holt, 2003). Holt’s (2003) theoretical framework for understanding narrative research situates narrative theory in the center of constructivist theory, humanist theory, hermeneutist theory, and feminist theory.

While narrative research is relatively new in the social sciences, it has been finding a home in the field as there has been growing acceptance that, “Social life is itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life” (Somers, 1994, pp. 613–614). Therefore, from an ontological standpoint, if stories are the very context that all social life is contained within, then understanding a social topic narratively may give understanding that no other research methodology could provide. Narrative is also
uniquely suited to engage in embodied forms of inquiry, as these kinds of inquiry always rely on subjective interpretation of experience.

This research was an autoethnographic narrative inquiry into what it means to know and to learn, with a specific focus on the practice of walking as both the subject and the method. My study sought to understand my connection to and relationship with learning about myself and the world around me, through the practice of walking. This was a decidedly epistemological journey, in which I wanted to understand what made walking such a unique form of inquiry and process of learning. Walking had always been an important part of my life and I, intuitively, knew that the practice created moments of spontaneous learning. Walking helped me to connect with myself and the world, and was something that brought me meaning and purpose, yet I didn’t fully understand what that meant. I wanted to know more. I also wanted to understand what kinds of learning came from walking. What new thoughts were generated? What experiences did I have that led to new knowledge? In many ways, this was an open inquiry. What happens when I walk? What do I learn and what does that learning teach me about the nature of knowing?

When I began my research, I thought that I was simply studying walking as a way of knowing. However, over the course of my study, I have come to understand that walking was not just the subject of my inquiry, but also the method. It became clear that what I was actually trying to understand was the nature of knowledge, and walking was just the process that I was using to do this: I was on an epistemological journey, and walking was my means of travel. I viewed walking and storytelling as intimately
connected practices and in many ways, inseparable. In her book on walking, Solnit (2014) said:

Part of what makes roads, trails, and paths so unique as built structures is that they cannot be perceived as a whole all at once by a sedentary onlooker. They unfold in time as one travels along them, just as a story does as one listens or reads, and a hairpin turn is like a plot twist, a steep ascent a building of suspense to the view at the summit, a fork in the road an introduction of a new storyline, arrival the end of the story. Just as writing allows one to read the words of someone who is absent, so roads make it possible to trace the route of the absent…To write is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination, or to point out new features on a familiar route…So stories are travels and travels are stories.” (p. 72)

Research into walking is therefore uniquely suited to be done through narrative methods. As Solnit (2014) so beautifully articulated, walking is a form of travel and travel is itself a form of story.

I found some recent academic examples of walking as a both way of knowing and as a research methodology. Jung (2014) used mindful walking to engage in community-based ethnography. Her research focused on understanding a community through spending time walking in and through the physical place being studied. Jung (2014) described this approach as “an interactive way of knowing, allowing the entire body, and all of its senses, to experience the surroundings, to trace, and connect different areas, to intuitively sense when and how to avoid potential dangers, and to live in the entangled social pathways” (p. 625). While this process did not employ traditional qualitative
research methods it was also not haphazard. Walking as a research practice, required an intimate attention to being present and a focus on the connection between self and the social and material world.

Wylie (2005) also used walking and narrative as a research method to describe his experience on a one day walk in Southwest England. Wylie made it clear that the walk “sought to activate a space and time within which I might engage with and explore issues of landscape, subjectivity, and corporeality…” (p. 234). Walking became a research method; a way of exploring topics that require embodied practices as well as being the subject of the inquiry itself. To understand connection to place, self, and a host of human experiences, embodied knowing became a necessary practice while narrative became an effective tool for sharing that knowledge.

In addition, two recent books on walking as a research method informed my thinking and my own work. In the first, *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, Ingold and Vergunst (2016) explored a number of ethnographic studies conducted through walking, or through exploring the practices of walking within a range of cultures. They described walking literally and figuratively, with walking often becoming a metaphor for a host of human experiences such as what it means to leave footprints in a place, or to walk a path, or even to get lost. Ingold and Vergunst invited me, as the reader, to explore my own conceptions of walking and knowing and to think more deeply about what it means to engage in inquiry through the practice of walking.

philosophical lens of post-humanism and post-qualitative research. Their approach de-centered the human experience of walking and made a ‘shift from the individual account of the human walker to consider an ethics and politics of ‘walking-with’’ (p. 3).

Springgay and Truman also explored queerness, settler colonialism, education, transmateriality, and indigenous theories of land, all in the context of walking methodologies. In addition, Springgay and Truman identified “four major themes in walking research: place, sensory inquiry, embodiment, and rhythm” (p.4), which are all areas that I have come to explore in my own relationship with walking as a way of knowing. As I engage in this process, I am seeking to challenge the dominant ways in which Western society interacts with the natural and material world and subsequently ways of knowing, and Springgay and Truman’s (2018) work provided thoughtful and provocative ideas for me to explore.

Finally, while walking research and walking methodologies are relatively new in the academic world, walking has been a way of knowing, and therefore a research method throughout human history. For example, in their children’s book titled, Walking is a Way of Knowing in a Kadar Forest, Madhuri et al. (2017) wrote a detailed, narrative account of the ways in which the Kadar people of India experience walking as not just a way to get from place to place, but as an embodied way of knowing.

The forest is like a storehouse of smells; how can you learn about the scent of the civet, leopard, tiger or guar from talk? These are things that you can know only directly. People like you from other places, use books to understand the forest, so you know things from the pictures and the words and recognize them only by
sight. Most of us can’t read a word, but we use all our senses, our entire body, to hear the stories of the forest (Madhuri et al., 2017).

Their book was rich with sensory and embodied details and described how walking creates a relationship with the natural and material world and how walking is a way of knowing; an embodied epistemology.

Combining narrative methodologies with walking methodologies has given me a rich and complicated theoretical framework with which to explore my own ways of ways of knowing.

**Autoethnography as Embodied Inquiry and a Way of Knowing**

Embodied inquiry is a way of knowing in which one must trust their own sensory, affective, and reflexive experiences as a way of learning about themselves and the world around them. This study is an autoethnography, which in itself is a process of embodied inquiry. Autoethnography is a research method that centers the lived experience of the researcher, “or as a humanizing, moral, aesthetic, emotion-centered, political, and personal form of representation” (Bochner & Ellis 2016, p. 47). In this autoethnography, I explore the process of embodied learning, and the ways in which embodied learning is a way of knowing, which can also be understood as the epistemological process of justifying claims of knowledge. Unlike the scientific process, which describes a very particular structure to justifying a claim, embodied inquiry is a subjective process in which claims of knowledge or belief come from reflecting on, examining, and interpreting personal experience. According to Merriam (2008), “Storying our experiences and recognizing that the body and the spirit are important components in
learning are quite commonplace in non-Western epistemological systems” (p. 96). Because I am interested in more broadly understanding the human condition, it is necessary for me to acknowledge both Western and non-Western epistemological systems, and in this case, I want to honor the ways of knowing that have been frequently devalued by the Western world, ways of knowing that are inherent in all people.

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, specifically how knowledge is generated and what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. However, how one defines their own understanding of epistemology is guided further by ontology, which is the philosophical study of the nature of being (Guba, 1990). Within the study of ontology, there is a wide range of understanding what constitutes reality and whether reality as we know it can be understood objectively, and therefore exists outside of the human understanding of consciousness, or whether reality is subjective and represents a social construct (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within the constructivist subjective viewpoint, there is a belief that humans can never truly separate themselves from the knowledge they create, and therefore there is an imperative to understand the world subjectivity so that it is clear that knowledge is always contextual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study, as an autoethnography, is rooted in the ontological standpoint of constructivist subjectivity, and the belief that reality is socially constructed. Therefore, the epistemological method at the heart of this type of knowledge creation is one that honors human experience and the role that each of us play in co-creating the narratives that shape our lives.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

Autoethnography as a research method is a reflexive process of collecting, examining, and interpreting data from the lived experiences of the researcher. This can include pulling from memory, examining past journal entries, engaging in artistic and written reflections, and even having conversations with others involved in the experiences under exploration (Bochner & Ellis 2016).

In this study, I sought to understand the role of walking in my own ways of knowing and to explore how walking itself is an epistemological process, by using personal narrative to examine and story my experience. I sought to understand how walking was a process of slowing down, immersing into place, and learning with and through my body, all with the goal of reconnecting with my own innate ways of knowing.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

All research requires thinking about positionality and ethics, however autoethnography presents some unique challenges. Many autoethnographies explore traumatic events in which the researcher’s experience and those around them is examined in detail. This can make it difficult to protect people’s identities, as they can be easily traced back to the researcher and the context of the story. Autoethnography as a method, demands vulnerability of the researcher if it is to be an authentic account of experience (Bochner & Ellis 2016), and yet our experiences rarely happen in isolation. Therefore, there is risk involved in sharing one’s story. Yet it is in that risk that knowledge about a topic can come to light that otherwise may have gone unseen. This understanding
requires researchers who use narrative methods, and in particular autoethnography, to consider issues of ethics and privacy as they examine their own experiences.

Because my work is focused on walking as a way of knowing and I do not include other people’s stories in my research, protecting my own story while remaining vulnerable enough to provide an authentic account is my primary ethical consideration. Throughout this process, I have worked hard to ensure that my stories are true recollections, and I took care of my own mental and physical health as I explored some difficult and emotionally-charged topics.

**Researcher as Participant: Connection with Nature**

I came to this research with a lifetime of experience in embodied learning and connecting with my own ways of knowing. I had, what some people today might call, a “free-range” childhood in the wild hills of Northern California. I ran around barefoot, often dirty, and at times barely clothed. Our housing was rarely more than a roof over our head, but even that was not always the case. I lived in vans, tents, a plastic Quonset hut, and houses that lacked indoor plumbing or electricity. Materially we were exceptionally poor, but my connection with the natural world felt like a great treasure that no one could take away. I did not have a big television (or any television for that matter) or the fanciest new toys, but I had a backyard wilderness filled with frogs, and snakes, and bears, and eagles and old growth redwood trees that were taller than many skyscrapers. I learned through observation that daffodils were the first flowers to bloom each spring and that four-leaf clovers were ubiquitous if one just took the time to look. I found arrowheads and garnets in streambeds; and realized that the world was full of history and mystery and
wonder. I also witnessed the redwood wars that raged across Humboldt County in the 1980s and how my community worked tirelessly to try and stop the logging of the last few stands of those ancient trees (Speece, 2017). It was clear to me then, just as now, that destroying 2000-year-old organisms for profit was morally reprehensible and something that must be stopped.

I loved where I lived, and I loved spending my days exploring the outdoors. I had a connection to the land that filled me with joy and excitement, and I wanted nothing more than to live out my days getting to know every hill and valley in the region. Unfortunately, when I was nine years old my parents divorced, and my mother had to move us from our rural paradise to the big city of Portland, Oregon to get support from our family as she found herself suddenly a single mother with few resources. In the blink of an eye, I was ripped away from everything I had ever known and from the land in which my childhood identity was formed. I hated the city. I hated the cars and the noise and that every adult I met chided me for climbing trees or playing in the dirt. In our new apartment complex with its indoor plumbing and lights that I could turn on with a flick of my hand, I was not allowed to play in the landscaped natural spaces or climb any of the trees. What little nature was available was apparently off limits and my connection to this new place became that of concrete and lost dreams. By many people’s standards, Portland was a nature filled city, but for me it was like comparing swimming in an Olympic-sized swimming pool with trying to swim in a puddle. They might both have had water, but there was little else the same.
My separation from the land I knew and loved was one of the hardest experiences of my childhood. This may sound dramatic, especially because I also experienced a great deal of trauma as a child, but there was something in losing my connection to place, that was devastating. My entire identity was tied up in the smell of bay trees baking in the late summer sun and the comforting feeling of watching the coastal fog roll into the river valleys at sunset and the way the soft spongy redwood bark felt on my fingertips as I ran my hands across the tree’s surface. *Who was I without these places, without these experiences?* But as is the case with most children, I adapted, albeit slowly. I gave up my afternoons outdoors for the *Disney Afternoon* cartoon shows and instead of going for long walks to explore dried up creek beds, I walked along busy streets to buy candy at the nearby convenience store.

After a few years, my family made another move and we ended up in Olympia, Washington; still nothing like the wild hills of Northern California, where I grew up, yet an improvement over Portland. There were more trees, more wild spaces, and less people concerned with kids playing in nature, alone and unsupervised. We lived near The Evergreen State College and the 1000-acre woods owned by the school, which was an endlessly exciting place to explore. Over time, I came to understand that nature did not have to be “wild” to be beautiful or to be meaningful, and I slowly learned to connect with this new land and the plants and animals of the region. The salty ocean air and the endless winter rain became my new identity as I developed an affinity for mosses and ferns. The Pacific Northwest began to grow on me and has since become the place where I am most connected to the land. It took time, like all relationships, but I now know this
place like I once knew the places of my childhood, and I know this place because I have spent time, slow time, immersive time, exploring, walking, observing, and listening to what the world around me has to say.

**Researcher as Participant: Walking**

While connecting with nature has long been a part of my life, walking as a form of embodied learning is something new. I have always enjoyed walking as a way to get from one place to another, but it was not until recently that I began to understand that walking was more than just a mode of transportation; walking was a way in which I came to know a place in a way that few other activities could.

Understanding walking as a way of knowing began after completing a large portion of the *Camino de Santiago*, an ancient pilgrimage trail in Northern Spain. In August 2012, I walked about 175 miles of the trail, over the course of two weeks, and in temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit; for days on end. The experience of traversing large distances on foot, in oppressive heat, with a body that was generally unprepared for the challenge, had a profound effect on my life. During my time walking, I came to understand that learning is not just an intellectual endeavor, but rather a holistic process in which my body is a full participant. Walking, as described by Edensor (2010), acted as “a mindful passage across an unfamiliar terrain through which the body adapts to land underfoot, and the peculiarities of place are apprehended at a slower rhythm than is offered by other transport” (p. 70). Over the two weeks while I walked *The Camino*, my body developed a relationship with time, space, and movement; a relationship that connected me with what it meant to be alive and what it meant to be physically on the
earth. When going about daily life, it can be so easy to forget the wonders of existence, but it became impossible to forget while my body was so intimately interacting with the space around me; moving across the landscape in a slow, intentional, and embodied way. I realized that walking was not just an activity or a way of getting somewhere, but rather that walking was like reading, it was a means to gather knowledge and understand science, art, philosophy, math, physics, history, and culture; walking was a way to connect to these topics and know them deeply as they became integrated into my lived experience in time and place.

**Researcher as Participant: Ways of Knowing**

I come to the topic of epistemology from a place of personal tension as both a learner and an educator. My relationship with learning and ways of knowing have always stood in stark contrast to my experiences in formal education. I have found again and again in my life that the lessons I learn while spending time immersed in place (both natural and human-created spaces) is where I learn the most. This is not to say that I have not also learned a great deal from books and through formal education, but these forms of learning already have plenty of advocates who often also reject experiential ways of knowing. I am interested in pushing back against the dominance of what is often seen as modern “objective” knowledge and instead embrace the ways in which we have learned about the world since the dawning of human existence.

I have encountered this tension within formal education, and throughout my life I have been told over and again that personal experience is not real knowledge; that real knowledge only comes from “experts” who are allowed to make claims through
“empirical/objective” research. I have been told repeatedly that my own experience can never be considered a form of knowledge because we can never trust an individual to be able to accurately interpret their own experiences. Yet, I know differently. I know that what I have learned through experience, I could not have learned in any other way and that this knowledge is valid and important. It seems to me that the motivations behind deciding what kind of knowledge is valid and what kind is not, are simply ways for people with power to assert and keep their power. If people’s personal experiences are dismissed as invalid forms of knowledge, it becomes easy for dominant power structures to maintain control of intellectual discourse and therefore retain control over how people think about whose ideas are legitimate and whose are not. In the modern world, this perpetuates the structural powers of the patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalist economic systems.

Throughout my life, I have asked myself repeatedly how my own personal experience could be so often misaligned with what I had learned in formal education. This was particularly obvious when considering issues of understanding the human experience. The skills and knowledge that are commonly focused on in formal education do not address the most important aspects of existence: relationships, questions of existential meaning, beauty, caring for the planet (our home), love, joy, emotional wellbeing, ecological food systems, and so much more. In formal education we are often asked to take our attention away from matters of the heart and soul and instead prepare our minds to endure a life of work within the capitalist paradigm.
Until recently, I have been both implicitly and explicitly asked by the people and structures within formalized education, to reject my own embodied knowledge in favor of what others had deemed “valid,” and I have come to understand this as a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, 2012) and epistemic violence (Bunch, 2015; Cho, 2008).

I first encountered the concept of epistemic violence while reading a chapter in the book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* (Cho, 2008). Cho (2008) wrote:

> On a geopolitical stage whose backdrop is U.S. imperialism, “the phantom represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of disappearance that is produced by both the material obliteration of war and the epistemic violence of erasure… The ghost that haunts this project lies at the crossroads of multiple forms of violence--the social and familial, the psychic and epistemic. (p. 31)

After reading this passage it felt like a light came on. Yes, epistemic violence. That was the experience I was trying to name. I had been handed a version of reality through our society, and the educational system, which was based on ways of knowing that actually served to perpetuate epistemic violence: an othering of people and ways of knowing that is fundamentally oppressive (Bunch, 2015).

This type of intellectual harm translates into physical, emotional, and spiritual harm. From the day I was born, society was ready to shape me and make sure I understood that certain ways of knowing were right and others were wrong. The kinds of knowing that were right were those unquestioned narratives of the Western world and
colonization; The language of positivism, objectivity, knowledge as power, individualism, mind over heart and over soul; a way of knowing that made these tragic exchanges all feel inevitable and natural.

As I explored this idea in greater depth, I also encountered a similar idea known as *epistemic injustice*, a term coined by Fricker (2007, 2012). Essentially, this is a form of injustice in which a *knower* is marginalized by being deemed not credible through forms of individual prejudice or through systemic deficits in collective understanding. Fricker (2007, 2012) described these as either *testimonial injustice* or *hermeneutical injustice* and defined the two concepts in the following way: “*Testimonial injustice* occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; *hermeneutical injustice* occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (p. 1). For the purposes of this research, I see my own experience with *testimonial injustice* revealed through the aspects of my identity that are not seen as credible by those who maintain material power in this society. Specifically, my identity as a woman, as someone who grew up in poverty, and my lived experiences being neurodivergent. These identities have created a social context in which my knowledge and ideas are often not heard or valued because implicit and explicit prejudice can lead people to devalue my epistemic contributions.

However, I see *hermeneutical injustice* to be even more applicable to my research, as it addresses the issue of how knowledge itself is created within a society, and how that leads to collective interpretations of social experiences. When someone, due to
testimonial injustice, is unable to participate in collective knowledge creation, they become, “hermeneutically marginalized—that is, they participate unequally in the practices through which social meanings are generated” (Fricker, 2007, p. 6). In addition, when one experiences a “dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience, it tends to knock your faith in our own ability to make sense of the world” (p. 163). This illustrates the idea that when certain groups of people are not seen as being credible sources of information (and do not have any material power within society), they not only are unable to participate in collective epistemological and interpretive processes, but they also struggle to make sense of their own experiences within that society (Fricker, 2007). A person may feel like there is an injustice being done, but lack the words or understanding to frame the issue to themselves or others.

From an epistemological perspective, representation is not just about who is represented in the broader social structure (such as those with marginalized identities: people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, etc.), but whose ideas are represented and seen as credible in the world of knowledge creation. It is one thing to see people like yourself holding positions of power in society, but it can be even more important to see your ways of knowing, your ideas, and your embodied lived experiences thought about as valid and worthy of collective understanding and interpretation. According to Fricker (2007, 2012), hermeneutical injustice reveals that those in society who maintain social and material power are able to ensure that their way of being and knowing is supported by the epistemological processes and structures used
by society at large. Those who do not enjoy social and material power are then put at an epistemological disadvantage in that they will struggle to make sense of their social experiences, which then leads to myriad forms of epistemic injustice in that their knowledge is not seen as credible in the eyes of society (Fricker, 2007). This marginalization of the knower can be seen anywhere certain groups of people have dominated the agreed upon ways that knowledge (and therefore collective understanding) is created. I would argue that in contemporary American culture, those who have maintained social, material, and epistemic power have been primarily white men, mostly in the upper class. Not only have wealthy white men held most positions of social power for the entirety of this country's history, and therefore shaped our institutions in their image, but they have controlled the mechanisms by which knowledge gets generated (specifically through academic, positivist, and objective means). The epistemic injustice in this system of knowledge creation, is not only that those without social power have been left out of the social discourse and even the generation of knowledge, but that because of this deficit must also struggle to understand their own social experiences, because there is not a collective understanding of those experiences through which they can be interpreted.

This realization is at the heart of what I have learned during this research. I see that my own marginalized identities have led to forms of epistemic injustice and that our educational system’s general rejection of embodied forms of learning is itself marginalizing: That in denying people the tools to understand their own embodied experiences, they become unable to make full sense of their lives. To put it in the context
of my own life, I have spent much of my existence not being able to make sense of my social (and embodied) experiences, because these types of experiences are not seen as valid ways of learning within society. I did not see myself, my ideas, or my intrinsic ways of knowing present in most places of learning and was unable to make sense of what I was experiencing. This form of epistemic injustice came about because this society does not have a collective understanding, or belief in, the knowledge one may acquire through embodied experiences. Mainstream American society's learning environments have no language to describe how to listen to a river or to learn from the built environment. Buildings and trees are objects in our society, and there is no epistemic process for engaging with them as the teachers they are.

For the purposes of this dissertation, and my interest in walking as an epistemological process, I see the lack of collective understanding about embodied learning as a form of Hermeneutical Injustice. Individuals do not know how to make sense of their embodied experiences (as these are devalued and undermined in our society) and therefore are unable to protest the injustice of being denied an intrinsic right to embodied knowledge (Fricker, 2012).

I feel strongly that my experiences in formal education (especially K-12) can be qualified in terms of epistemic injustice, in that my innate ways of knowing were denied, my voice and epistemic contributions rejected, and my ability to make sense of experiences curtailed. And it was not until I began to walk regularly, that this became clear to me. There was something in the practice of walking that made me realize that what I had learned in formal education was not just a set of information or facts, but an
entire way of approaching what it means to know something. I also learned that this
dominant way of knowing was designed to uphold systems of power and privilege; and
that other ways of knowing threatened those structures by giving people without
traditional social or material power a place at the knowledge making table.

Our country is currently in the midst of an epistemic crisis in which the very
nature of truth is being disputed. It seems that many people do not know what it means to
claim knowledge as a fact, nor do they have the tools to investigate the information they
encounter and verify its credibility. Without proper understanding of what it means to
know, people could interpret any repudiation of a set of beliefs as a form of epistemic
injustice, however, this would be an incorrect understanding. There is a difference
between rejecting information because it is coming from a marginalized group, whose
voice and experiences have not been collectively understood, and rejecting information
because it lacks integrity and does not hold up when tested and examined. While these
distinctions can feel ambiguous, they represent the very heart of why it is important that
education is not about teaching facts, but about teaching what it means to know anything,
in the first place.

I believe that education should give people the tools to make sense of their own
forms of knowledge creation, to become epistemologically empowered, and to learn to
trust their own experiential knowing. However, this process should be just as robust as
any that we have come to know. Experiential knowledge must be tested and shared and
co-created, just as any form of research demands. It is not enough to claim knowledge
through transient moments. To become genuine knowledge, there must be a process of
in-depth examination that holds up to scrutiny over time and not just within typical epistemological power structures.

This dissertation is my attempt at exploring and sharing my epistemological process and the knowledge I have gained along the way. I hope that I will add to the ever-growing body of narrative research that values the subjective and embodied ways in which all people come to know and understand the world. However, I also seek to reaffirm that knowledge creation requires epistemologically sound practices, and that while this work is subjective, it is not without thoughtful examination and a process of experientially testing my claims.

**Procedures**

I collected multiple forms of data, all with the goal of stitching together a narrative research text that explores my own experience with the embodied practice of walking as a way of knowing. My final data includes written personal reflections and essays gathered from past experiences as well as experiences during my year of research while asking the question: What do I learn about my own epistemological process and ways of knowing through the practice of walking?

Chang (2008) described extensively how to collect autoethnographic data using structured writing exercises to collect data from memory, self-observation, and self-reflection. Additionally, Chang described collecting external data including interviews and artifacts such as photographs, official documents, and other textual documents. Drawing on Chang’s approach, I kept a journal to write and reflect on my experiences of walking, past and future, and I also reviewed and reflected on my past writings related to
this topic. In addition, I took and reviewed photographs of my time spent walking and looked for themes and narratives in the images. I also explored my own internal experiences as I walked and the way those experiences connected me to the world, helped me to make meaning, and were powerful ways of knowing.

My inquiry took place over the course of 12 months so that I could collect a full year’s worth of phenological observations; to experience the practice of walking in all seasons. I attempted to walk at least once a week (and this more or less happened), and I journaled about my experiences during and after each walk. I frequently wrote down ideas while I walked; either typing into a document on my phone or dictating my thoughts using a voice to text system. Some essays were written entirely while in motion. I spent considerable time reflecting on my past walking experiences through my writings, as well as reading and listening to others and how they have created meaning and knowledge through the experience of walking. I also created artistic representations of my learning throughout the year, including poetry and photography. I then took all my notes, reflections, photographs, and stories, and weaved them together into this narrative research text.

**Analysis**

Narrative approaches to interpreting data, require attention to the structures of a story: plot, characters, setting, time, action, conflict, and drama (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Interpretation of the data is therefore one that finds threads within these structures. Whether one is sorting through data collected through field notes, observations, and
interviews of participants, or autobiographical documents, there is an eye towards creating and crafting a narrative that tells the story of people’s lived experience.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000):

Narrative inquirers *narratively code* their field texts. For example, names of the characters that appear in the field texts, places where the actions and events occurred, storylines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities, are all possible codes. (p. 131)

This process of narratively interpreting data is one that embraces the subjectivity of the researcher, as they bring their own narrative understanding to the field texts.

In my own process, I have analyzed the extensive amounts of data I collected (including field notes, reflective journal entries, reviewing past writing on the topic, and artistic interpretations of experiences, such as photography and poetry) on an ongoing basis. This was an iterative process of collecting, reviewing, sorting, and finding meaningful and resonant narrative threads throughout the data. I used the interpretive tools of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which include attending to themes of place, time/temporality, and experience/interaction. I also used the process of evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) to think about how I could story my experiences to evoke emotion in the reader.

In the end, my narratives took the form of a collection of essays, poetry, and photographs on the themes of walking, slowness, ways of knowing, and embodiment. The intent is to weave together a variety of separate yet cohesive vignettes that bring the
reader into my experiences and help them see through my eyes. This subjective experience of data collection and presentation gives the reader the chance to form their own ideas and interpretations from the work, and hopefully find ways to connect their own lives to mine.

Validity

Forber-Pratt (2015) developed a method—a set of questions—for establishing validity in autoethnography that I used in my own research:

- Does it make sense to me?
- Does it make sense to someone who knows me really well?
- Does it make sense to someone in my family?
- Does it make sense to an academic?
- Does it make sense to a non-academic?
- Does it make sense to someone who does not know me very well? (Forber-Pratt, 2015, p. 831)

To use this model of validity, I asked many different people to read portions of my final research text. I asked them to provide me feedback on whether it “made sense” to them. Additionally, because evocative autoethnography intends to create some kind of emotional response in readers, I assessed validity by asking my readers to express whether they had an emotional response from the work and whether the work resonated with them in some way.

My readers offered valuable feedback in writing and through conversations. The following are some examples of that feedback:
There are so many pieces of this that I absolutely love. Your writing makes me feel and makes me think. There is so much contrast in this piece—a car versus being on foot; the sunset as the backdrop to the highway. Reading this made me want to choose-- the sun, walking... but it also made me feel reflective, as a driver, as someone who is so often in a hurry, no different than anyone else, certainly no better. I also love how you bring in how these things occupy the same space, at the end. How can these things that contradict one another so much, yet exist in the same place? It doesn't seem to make sense, and it's true.

My favorite lines in the piece are as follows:

1) Highways became the veins of the nation; corridors of death. —I think this is an interesting metaphor. Veins carry the deoxygenated blood back to heart for replenishing, but what if the heart can’t do so. I thought about this line a great deal.

2) Only things you pay for have value. —What a simple idea. So true, and yet so potent. What you pay for has value, what is free is less valuable. It’s a myth of exclusivity that binds us all into bartering for what we don’t have yet. Brilliant.

3) It has not yet been monetized. —This is too true, unfortunately. Ironic that I hear people talking about how to access commonalities in our polarized nation, and yet this commonality, walking, hasn’t been monetized so is beneath notice.
In your honor, I went outside on one of these warm days we’ve been having, and there I found a ladybug. I don’t know if I ever told you this but once I wanted to be a ladybug. Anyway, I watched it crawl around on my fingers for at least 15 minutes, just watching it explore my hand. Walking. Feeling. I learned by watching that it was too injured to fly (hence why I had likely been able to observe it for so long). I wanted to send you this thought that thinking about walking made me think about how this is a trans-special commonality. Thanks for the lessons!

I received considerable feedback that the work made sense and was evocative. My readers gave me detailed reflections in which they connected their own lived experiences to mine and this demonstrated that my narratives were effective and meaningful. Additionally, my readers told me how my narratives invited them to question their own experiences and ways of knowing that spurred them into action, such as going on walks themselves. The validity of narrative research came in the form of collective interpretation. Each person sought to make sense of the story for themselves and in that sensemaking, knowledge was shared and created.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reviewed the research and methodological literature relevant to my topic and made the case for using a narrative approach to exploring walking as a way of knowing. In the next chapter, I share the narratives that came from my year of walking. This chapter is a collection of essays, photographs, and poems that are meant to bring the reader into my lived experience.
Chapter 4: Embodied Narratives

In the beginning I was so young and such a stranger to myself I hardly existed. I had to go out into the world and see it and hear it and react to it, before I knew at all who I was, what I was, what I wanted to be. (Oliver, 2019, p. 4)

What follows are my stories. My ways of knowing. Each one came through the study of walking as a subject and walking as a method of inquiry. These stories emerged when I gave them space; through a process of immersing in place and reflecting on what it means to know and to learn. This research data is a collection of essays, poems, and photographs in which I weave together narratives expressing what I learned during my year-long process of embodied inquiry.

My study explored my connection to, and relationship with myself and the world around me. I explored themes of place, slowness, embodiment, sensory connection, spirituality, epistemology, and meaning making, all through the framework of walking as a way of knowing. My primary research question was: What do I learn about my own epistemological process and ways of knowing through the practice of walking? These stories are some of what I learned.

Beginning the Research

When I began my research in early February 2019, I had a plan. I would spend the year walking, as often as possible, while documenting my experiences and eventually trying to distill what I learned into this narrative. My focus was mostly on the external world. What could I learn about plants, seasonal change, urban design, and my personal
relationship with place? I intended to use my body as a vehicle for learning—an embodied inquiry. I wanted to understand what my body had to teach me about the world; about how my body related, made meaning, and stored knowledge. I hoped to gain insight into what embodied inquiry even meant. How are the mind and body connected? How have mind and body been artificially separated by Western civilization?

My plan was to engage in this embodied inquiry through walking. A practice that I suspected could help me find answers to my questions because walking was something that helped me to be in the present moment and brought me into contact with meaningful experiences. When I walked, I often felt like I had the freedom to be just myself, in a world full of expectations and judgements, especially about my body. Like most people in the United States, I had been socialized into a culture where the human body was something to judge, hate, alter, critique, change, and be ashamed of. While I loved the idea of embodied inquiry, I also had a very complicated and unhealthy personal relationship with my own body, the product of this socialization. While walking often felt like it freed me from this unhealthy conditioning, what I came to find through my research was that walking only provided a temporary escape, and the more I walked, the more I had to come face to face with the reality of the problematic ways in which I had been taught to relate my own body. When I began my research, I greatly misjudged how much influence this ingrained socialization would have over my process and how significant detangling that relationship would be to this final narrative.

The thing about walking is that it strips away the noise of daily life and creates space to see through the socialization. When I walk, it is just me and the world. There are
no expectations of what I do or who I am. I just get to be. However, in this space that walking creates, I found that so much of my life made no sense and that so much of the ways it doesn’t make sense have to do with my relationship with my body. When I walk, I feel whole, exposing the fact that I don’t feel whole other times in my life. Walking connects me with my body, which makes me see how disconnected I am otherwise. Walking connects me to seasonal change, which shows just how separate I have been from natural systems. Walking makes sense when the world seems to be falling into chaos.

I came to the topic of embodied inquiry because I already understood that the society in which I live diminishes the role of the body in the learning process, and I wanted to help create new narratives in what it means to know and to learn. I assumed that just by engaging in embodied inquiry and sharing my experience, I could accomplish this goal. What I did not understand was the way my own relationship with my body influenced my ability to fully engage in the process of embodied inquiry in the first place. Therefore, before I was able to answer the question: What do I learn about my own epistemological process and ways of knowing through the practice of walking? I had to ask the questions: How has the practice of walking helped me to unlearn the ways in which society has socialized me to have an unhealthy and negative relationship with my body? How can walking reconnect me with the natural and material world and myself? What follows is a collection of narratives that attempt to expose how walking has made me question my socialization and helped me to get back in touch with my body, my ways of knowing, and my relationship with the world around me.
I like to think about my life as a book, in which my stories are written into the flesh. A story that morphs and changes as new experiences rewrite past narratives. I like to know that I can learn to read my body if I am patient—if I slow down to its pace. The body has a language; each physical interaction with the world is a phrase born of memory. Bodies are perpetually engaged in an expression of their experience, and existence; they tell their stories in every movement. Pain, joy, depression, fear, excitement, wonder—all have stories written into the body. Stories that become lived whether intentional or not.
My body often tells me to explore. It reminds me that my flesh has been shaped by experiences that challenge me to expand my notion of reality and to experience the unknown.

Written in my gut is three months at sea when I was 21, motion sick and tired of vomiting, but enamored with the freedom that comes with sailing across parts of the globe, seeing humpback whales breach as the sun rises behind an active volcano. The Caribbean wrote me a novella as I walked through a valley of bubbling mud pits on my way to the Boiling Lake (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boiling_Lake); my body covered in mineral deposits that had only recently been pushed up from the insides of the earth to this moonlike surface. Parrots called in the distance. I was not of that place, but that place wrote a story that still shapes me today. A story that lives through me; perpetually attempting to be born into the world as an embodied narrative. While I am no longer sailing through that time or place, within me is a corporeal story that lives on.

Yet, these days my body often tells me how I have spent too much time indoors—too much time sitting and looking at screens. My body hurts from immobility while the algorithms draw me further into the couch. I can feel my flesh merge with the textiles of the furniture in my living room. Am I just another accessory?

The freedom I remember of the ocean has become a memory often rewritten by the convenience of handheld entertainment. Sometimes I long for the meaning I found in the middle of the sea, but I am afraid to give up the comforts and ease of this new digital existence. It seems that these days I have given up adventure and replaced it with my smartphone. I am never bored, but I am also always so bored. I have become a
disembodied story. The sway of the sea is a mere fiction now; such an implausibility that it sometimes feels like it never happened at all. I have so many stories to tell that seem to make no sense in a world where we mostly exist online. In a world where people want to be seen somewhere, rather than to see somewhere. Or to be somewhere. And in this disembodiment is a crushing existential pain. One what we desperately want to make disappear. So, we disconnect further. Shrink our existence. Live as if our bodies were not important. Live for the likes and followers, not the fulfilment of bodily sensation.

No wonder entertainment industries are the largest corporations on the planet. Billion-dollar companies designed to keep us in a perpetual state of disembodiment. The stories written into our own flesh become transient, vicarious visualizations of other people’s experience. Stories traced, not etched. Nothing in the body knows how to make sense of these pure visual stimuli, experienced only on a screen and not in the flesh. What do the legs learn while watching a movie? What meaning does the low back make of playing a video game? What stories are being told while sitting mostly motionless, the right thumb moving rapidly across an artificially illuminated screen? The body becomes vacuous—storyless; cast aside.

I am a student and an educator. I have spent my life in the pursuit of knowledge, others and mine own. Knowledge is power, and freedom. Or so I thought. What is freedom when the body is a prisoner? Sitting six to eight hours a day in a chair, bound by the rules of time and meritocratic structures. Is this liberation? My body tells me no. It rebels from the inside out. My stomach is always the first to protest: nausea and more nausea (but not the kind that comes from feeling the perpetual motion of a ship). I am
often overcome by a desire to vomit my feelings of frustration and futility that mark most of these motionless days. Or to curl up in the fetal position under my desk and go to sleep. Maybe when I wake up, everything will have changed. Maybe everyone else will have finally let themselves feel the same pain and together we can throw away the computers and the phones and the televisions and walk away from this world we built where all we do is sit.

I know that even when my mind tries to separate from my body, my body is always in the here and now, it can never be somewhere else. Disembodiment is ultimately an illusion. The embodiment of sailing across the ocean respects my body’s contribution to the whole. Sitting, while passively engaging in a digital world, is treating my body as a simple vehicle for my mind; a vessel of little consequence. I am unintentionally re-writing my story from one of being part of the world, to one of separation. And I need to find my way back to the motion of existence.

I have to remember that to move is to live and to learn. My learning happens through movement. When I walk, my body and mind join together in conversation, and together tell new stories. If I can keep moving, new chapters will unfold, and I may see glimpses of meaningful self-expression. My body wants to interact and engage; it wants to tell its story.
Socializing the Body

Figure 3


When I was born, I was gifted a body that, so far, has stayed alive and relatively healthy. I know that not all people have this same experience. Bodies are complex. So much can go wrong; they can tragically stop working at any moment, taking our consciousness and connection to this physical realm with them. I am not sure what happens at that point, and I’m not sure anyone really does, but I do know there is
something special about having a body that allows us to be alive and to experience this world. However, the moment any person comes into this world, the society into which they were born governs their bodies with explicit and implicit expectations.

I was born during the spring of 1981, as the sun rose above the green rolling hills of Central Tennessee at a place called The Farm (http://www.thefarm.org/). I did not choose where I was born, whom I was born to, or what I would look like. I was just suddenly in the world, almost as if by magic, and began to grow as a person in a society that was already in progress and had been in progress, for quite some time prior to my arrival. The society in which I found myself was firmly rooted in the cultural traditions of Western civilization and the associated ways of thinking and knowing. This included the influences of Judeo-Christian morality, colonialist ways of relating to others and the natural world, and the assumed centrality of capitalism in daily life. As socialization often goes, I learned much of what I know about how to be human from the subtle, implicit, and embedded messages passed down from generation to generation.

I was also raised in a family that was frustrated by the norms of mainstream society and who attempted to live in ways that better reflected their values. We grew our own food, lived off the grid, and rarely watched television or movies. We tried actively to avoid consumer culture, and my parents taught me to understand the influence of advertising on my decision making. For the first few years of my education, I attended a community-based Montessori school and spent most of my time playing in the outdoors. However, despite my family’s best efforts at interrogating the norms of mainstream society and raising me to question the messages I was receiving, in the end, I was unable
to escape many of the most problematic influences of dominant culture; especially as they related to my body.

As I grew up, I learned about how my gendered body was supposed to look and act and that beauty occupied a narrow set of expectations, which I strived to achieve. I learned that my worth was based on these physical standards and that it was best to apologize when I did not stack up. While I was a free-range child who loved to climb trees and lived in a one room shack without electricity or running water, I was still heavily influenced by the little bit of media I encountered and the pressures from other people. The largest lesson I learned about my body was that I was supposed to hate it and that it would never be good enough. While I often rejected these ideas intellectually, I now recognize that I internalized many of them and continue to have to unlearn this insidious conditioning.

My body also learned that it was not part of the formal learning process. School was a practice in sitting still and quiet and generally denying any and all impulses towards movement. School barely taught me about how my body works or how to take care of it, and health classes tended to reinforce gender and beauty standards through the guise of health and wellness. For most of my education, the learning process excluded my body; I was socialized into the Western intellectual tradition that the mind and body are separate and the mind does not need the body to learn.

The socialization of my body happened through television, friends, family, magazines, news, books, school, and more. I also learned that trying to reject this socialization was dangerous and often led to rejection, isolation, and even more intense
feelings of inadequacy. While having a body is what allows people to be alive and enjoy this existence, our dominant U.S. culture seems intent on making sure we treat that body with disdain. The fact that this reality is true is endlessly frustrating, but this is the world into which I was born, and I believe that if I am to understand what it means to be a person on this planet, it is also the most important perspective for me to unlearn. Which brings me to walking. As an embodied practice, walking has been the single most important way I have to deconstruct my conditioning and learn to live a more meaningful life.
I woke before dawn and made my way through the twisting cobblestone streets. A few faint stars glistened above, and the half-moon sat on the eastern horizon, casting a warm glow across the still sleeping town. I had come here alone, but there were dozens, if not hundreds of people who also woke to pre-dawn twilight and began walking towards the mountains in the distance. I walked alone, yet was in the company of other pilgrims, as we made our way to the edge of town. In front of me were green rolling hills, cast dark gray by the lingering shadow of night. The morning's light was slowly announcing itself, but it seemed timid, the sunrise lasting for hours, as sharp blue hues gave way to soft pinks; a landscape being painted before my eyes.
As the morning turned into day, I made my way up into the Pyrenees. There were sheep and horses everywhere. There were giant *Lammergeiers*, the last of the European Bearded Vultures, the mountains providing them a refuge in an ever-urbanizing world. Livestock bells rang out across the steep valleys; a kind of metronome for my steps, counting out the journey's rhythm. The scenery was stunning. I was in awe of everything around me. The flowers seemed more vibrant, the sky more blue, the valleys more lush, than any place I had ever been before. I wanted to roll around in the grass, to get as close as possible to being part of the landscape. I drank in the mountains and tried to hear the heartbeat of the earth. There were many plants and animals that I didn’t recognize, but there were many I knew: foxgloves, banana slugs, and Queen Anne’s lace, all which made me feel at home even though I was halfway across the globe.

As I walked, and ascended towards the pale blue sky above, I fell prey to the optical illusions of the hills. Each bend in the road made the next peak look like the path to the final pass before getting to head back down the other side. For hours, I felt my hopes rise only to be dashed, again and again. My body had never walked this far before in one day and the 4000 feet of elevation gain was more than my body had bargained for. At some point, I gave up hope that the pass would ever arrive, yet I continued walking up and up and up for hours. The longer I walked, the less I was sure I was going to be able to make it. My steps were becoming increasingly painful, and my body was beginning to slow down.

With each step, it became more and more clear that it was just me and the world. There was nothing else. My whole life, everything I had worked for, all my possessions,
and everything that once seemed important dissolved into meaninglessness. I was struggling to walk, but at the same time could feel my entire sense of self come alive and connect to the world around me. This was all there was—me and the world. It was so beautiful. I’m not sure I had ever seen such beauty before. Perhaps I had never been somewhere so alone, where I had no choice but to be in the present moment, and the present moment was breathtaking. I could feel the entirety of the world enter my heart, breathing life into my body. I was completely in love with existence. Everything made sense for the first time in my life. What if I had never come here? What if I never had this moment of understanding? I shuddered at the thought. This unmistakable, fully embodied acknowledgement of the present is what had called me here. For this very moment. I had needed to know what it felt like to be alive. And alive is exactly how I felt.

As I kept walking, my body continued to struggle. I started to go over and again in my mind what I would do if I couldn’t go any further. What would happen if my legs gave out or my feet just stopped working? I was in the middle of nowhere; at the crest of the Pyrenees Mountain Range surrounded by wilderness. I put headphones in my ears and turned on my music. My head was flooded with songs that helped me to keep moving forward. Many of them were the songs of people I knew well, friends whose music had long been a source of comfort. More than once, someone easily passing me would let me know that I was missing "the true Camino experience," by tuning out the world around me. However, at that moment, I had no choice. The music was the only thing that was keeping me from collapse. The familiar songs distracted me from my pain just enough to not give up, while still allowing me to be as much in my body as possible. I had a
soundtrack to set the mood, which was far more inviting than the thoughts of desperation flowing through my mind.

By the time I finally made it to the top, my body was in shock. I still had miles to go and 1500 feet of descent in front of me. There were also few people remaining on the path, to pass me from behind. Soon, I would be the last person on the trail at the end of the day and if I were unable to make it any further, there would be no one to find me and call for help if I collapsed. I had to keep going. The cramps on the bottoms of my feet made each step crippling painful and my legs felt as heavy as tree trunks; stiff and nearly immobile. The final three miles took me over two hours. I would take a step and then rest. Take another and then rest. I cried as I walked. I had never felt so alone or unsure of myself in my entire life. Who did I think I was coming here? I kept moving forward. The music kept playing.

When the large stone church, where I would be staying the night, came into view around a densely wooded corner of the trail, I burst into tears. I had just walked over the Pyrenees by myself, with a body that was in no condition to do so, yet I had all the same. I had pushed myself beyond any limits I had known possible, and somehow, beyond my comprehension, my poor tired body had given me one of the most difficult, beautiful, and meaningful experiences of my life. I was suddenly in love with a body I barely knew, which I had been so cruel to for so long. Nevertheless, at this moment, she was the most beautiful thing in the world, and I realized that I needed to learn to love and care for her without condition. She was perfect, and she was me.
My journey on the Camino continued for the next two weeks. The weather grew hotter and temperatures soared to over 100 degrees each afternoon. My body continued to struggle, and I continued to find ways to show love and care and make amends for all that I had done to harm her in the past. In total, I walked about 175 miles across Northern Spain, completing about two thirds of the walk. I took a train across the high plains, cutting off the middle of the journey, instead of walking that section, as the heat was just too much for my Pacific Northwest body to handle.

Before I left on my trip, I had assumed that I would be embarking on a grand adventure, but nothing quite prepared me for the profound ways in which I would be changed along the way. It was almost as if the experience of walking each day had interrupted my cognitive pathways, which up until that point led me to detach myself from being truly alive. Like I had been on autopilot, and I was suddenly aware of my surroundings and was in control of my life for the first time. The sensations in my body felt novel. The way the land talked to me and told me stories of its own life, was like coming home, even though I was in a place I had never known. As I walked, I began to shed parts of my identity that were just for show. I stopped wearing makeup. I became less concerned with sharing my thoughts and ideas with others. I no longer cared if my body didn’t look, just right, in the mirror. My feet and the ground I walked on demanded authenticity; they required that I knew my true self. And it turned out that I was stronger than I knew. More capable. More full of love and hope and joy than I had ever thought possible.
As I made my way to the end of the Camino and slowly walked into the courtyard of the Cathedral de Santiago, the endpoint for many pilgrims, I experienced a sinking feeling. I could see other pilgrims light up with joy as they rounded the corner into the cathedral’s courtyard. I just felt empty. I had just walked across much of Northern Spain to end up here. A church. A Catholic church. I was neither Catholic, nor religious. It suddenly seemed absurd to be here at all. I took a few photos of myself in front of the church’s grand facade and made my way inside the Cathedral to look around. It was beautiful. Possibly one of the most beautiful cathedrals I had ever seen. Yet it also felt like I was in someone else’s home. This place was not mine. It wasn’t for me. The reality that I had just walked across a country to get to a place that held little, if any significance in my life, was unsettling. Why was I here? I began to think back over the weeks preceding. I had spent my days with a singular focus. Get to Santiago. And then I arrived and realized I just wanted to be back on the trail, walking. I wanted to be back in the moments where each step was its own destination and where I learned how to just be. This church was never my destination, even though I thought it was. The destination had always been the walking itself. But, perhaps I needed a destination, even one that made no sense, in order to have started the journey in the first place. Maybe next time I would walk to the ocean instead.
Rivers of Cars

Figure 5

Spring flowers observed while walking. February 2, 2019.

The day was mostly overcast and relatively warm for mid-winter. In many ways, it was a perfect day to go for a walk. The kind of day that makes me glad I live in Western Oregon. Early season flowers bloomed in yards across the city—Daffodils, Daphne, Witch Hazel, and Flowering Currant, to name a few—I could see, and smell, that spring was not too far away.
Winter had never quite arrived. Temperatures stayed warm enough that on some trees, cherry blossoms began to bloom in late December; and by January, they were blooming in patches across the city. It was now early February and as I walked from my house in inner NE Portland to Mt. Tabor and back again, I contemplated my relationship with the seasons and how walking connected me to this annual, cyclical change.

As I walked, I gave most of my attention to the flowers. It was only a few years ago that I did not know them by name. Shortly before that, I barely noticed they existed at all. Over the years, I had learned to understand these flowers. They had stories to tell about the seasons, the soil, and the annual rainfall. They had stories to tell about who and what they were in relationship with, and how that relationship unfolded over the course of the year. Yet, it’s hard to hear the stories of flowers over the noise of the city; the rivers of cars that have replaced the rivers of water that once made up this region.

Roads are a poor substitute for rivers. They transport cars, which are loud, aggressive, and take up more space than they deserve. In many ways our cities are more dedicated to making sure people have a place to park, then making sure people have a place to live. We subsidize one, but not the other. We prioritize cars: where they park, where they get to go. There are roads everywhere. Parking everywhere. To be a human in these places dominated by cars, is to be secondary to their needs. On two feet, I cannot use the roads or the freeways to go where I want. These are places just for automobiles; one must pay for the proper equipment to have access to this community space. Roadways are inherently classist. Only those who have money to access this kind of
transportation are welcome. Walking in a city is indicative of poverty. And the poor are rarely well regarded.

Cars take life away instead of being life giving. In the United States, over 100 people a day die in automobile crashes (Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2019) and 18 people a day are struck and killed, while walking, by people driving cars (Governors Highway Safety Association, 2020). Automobile crashes are the leading cause of death for people between the ages of 1-54 years old (Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020). Additionally, one million vertebrates are run over every day in the U.S. (High Country News Staff, 2005). And none of these numbers capture the ways in which automobiles and automobile infrastructure has destroyed neighborhoods, increased pollution, and warmed our planet. Not to mention the financial burden of owning a car, which averages over $9,000 a year (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, n.d.). I wonder what most people would do with an extra $9000 a year. We have built a society in which people’s access to basic needs requires them to have a car, but in owning that car, they must give up sizable portions of their yearly income. Perhaps our country’s reliance on the personal automobile is one of the important factors to consider in the ever-increasing levels of income inequality? If those with less income were able to rely on a transportation system that didn’t require them to pay upwards of $9000 a year to access, maybe they would be able to more fully participate in society and take care of their individual and community needs.

For me, my very first loan, at 17 years old, was for buying a used car. I have been in debt ever since. The funny thing about debt is that it is designed to be difficult to pay off,
and it often dictates one’s life choices. Once I had debt, I always needed to have a stable income, so that I wouldn’t miss a payment, ruin my credit, and then find myself no longer able to freely rent an apartment. I wasn’t going to make that mistake. So, when I did lose work, I just took out more debt to make my payments on time. Debt paying other debt. The numbers kept growing. Interest accruing. My car needed new tires. An oil change. A new transmission. I needed a new car. And a new loan. I had to get to work, so that I wouldn’t miss my next payment. I wonder how much that first car actually cost. Did $1000 turn in $2000? Or $10,000? I wonder how my life might have been different if I had been able to take a bus or a train or ride a bike or walk safely to where I needed to be.

There is an illusion of freedom with the automobile. We can go most we want, when we want, but at what cost? At the expense of how many lives? With how much pollution? With how much debt? All externalities tied to each automobile that most people never see or consider. Externalities that go beyond the $9000 a year that it costs to participate; costs that we as a society subsidize. Millions of dollars in health care costs, lost wages, grieving families, asthma, cancer, destruction of wildlife and habitat, climate fires, lost neighborhoods, and forced poverty. Individualism tricked us into believing that having our own, private transportation was worth the destruction of our communities; the destruction of our ability to walk out our front doors and just be. There is no walking anymore without coming face to face with the fact that we have lost our rights to roam. That we have lost our ability to get around on foot safely and in peace.

Cars show up impatiently at each intersection and race wildly down each road built specifically for them. A road that sits on ground that was once something else: forests,
gardens, homes, community gathering spaces, and water. They embody the death and destruction central to colonial, capitalist ways of living. They suck out empathy and replace it with entitlement. They also curtail the epistemological process of embodied inquiry on foot.

They are the opposite of free-flowing water.

I am glad to be on foot, despite the ever-present car and everything they bring with them as they move through our shared space. You can’t smell the flowers from the inside of a car or listen to the birds announce the coming of spring.

I continued to walk and notice what’s around me. I know this place and this route well as I have been walking these streets since I was a child. I used to visit my best friend at his apartment on Belmont Street when I was around eight or nine years old. Back then, this was a working-class, dingy part of town with boarded up businesses and cheap rent. I walked past the block where the Dixie Mattress Co. used to be. A business that never seemed to be open and made clear, with its Confederate flags, that only certain people were welcome there. I hated that place and was glad when it was finally gone.

I only now understand the history of race in Oregon, something that I was never asked to consider growing up as a white person. A history that our state and city seem to struggle to accept and rectify. The streets I walk down have been shaped by interpretations of race; of who belongs where. Portland is not predominantly white by some accident and walking its streets I am confronted with that racist past. The red lining in Portland meant that these streets and neighborhoods were not built for everyone and that legacy lives on today. The cost of living has skyrocketed and automobile
infrastructure has enshrined racism into the very fabric of this city, and most if not all other American cities as well (Poon, 2020). Those in power built freeways through traditionally Black neighborhoods, often intentionally, “to clear so-called slums and blighted areas” (Dewey, 2020). Now, in most of the neighborhoods where one could walk, bike, or take the bus, the cost of living is so high that communities of color, who do not typically have the same generational wealth of white communities, are pushed out of the inner core of the city into run down suburbs, where driving is virtual requirement of survival. To walk freely is not an option for many and the fact that this neighborhood has sidewalks and crosswalks reflects policies rooted in race and class structures. Yet, even with the walking infrastructure present, few people seem to take advantage of the opportunity to move about this way.

When crossing Belmont Street on foot, I am reminded of just how much has changed in the past 30 years. Old, once abandoned buildings have been knocked down to make way for new ones. Although, some relics still stand if you know where to look. The stained-glass sunshine still sits in the window of what was once a pizza place and is now a fashionable, prohibition themed bar. I see few reminders of my past; even those seem to be fading.

Like the seasons, change is inevitable. Progress, however, is up for debate.

Brand new cars line the streets. I remember it was around 2012 when I first started to notice shiny new cars rolling around SE Portland, a once rare site. It was with the arrival of those new cars that the act of walking began to feel more hectic in this city and drivers less patient. People used to walk and drive slowly here. Now, it seems like
everyone is in a race to get somewhere important. Walking is just too slow for someone who needs to get to their jobs to pay for their expensive new car and recently remodeled single-family house; a house where just a few years ago six working class adults lived, before being evicted to make room for the burgeoning tech class who came in droves with cash in hand and brand-new automobiles.

Today, like most days I encounter only a handful of people choosing to walk. I am alone in my endeavor and only find people on foot once I get to Mt. Tabor Park, which is surprisingly crowded. I wonder why so many people in the United States feel that walking is an activity that can only be done in certain places? What would happen if we treated our whole city as a park, where walking was the central way of moving around? Imagine all these streets being turned into horizontal parks. Places to walk, play, and gather.

I have a feeling that people in this country are missing something fundamental to the human experience. *Why don’t we walk more? What could we learn if we did?* With my focus on exploring walking as a way of knowing, I am struck by how simple of an act it is and yet how central it is to my existence. When I walk, I get to be in the world without expectation or agenda. My social conditioning seems to fade, as the movement of my body and my relationship with the world around me, becomes what’s important.

Walking is a way of being and being is a way of knowing.

In the chaos of today’s world, I secretly wish to myself that I could just spend my days walking. Everything makes sense when I walk, but the moment I stop, I once again face uncertainty. As I make my way back home, I am reluctant to end my walk. Thinking
about walking is not the same as walking. Writing about walking is not the same as walking. Only in putting one foot in front of the other, moving through the world at a pace where I can interact with my surroundings, can I find the embodied knowing I am seeking to understand.

When I walk, I know myself and the world.
Snow Day

Figure 6
Portland, Oregon after a snowstorm. February 9, 2019.

Today is a snow day. Local schools are closed, and I’m taking the day off. Convincing myself to go outside into the cold was a challenge, but I'm glad that I did. Walking in the snow is different from other kinds of walking. It’s much slower, intentional. The frozen ground requires careful attention. Everything looks different, and my eyes are drawn to find the familiar in the now alien landscape. Everything is brighter, more alive in some strange way.
I walk around the neighborhood having no specific destination. I want to see how the flowers, having just emerged a few days before, are doing. The air is sharp. The exposed skin on my face starts to burn as I move down the street. My fingers ache from the cold, as I keep removing my gloves to take pictures of interesting imagery that I come across. Vibrant pink and yellow flowers are explosions of color against the bright white snow. Dog prints cross in every direction. The refreezing slush makes a crunching sound beneath my feet. I’m not walking anywhere specific, just wandering. This is the beauty of snow. It slows time. It demands attention. The snow lets me know that I am not alone. I can see everyone’s footprints coming and going—their presence etched onto the sidewalk, occupying a transient state of being.

There is less than an inch of snow on the ground. Yet in a place where it snows so rarely, this is enough to bring the whole city to (at least a temporary) halt. I think that people here protect their right to take the day off when it snows, even when that snow is so sparse like today. It becomes permission to play, to be present, and to let go of the burdens of daily life, if even just for a moment. Permission to express joy, to be uninhibited, and to truly live.

When it snows, I feel my heart getting bigger. I light up with childlike excitement. There is something special in the novelty, in the way that this uncommon event makes everyone pause their normal routines; the snow forces them to slow down. In a society where many people rush through their lives and are frequently stuck inside the thoughts in their own heads, even a light dusting of snow can bring someone into the moment. Somehow, snow appearing in a place where it is so rare, allows people to temporarily
occupy the present, as their attention is captivated by this physical, tangible substance that cannot be ignored.
Snow

The ground beneath my feet
Becomes
unreliable

Where there was mud

Just Ice

Where there was
Certainty

   Now   careful   attention

My toes

Normally ignored

Each have a new   defined purpose

Everything has changed
Northwest Industrial Area

Figure 7

NW Industrial Area, Portland, OR. February 10, 2019.

I am taking the kind of walk that makes me uncomfortable. I am alone in an industrial area with no one else in sight except for an occasional, anonymous, passing car. This is the area of town where industries process the earth’s extracted “resources:” wood products, industrial waste recycling, vats of “Hot Molten Zinc,” metal fabrication. Elevated freeways are suspended dozens of feet overhead and the endless drone of
automobiles rushing from place to place surround me. This is a landscape of concrete—a perverse monument to human progress.

*Who would voluntarily walk here?* This place was designed to manufacture industrial products, not a place for people to spend time. The land these buildings sit on has been stripped of life and is now a place haunted with toxic detritus; walking through it feels like a dangerous act of defiance. *If a place is not fit for humans to be present, perhaps it is not a place that should exist at all.*

The United States is filled with impassable, uninhabitable places, places so toxic that we cut them off from most of society. Cut ourselves off from places that were once alive and now are wastelands of our own making. *Who decided that it was ok to create such apocalyptic spaces? What does it mean when humans cut themselves off from the land that gives them life?*
Relationship with Place

“We need to recognize that it is not the land which is broken, but our relationship with land.” (Kimmerer, 2012, p. 318)

Figure 8

I am walking in Washington Park while contemplating a quote by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013). *It is not the land which is broken, but our relationship with the land.* Walking through a park is an interesting place to contemplate this notion. Parks are places set aside for protection, conservation, and recreation. A sentiment that shows care, and yet is an act of separation; we do not *live* in these places, they are not part of us.
People have access to parks via trails, but does the act of simply walking through a place constitute a relationship? Or is something else required?

In thinking about my own relationship with this particular place, Washington Park, I am brought back to my childhood. I have been walking these trails since I took my first steps, and I know them intimately. My parents brought me here regularly and sometimes I think I could walk with my eyes closed and still find my way. This is a very special place to me, although it is still a place I come to—not the place in where I live. I know the plants here: an understory of mostly Oregon grape, sword fern, and English ivy. Douglas-fir and Big Leaf Maple make up most of the canopy, and many small cedar trees are growing up in their shade, just as cedar trees do. I am on the lookout for leafing Indian Plums, but don’t find any. They are usually out by now, but it has been very cold lately. Is it knowing these plants that creates a relationship? Or something else? Is my relationship to the land strong or broken?

The forest radiates life brought by the seemingly inevitable, endless rains. There is green everywhere: mosses, ferns, and early spring leaves. However, many flowers that had bloomed just a few weeks ago in the midst of an unusually warm winter have shriveled away in a sudden and unexpected cold snap. Many plants seemed taken off guard.

Maybe it is time that is essential to developing a good relationship with the land. An emotional connection that develops when one comes to know a place through immersion, through direct time-based experiences. Plants can only tell you their stories over the course of many seasons, from year to year, so time seems key to connecting with place.
A relationship also requires reciprocity. Am I doing my part to take care of this place? I have never volunteered here. I sometimes pick up trash. What would true reciprocity look like in a space like this?

I start to think about Portland and my larger relationship with this place I call home. It is the place where my family has lived for many generations. My maternal grandmother was born here, and my paternal grandmother was born 140 miles north in Tacoma, Washington. They were both the second-generation children of Nordic immigrants who came to the West to farm and fish. However, to contradict the common narrative in dominant U.S. society, my great-grandparents did not come to an empty land, just waiting to be settled. They were part of a tragic legacy of colonialism in which willing settlers moved into ever expanding U.S. territory and were necessary to put literal stakes in the ground and claim ownership of the land for themselves, and by proxy, the U.S. government. In the mid-late 1800s, when my great-grandparents arrived, the Indigenous people of this area were forced, often brutally, into smaller and smaller reservations to make way for white settlers. Then, in 1953 the Federal government terminated all tribal recognition (Coalition of Communities of Color & Portland State University, n.d.) in an attempt to force assimilation. This act was part of the U.S. government’s ongoing campaign of genocide against the people who had lived on this land since time immemorial. While some tribes regained recognition in the late 1970s and 1980s, Tribal sovereignty was never restored to pre-colonial times, and Tribal communities continue to fight for recognition, land rights, and self-determination. My
grandparents' lives and future aspirations were predicated on the erasure of the people who already lived here. I live here because of this legacy.

In my own life, growing up on this land, no one asked me to consider what it means to be the great-grandchild of colonists. My public school never taught me about the Indigenous people nor the natural history of this region. Sometimes a teacher would ask me to consider my family history and to contemplate the life of pioneer families who came west. Nevertheless, no one asked me to question if this journey, made by so many, was morally or ethically just. The way I learned this history was as if the act of colonization was a neutral condition, one that seemed inevitable, simply a part of life.

I have now learned that ignorance is a privilege. The privilege not to think about something, is often because one is not oppressed by that power structure. I may have experienced other forms of oppression, such as being born into the body of a woman where women are not equal and growing up in extreme poverty. However, on this issue, the issue of place, I am a person with immense privilege. I was told I belonged here and never had to give that idea a second thought, even though my belonging was at the terrible expense of others. My ancestors had been “given permission” to make this place their own. They were never marched to reservations, denied their traditions, or been forced to hand over their children for assimilation. They were never told where they were, and were not, allowed to live, or travel, and under what circumstances. However, the privilege of belonging to a place where I have a limited cultural relationship with the land, is not a real belonging: There is something missing, that I have now come to understand, takes generations to cultivate.
My personal relationship with this land is founded on being handed access to a place that was stolen from its original inhabitants. This land was in *relationship* with the people who lived here, and colonists forcibly severed that relationship, and then, instead of building relationships themselves, sought to dominate, subjugate, and exploit those places that once provided everything people needed to thrive. Colonists built dams, cut old growth forests, put out seasonal fires, and disrupted ecological systems—ancient intricate connections—disrupted. It is easy to look around and claim that the natural world is struggling; that the land is not well, however, as Kimmerer (2012) stated, “It is not the land that is broken, but our relationship with land” (p. 318). I take that to mean that we will never be able to heal the land simply through policy changes or conservation initiatives. There needs to be something much deeper; the kind of loving relationship that is truly reciprocal where we see ourselves as part of the place we live and care for it, and the place we live then cares for us in return.

Throughout my formal education, I was not taught about this place I call home. We did not learn about local ecosystems. I was not handed meaningful traditions that connected me to place. It was as if the land and this place were just a convenient canvas upon which we were entitled to paint our lives. Wetlands can be paved over. Deserts made green. Society taught me that we didn’t need nature and nature sure didn’t need us. Despite this fact, I did learn to love nature because I spent considerable time in the outdoors as a child. I learned how to love nature as an individual, but I wasn’t learning cultural traditions that connected me with the land I loved, so that I would know how to care for it. I was learning to explore and play outside, but not understand the gifts of the
land and nor ways to care for those gifts into perpetuity. In some ways, I was taught about nature in the same way I was taught about my body, as if it were an interesting mystery, something that no one seemed to know all that much about.

I now realize that I was not taught about this land in a meaningful way, because destroying land-based knowledge was an intentional component of the erasure of Indigenous people and is part of the ongoing legacy of colonization. How can I learn to decolonize my understanding of this place? How can I heal myself in order to heal the land?

As I walk through the park, I understand that I have few role models to follow. Many heroes of the environmental movement are rooted in, and perpetuate, colonial ideals through only using Western models of science and replicating colonial notions of land stewardship. The outdoor recreation industry often uses the language of “conquering” mountains or trails or rivers. Environmental education often focuses on understanding nature as a set of resources that can be extracted for human consumption, albeit “responsibly” in their view. Can we ever extract responsibly?

My relationship with this place is complicated and fraught with paradoxes: I love to be on these trails but rue the fact that they are here in the first place. I love science and yet understand the ways it is used to destroy the planet more than protect it. I want to cultivate my relationship with this land, but also feel the weight of colonization and the fact that I am traveling on stolen land. How can I heal my relationship with the land when my relationship is so precarious? What would a healthy relationship even look like?
Tryon Creek State Park

Figure 9

*Indian Plum leaves emerging in late winter. March 2, 2019.*

I spent a busy, cold, and beautiful day walking with a friend around Tryon Creek State Park. It was the first day I had spotted Indian Plum (*Oemleria cerasiformis*) leaves this season, which for me indicates the official beginning of spring. This year it came much later than I am used to. Their brilliant green leaves are like glowing orbs, little harbingers of what’s to come strewn across the understory of the forest. They always give me hope and remind me that winter will never last forever. They seem to show me, and the rest of the forest, that we can emerge from the darkness of winter in the company of
others. That we can shake off our dark moods and introspective days to prepare for a new year. There are seeds to be sewn and dusty corners to clean. Only a fool would ignore the call to emerge. Now is the time to prepare for what comes next.

Every other plant is still in hiding; their buds firmly closed against the chilly March air. However, their turn will come when the time is right. There is no way to hide from the inevitable. I take comfort in knowing that everything is as it should be and that my own personal healing is a process that resembles the seasons. There are always dark days before the return of the light, and I must keep watch for signs that my own emergence is near, so that I don’t miss my time to unfold.
I walked with a friend around Powell Butte in SE Portland. It was 60 degrees and sunny with a crisp wind blowing across the wide-open spaces of the park. It was the first sunny, warm weekend since late fall, and it seemed as though everyone was out enjoying the day. The sun was lovely yet overwhelming after months of its general absence. My felt hat kept blowing off my head with each strong gust of wind, and I had forgotten to put on sunscreen before heading out. I hoped my pale, over-wintered skin wouldn’t burn.
My friend and I meandered around the park, talking about life, and enjoying the day. One trail took us to the southwest slope of the ancient volcano and the exposed meadows made way to typical northwest forests: Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), Western Hemlocks (*Tsuga heterophylla*), Sword Ferns (*Polystichum munitum*), and Indian Plums (*Oemleria cerasiformis*), whose new leaves were just emerging. It was a beautiful, lush forest that made me feel calm and at home. Although I didn’t dwell as long as I would have liked, as our conversation kept propelling us forward. My feet loved walking on the soft duff, and I wished that I never had to walk on concrete again. That wish ended as we crested the top of the hill into an open meadow and once again found ourselves on one of the many concrete paths that laced through the park.

On my walk down the hill back to my car, I passed by the crowded visitor center and heard the faint sound of Pacific Chorus frogs croaking in the distance. No one else seemed to notice, or if they did, they didn’t seem to care. The strong wind and ever-present low rumble of cars winding through the city, made listening to frogs announce the beginning of spring a challenging task. I stood there and listened anyway, hoping that in my listening, their song and presence would not be forgotten.
Trilliums

Figure 11

I saw my first trilliums of the season today. It was a perfect spring day: in the low 50s and overcast. Everything seems to be emerging a little late this year, but I could tell that in a few weeks the forest would once again be alive with spring plants. I always look forward to this time of year. It feels like reconnecting with old friends I haven’t seen in months. I love to watch the fiddleheads unfold and to see the first salmonberry blossoms materialize. But today is all about the trilliums. They are everywhere; their perfect white petals, neatly arranged in triads. They remind me that resilience is not just for the rugged. That even small, beautiful flowers, seemingly so delicate, also endure the challenges of this world.

Today I am walking with my partner and I am reflecting on how it’s different to walk with company versus alone. It’s lovely, and yet it takes me out of the moment. My connection becomes more focused on the other person and less on what’s around me. There is something special about walking alone; an ability to immerse into my senses and focus intently on my experience. Today, the trillium’s stories are spoken over; their voices are so quiet. I try to listen to them and to my partner, as I love them both. The trilliums tell me that this year, spring is late. My partner tells me about a story he is writing. The trilliums tell me to slow down and take a deep breath. I listen to one out of my right ear and the other out of my left. The messages get tangled and blur together. I ask if we can walk in silence for a bit. The flowers continue to share and soon the birds join in. The forest comes alive with conversation.
Kilchis Point Reserve

I found a trail through the woods

She told me what it meant to live

Her voice: soft and deliberate

The neon greens of spring

White fungus on the side of trees

The birds sing to me that this is their home

That this is my home

Salmonberry, spruce tips, skunk cabbage

A rainforest of wonders

These are the places where my heart sings

Where I become whole
Figure 12

Summer

Figure 13

Summer seems like the time when I would walk the most, and yet I always find it is just the opposite. Summer always feels stagnant. Like the sunshine freezes everything in time. The forest gets dusty and the air hangs heavy on my breath. The trails are crowded, and the plants seem to be waiting for the rains to return. They soak in the sun from above and pull up moisture and nutrients from deep below, as they grow and prepare for the lean times of winter. Summer is a time of growth yet also a time of
survival: too hot and the forests burn down, too dry and they become susceptible to
disease. This summer is cool and wet. It reminds me of my childhood summers when a
100-degree day was an improbable anomaly. Summers make me anxious now. What
happens if the temperatures keep rising? At what point will everything living, desiccate in
the heat?
Oxbow Regional Park

Figure 14

The rock is rough and pocked

grey and white (perhaps basalt)

To my hand, it is familiar

I know this river

and these stones

(I have been here before)

Another is dark

smooth

(It tells a different story)

I represent an infinitesimal moment in both of their journeys

(They have seen millennia)

I am here for just a day

I wish I understood my place

in this existence

These rocks seem certain of theirs
The Fireweed is on its way out. There are now just a few tender purple flowers atop each head high stalk. This is an ominous sign that fall will be early this year. It has already been a fairly wet and mild summer and the Fireweed is telling me that fall is likely to be the same. I am ok with that prospect; I'm learning to embrace the dark, wet winters. The past decade of excessive heat and drought have made me grateful for the rain. It is not a given, but rather a gift. A gift that will disappear if we don’t take care of our planet.
Rain

*September 15, 2019*

This place is made of rain.

Today feels like coming home. The air is wet and beads of water cover everything.

Summer is ending.

That large ball of gas and heat was just a temporary guest here. A reminder that everything is made of sun. Here, things are also made of rain.


Some people hide from the rain and others dance for it and in it. Those who come from the rain have smiles that grow with each drop. Just like the trees rejoice as they feel the end of drought. There is joy in the rain. A reminder that summer never lasts forever and that is a good thing.

The rain is beautiful. It makes this place home.
It’s the fall equinox and mushrooms are everywhere. Little fruiting bodies cover the forest floor. It’s been years since I have seen so many. I used to be an avid mushroom photographer but was forced to find new subjects as droughts have become a yearly occurrence. Seeing them today in such abundance brings me joy and relief. Those late summer rains were an unexpected gift. I find myself crouching down to see them at various angles. From above they seem so inconsequential. From below I can imagine the...
world they occupy. I can see the way they push through the duff to make a temporary home above the soil in order to release their spores. I think about the fungal network beneath my feet, threads of mycelia connecting the forest like neurons or facia. This forest is alive. And not just as a collection of individual organisms, but as a complete entity; a body with many distinct, yet interdependent parts. These mushrooms are a piece of this whole and one that I always want to know better. Yet, mushrooms are complicated and it can take years to develop a relationship. For decades, I’ve been trying and I still feel like an outsider in their world.

No matter how many books I read, they will never replace just being in these places, observing and trying to understand the language of nature. A language I know is innate within me, but was forgotten so many generations back that it’s inarticulable. The language of commerce has replaced the language of fungi. I wonder how many generations will it take to become fluent again?
I stood on the freeway overpass and watched the stream of cars ebb and flow; a mechanized river of inevitability (see Figure 5). They were relentless—hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, perhaps more, every day. The sun was setting in the west, casting bright orange and red hues onto the windows of each automobile. On the overpass, there was just me; all alone on two feet, wondering where all these people in their speeding cages were going. It seems that we have built an entire civilization on the premise that each person has a place to be and must get there as fast as possible. Is this
what the universe had in mind for us when life began in the primordial soup? Is this our highest aspiration?

The setting sun sent sharp rays of light through dense, dark, winter clouds. What does the sun think of all this human progress? Does it understand the futility of our ever-desperate attempts to achieve success and power? The sun provides the energetic building blocks for all of life on the planet, and yet, seems to provide no instructions on how to live. Or, perhaps are humans just not listening to the instructions?

Are these automobiles the pinnacle of human progress? Giving up our right to walk out of our front door and into the world unimpeded. Whole neighborhoods destroyed by freeways? Tailpipe pollution leading to asthma, cancer, and cognitive impairment? Humans rely on this machine of death and destruction, carrying them to work at a job they hate only to save money for a retirement they will be unable to truly enjoy because once they finally have time to walk; their bodies will be shaped by immobility? A soft couch will have a stronger draw than a nice walk in the park.

The setting sun is so beautiful and the freeway so ugly. How can they be occupying the very same space? Could we know one without the other? Or is in the contrast that their true nature can be seen?
Decomposition

Figure 18

It was October, and the crisp, cold air smelled the way leaves do as they turn yellow and fall to the ground: musty and damp. I could see that there were red and brown leaves too, but they had a different smell. The yellow ones were more fragrant, bright, and vibrant—a color to remind me I was alive.

As the afternoon breeze carried the scent of those yellow leaves through the neighborhood, I imagined myself, among them, picked up by the wind and tossed about. My body light in the air, eventually coming to rest in an overgrown alley behind a recently remodeled Craftsman; the new residents sparing no expense to have their home
reflect a time that had long ago passed, so that they themselves could ignore the very real problems of the present. I imagined that I was in the company of others who were brought to this same place by the same breeze. Their lobed bodies limp and ready to decompose. I wondered which would be first: insects, bacteria, or fungal spores; the mycelia eventually replacing our flesh the way that mineral deposits transform wood into stone. I loved thinking about what it would be like to return to the earth and be recycled into something new. I hoped that someday I would become a tree. *How amazing would it be to get to know one place so well?* To watch the world pass by and know that each monumental human event was just another groove in your bark; that centuries and even millennia were a part of you. *What if I could become a redwood?* I would have thousands of years to contemplate the nature of reality. I reminded myself that perhaps I already was a redwood. That if all matter is recycled, then the time I spent living in Northern California, as a child, would have surely brought some of my molecular matter into the living structure of at least one of those ancient trees.

I pulled my mind back to the moment and shook off the image of my body decomposing in an alley; it was both beautiful and gruesome. I took a deep breath and then momentarily looked down at my feet as I walked. My brown leather shoes had become a reliable companion; traveling with me on each walk I took. They were not typical hiking shoes, just simple leather with simple laces, to tie them up. I found that sneakers just couldn’t hold up past six or seven miles, and that boots were heavy and burdensome. I liked having a shoe that felt natural and light that didn’t announce itself as special “equipment.” Walking should be simple, I thought; something that you can do
just by leaving your house and going wherever your feet want to take you. I looked back up, and to my right noticed a squirrel burying a nut in someone’s garden. I wondered if the squirrel would remember this nut and return to collect it during the winter. In my own garden, I have found dozens of abandoned nuts each season and have lost more than one lettuce plant in a squirrel’s desperate attempt to locate a missing cache. I loved the squirrels anyway, even if they are, sometimes, a nuisance.

Today my feet were taking me north, out of my neighborhood and up the Alameda Ridge. I walked a familiar route across Broadway, up NE 22nd and eventually coming to a hidden, public staircase. The steps led up to the top of what was once a giant gravel bar created during the Missoula Floods, and was now home to some of the wealthiest residents in the city. Houses which have elegant views of Portland with the west hills nestled behind the downtown skyline. As I slowly walked up the stairs, I frequently paused to turn around and take in the view. Today there was a thick cloudbank pouring over the crest of the hills into the Willamette Valley below and I knew that I only had about an hour before the rain made it to me.
Winter Solstice

Figure 19

Cherry blossoms blooming in December, Portland, OR. December 21, 2019.

This winter solstice was wet and relatively warm. I walked through my neighborhood while the rain soaked through my jacket and onto my skin. I didn’t mind. It somehow felt like the right way to enjoy the day. The first signs of spring were already evident, months before the season would begin. Bulbs, like daffodils and tulips that had been planted in the fall, were poking through people’s front yards and in the grassy
medians throughout the city. There were random flowers already blooming: a rogue rhododendron, a confused cherry blossom. There were also all the winter blooms I had come to know over the years: fragrant Daphne, brilliant Camellias, and those small purple flowers on short, thick bushes that for some reason I still didn’t know their names.

I always feel a range of emotions on the Winter Solstice. Winter is hard, and a time when I feel I must wrestle with my inner shadow. However, the Solstice is also the day when the light returns, and my hopes and dreams begin to rekindle. It is the darkest day of the year. Every other day is brighter than this one. Somehow, that gives me a sense of hope and perseverance.
You didn’t teach me how to walk. You didn’t teach me how to find my way. My legs, with all their strength, are only afterthoughts in a world dominated by chairs and cars and television. You never taught me the joy of putting one foot in front of the other and walking into the unknown. You never showed me the simplicity of sauntering around my neighborhood. You even made my neighborhood a place where walking was undesirable, too many cars and too many places where I am not welcome.

I learned to hike in distant “wild” places, but not move through the spaces directly around me. You never taught me that my own two legs could take me across a country—
a continent. That walking was a form of freedom. Maybe that is because you have curbed that freedom; hoped I wouldn't notice. You put highways where there were once homes, parking lots where there were once fields. You put fences and “private property” signs up across the countryside. Highways became the veins of a violent nation: corridors of death.

Even if I had been taught to walk, where would I go? How would I find my way? My humanity formed on two legs, standing upright set us apart. But what now? I’m only allowed to use this gift with permission, often implicit. I might have never known what I lost, in never being taught to walk. But curiosity got the best of me. What was down that street? What did it feel like to move my legs all day long and see where I might end up? I discovered the lie. Faster wasn’t better. Walking happens at a human scale. I could finally see the world. Touch it, taste it, smell its sensuous flowers. Sounds from above told me stories of migrating birds, sometimes hard to hear over the stream of cars moving down the highway. Where are they all going so fast? Do they not know what they’re missing? Can they not hear the din? Walking made me question progress. Is that why you never taught me? If too many people learn to walk, will there be a rebellion against convenience? Waking is not convenient, but it does connect you with the very essence of what it means to be alive.

Walking is a form of rebellion in a world where speed is glorified and efficiency worshiped.

We don’t have time for you to walk.

Only things you pay for have value.
Move your body at the gym.

Transport yourself with your credit card.

No wonder you find pleasure in taking away this most basic freedom. It has not yet been monetized. You cannot exploit me to make yourself rich. Instead, you block sidewalks from being built and equate walking with poverty. Only those people walk. You promote automobiles and curate consumer culture. You never taught me how to walk because you didn’t want me to realize just how wonderful life could be, that I didn’t need to buy things to feel good about myself, and that the world was more beautiful than any photo could ever depict. You didn’t teach me how to walk, but I taught myself. I am now here to teach others.

Walking sets me free.
Epistemic Violence

For too long I have heard these implicit messages:

One way is the right way.

One way is the way of human nature.

Other ways are inhuman. Barbaric.

Those people who are not us are barely human anyway, not worthy of epistemic autonomy or liberation.

Once we make them like us (make them think like us), then they will then be worthy of respect.

And once you are like us, you will be worthy too.

But first you must join us in othering them.

There is physical imperialism, and then there is epistemic imperialism. Both destroy people, one from the outside in, and the other from the inside out. Epistemic violence destroys language, culture, and tradition. It makes everything outside of it appear lesser-than. Nothing more than an academic curiosity that someone can study and add to the academy’s list of intellectual conquests.

I was not born an “other” in the traditional sense: I am a white, English speaking, able-bodied woman. My physical and cultural belonging has never been in question in the place I grew up. And yet, the epistemological oppression inherent in a system that separates the knowing from the knower, has eroded my sense of self, over the years, to the point where I have often felt like I was just a thousand little fragments of a person desperate to be put back together; unsure of what had shattered me and so exhausted from
trying to figure it out. My mind, heart, body, and soul were shamed, by the rules of positivist objectivity, into no longer communicating. Yet, I didn’t know how to bring them back together. I didn’t have the tools for healing and repair.

In my unrelenting curiosity about the world, my innate empathy, and my intellectual excitability, I was particularly susceptible to the trauma of epistemic violence. Being told over and over again by the implicit and explicit messages of society and formal education, things like:

*You don’t know anything.*

*Experience is meaningless.*

*How did you learn that?*

*You are too young to know such things.*

*Why do you ask so many questions?*

*Who you are doesn’t matter.*

*Your stories don’t matter.*

*Your stories are not knowledge.*

*You can’t trust yourself.*

*Bias is dangerous.*

*You must separate yourself from the research. From knowledge.*

*You are not important.*

*Your stories are not important.*

*Your knowledge is not valid.*
It felt as if the intellectual traditions I was born into were ripping me apart, disintegrating my being. I was taught that knowledge was outside of me. And if knowledge was outside of me, then I was nothing. Just a simple vessel for storage. One that could be easily broken.

And I was broken.

Depression — anxiety — existential dread: my daily companions.

I started walking. And thousands of tiny pieces of myself, began to coalesce. They started to communicate. My mind was talking to my heart, my heart to my body, and my body to my soul. They were telling me about the world around me and reminding me that my body was perfect, just the way it was. They told me that knowledge can never be separate from the knower and that my ways of knowing were valid. That my knowledge *is* valid. That I was important. My feelings, my ideas, and ways of knowing were real. That my stories were important. That they were knowledge. They told me that I needed to get angry. That I could find cohesion through anger; that I could learn to reassemble my broken self. That I had to name and understand what had been done to me in order to heal. That I needed to name and understand what was being done to others to stop replicating these forms of epistemic oppression.

Epistemology is like a thread that holds everything together. It creates mental and social cohesion. Agreeing on what it means to know something is fundamental to a functioning society and a cohesive human experience. The ways in which we know and learn are what give humans an ability to agree collectively on the nature of reality.
Without this collective agreement, we can find ourselves unable to make sense of anything.

But now I want it to unravel. I also am scared of what that means. What happens when the way of knowing that someone was raised with, comes undone? There is safety in the known, even if that known is life-destroying. All of our systems and institutions are built and held together with these agreed upon ways of knowing. What happens when they dissolve? Do I want them to collapse? I do. I want people to be liberated from the epistemic injustices that distort their sense of self and deny their lived experiences. I want people to learn the epistemic tools to make sense of their world. I know too many people who are unsure of how to ascertain any sense of truth anymore. I want them to know that they are not simply vessels of knowledge, but rather creators of knowledge. And I want them to understand the epistemological tools available to them.

I also know that I am hesitant to pull the thread. The positivist epistemological paradigm creates an authoritative feeling of safety. It claims to be the only right way to know. That other ways of knowing are dangerous. They cannot be trusted. That if our current epistemological standards collapse, we will be left with chaos. Too many emotions. Un-empirical knowledge. Ignorance. Inefficiency. Regression. Only through maintaining “objectivity” will we be protected from these disruptive forces that seek to distract and confuse us from knowing the real truth.

I want it to all come apart, but I can see that parts of me are still tethered to the knowledge structures in which I was raised. And maybe I always will be. Is it ever possible to fully see your own social conditioning? For now, I will keep walking and
hope to continue the process of re-integrating my broken pieces. I must keep finding ways for my heart and body and soul to be in full conversation with my mind. I must also remember who tore me apart in the first place, lest I disintegrate again, forgetting that I am the knower, and the knowing, and the knowledge.
Chapter 5: Epistemological Healing and Envisioning a Better World

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of walking in my own ways of knowing and to explore how walking itself is an epistemological process, by using personal narrative to examine and story my experiences. My research question was: What do I learn about my own epistemological process and ways of knowing through the practice of walking?

In this chapter, I share a final story; I discuss a synthesis of my findings as they relate to my theoretical framework; I describe how my work is connected with epistemological injustice and healing; I connect my work back to my own educational journey and epistemological process, and finally I share recommendations for practice and my vision for a better world.

Walking Through the Apocalypse

As I navigate the final pages of this narrative, I find myself walking more and more. I need to walk to think. I need to walk to make sense of the research. As I walk, it couldn’t be clearer that the world has changed since I began two years ago. I finished my year of research at the end of January 2020. I had no idea then what the coming year would bring. As I walk to think and analyze my learning, I feel as though I’m walking through unfamiliar places. The places I knew just a few months ago are now transformed by layers of injustice, by a pandemic, and by a precarious presidential election.

Just a few days ago I went on a walk. Most of the shops nearby had closed permanently and I felt a palpable sense of desperation in the people I passed. There were
boarded up windows and graffiti everywhere. I’ve never been one to watch movies or read books about the end of the world, but this is how I might imagine it would all begin.

When I sit at home, life feels mostly normal. It’s only through walking that I see signs that remind me of what’s really going on—that we are perhaps on the edge of an apocalypse. Not an apocalypse in the religious sense, but one in the sense of impending collapse. The kind of apocalypse that happens when a society loses cohesion through war, famine, corruption, or incompetence. Apocalypse as the manifestation of inevitable entropy. That’s how it feels to walk right now. Like walking through entropy. Stability is a temporary state of being. Nothing lasts forever. Every walk must end. Every society must collapse. Eventually.

As I write, the autumn leaves are turning yellow and red and beginning to fall to the ground. They remind me that impermanence is necessary. That without change, there is no life. States of joy, and wonder, and awe all come from transitory events: sunsets, fires, celebrations, waves crashing on a beach. Transitions are often painful, but they are also the only catalyst for new or growing life. To be static is to be dead. Walking is movement and movement is what makes something alive.

Walking has also put me face to face with my own epistemological unravelling. An apocalypse of the mind. I wonder what will be born in the aftermath. Can I find a new cohesion? Can I make sense of my experiences within a new framework? One that does not ignore the wonder of existence. All I know right now is that I want to live and to feel alive as much as possible. I want to keep walking, even if the world around me falls apart.
Connecting My Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework for this research situated walking as a way of knowing within the context of slowness/slow pedagogy, embodied learning/inquiry, and connection to place/the land. Layered on top of that theoretical framework, was the use of narrative and personal experience to explore and understand phenomena.

Themes of slowness, embodied learning, and connection to place are present throughout my research as I spent focused time walking, reflecting on walking, and trying to make sense of my experiences. I also discovered, as I discussed in Chapter 2, that walking “was both the subject and the method.” While some of my essays and narratives are about walking itself, others are about the ideas, images, and feelings that came to me while I walked. This final research text itself is the most salient example. If my exploration of walking had been simply theoretical, this dissertation would have never been written. It was only in the embodied process of inquiry, the slowing down, and the tangible connection to place, that these ideas and understandings came to be. Therefore, this research itself shows the necessity of experience in learning. I could not have learned what I did, or written any of these pages, if I had not spent dedicated time to walking as a process of inquiry.

During my year of research, I walked often. I walked through neighborhoods, parks, forests, and industrial landscapes. I mostly walked alone, but occasionally with others. I walked through all four seasons and in both Oregon and Washington State. I spent time noticing the changes of seasons and what it felt like to walk when it was hot, cold, raining, and snowing. The more I walked, the more I noticed just how little I knew
about the world around me and even about myself. I found that I walked in a body with which my relationship was complicated. I found that I walked on land that I knew little about. I found that the slowness of walking took me out of sync with how our culture usually relates to time, a kind of skewed relativity, in which everyone around me moved at different time scales; like the way people theoretically age faster during space travel compared to those who remain on earth. But, it is only a difference of perspective, not reality. Walking was like being in slow motion while everyone around me rushed by in a near blur; the trajectories of our lives rarely crossing paths.

My relationship with the land has always been nuanced, but walking exposed something that took me beyond the ideas I had learned as an environmentalist and naturalist. For much of my life, I have approached land stewardship from a somewhat paternalistic perspective, one in which it was our job as humans to save and protect nature. As an environmental educator, this is what I have often taught my students. But walking, and immersion into place, challenged those ingrained ideas. As I discussed in Chapter 2, research has shown that slowing down and immersing in place (Hill & Brown, 2014; Payne & Wattchow, 2009 & Payne & Wattchow, 2009) is necessary for learning and connection to the natural world. What I came to understand while walking was that the connection I developed was a relationship, and all relationships must be reciprocal. My own experiences confirmed what Kimmerer (2012, 2013) said when she shared the idea that it is one thing to love the earth, but something entirely more powerful when you come to understand that the earth loves you back. Walking took her words and made
them material. I became more connected with my own love of the earth and began to understand how the earth loves me in return.

This relationship with the land that came through slowness and immersion was what Kimmerer (2013) called “paying attention” (p. 222) and a “form of reciprocity with the living world” (p. 222). Just like with any of our loved ones, paying attention is necessary for bonding, for knowing how to care for, and for understanding. Without attention, the relationship is purely superficial; one without meaning. Yet, paying attention in our fast paced and distracting world is difficult. As often found when I walked, the noise of the city, and especially the noise of cars, often took me out of the moment and distracted me from that in which I was attempting to connect.

While I walked, I often felt connected to others who also walk. Every time I encountered a place where I could not go on foot, because of an obstacle or intentional exclusion (like private property), I thought about people who rely on walking to get places every day. While I was walking out of desire, not necessity, I could feel how unwanted I felt on foot in so many places. So much of urban design saw me as an afterthought. It is no wonder that people in the United States walk the least of any developed nation in the world (Chappell, 2012). It is a relatively uncomfortable experience in which you become confined to certain areas and seen as a nuisance by many people traveling by automobile. The experience of walking in a city often made me feel like I did not matter. Like my life was less valuable because I was a pedestrian.

As an activist, walking also connected me to those who have used the practice as a tool of activism, like the Peace Pilgrim (Pilgrim, 2013) or John Francis (Francis, 2009).
While I have not walked long distances as a form of activism, I have walked in marches, protests, and for causes I care about. I also see walking itself as a form of activism and rebellion against the status quo, especially in the United States, where our right to walk is being constantly curtailed (Malchik, 2015). I see the simple act of choosing to walk as a statement of liberation. *I am free to exist in the world and be myself. I am free to learn about the world around me through embodied inquiry. I am free to move my body. I am free to just be myself.* Without walking I feel caged; moving from my house to a car to a building without ever really getting to be in the world. These modes of transportation are a way to pass through, not a way to be, in a place.

Throughout my research process, I was often drawn to pay attention to my body, as this was how I moved about. As I mentioned before, my relationship with my body has always been complicated; I have negotiated social, cultural, and philosophical ideas of what bodies “should” look like, “should” do, and how they “should” behave. While on the one hand, research shows that our bodies are intricately connected to our minds and learning requires the body (Merriam, 2008) on the other, we live in a society in which body shaming (Harrison, 2019) and body terrorism (Taylor, 2018) are the norm. How do we go about learning with and from our bodies, when they are systematically marginalized by the culture in which we live? I ran headlong into this problem, over and again while trying to connect to the body I have, so that I could learn from it, while also connecting with my own internalized shame, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy; unwanted gifts from society at large. In asking myself to connect deeply with my own embodied
experiences, I was confronted with the painful and often confusing experience of
disliking, distrusting, and dismissing the same body I was asking to learn from.

One area of learning that became central to my experience was my connection
with place and the realization that I knew so little about the land where I lived. While
walking, I began to notice and ask questions about what was around me. What is the
name of that tree? Which geological processes shaped that hill? When was this house
built and who lived here before the city existed? My embodied inquiry moved me from
place to place and I found that my epistemological process was born out of curiosity. This
curiosity, and my desire to learn, was at the heart of my process to figure out what it
means to know something; of what it means to claim knowledge.

In my formal education, I got the sense that most people believed knowledge to
be somewhat static, something that is “discovered” and then passed on to others. For
example, I might find someone to tell me the name of the tree I was curious about, or
maybe I could look it up online or in a book. But, real knowledge is about so much more
than that. How did that tree get its name? Was it ever called something else by other
people? What is that tree in relationship with? Has its kind always lived in this place?
Does it rely on humans, other animals, or certain fungi? How do I know that the people
who have those answers are correct in their knowledge? Do they know because they were
also just told by someone? Or have they studied the tree in a way that would make their
knowledge embodied? Are there people nearby who have stories of the tree? Does the
tree have stories of its own? If I were to study the tree, how long would it take me to
know it well? Why was I never once asked to study a tree in my entire formal education?
How it possible was that most of us will go through our entire lives without the most basic knowledge about what’s around us? All of these questions bring me back to the connection between slowness and placemaking discussed by Payne and Wattchow (2009), and the fact that the kind of learning through which people become connected to the world around them requires immersion and time. It is also not linear, but emergent.

Finally, my theoretical framework was situated within the larger context of using narrative as both the research method and the final research “product.” This research text is a collection of my personal stories as they relate to walking as a way of knowing. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) described, I engaged in an autoethnographic process that centered my lived experiences and provided a form of data that was, “humanizing, moral, aesthetic, emotion centered…” (p. 47). I sought to not only tell my stories, but to have those stories represent a window into my ways of knowing and personal journey; one that hopefully resonates with my readers.

However, I have found that the process of using narrative to explore ideas and share my learning was not always easy or straightforward. Narrative is so different from the traditional research methods in which I was familiar. Along with the process of embodied inquiry into walking, narrative was its own embodied process that required my full participation. Throughout the research and writing, I was never able to step back, or detach in any way. I had to bring my full-self to the work and negotiate which parts of who I am would end up on the page and how I would go about representing my experiences. As described by Mendez (2013), “there are no formal regulations regarding the writing of an autoethnographic account” which often left me without clear guidance.
on how to proceed. Yet, I made sense of my experiences narratively and found where there was emotion, connection to place, and provocations to learn.

**Epistemic Injustice and Healing**

My task throughout this dissertation has been epistemological in nature: What does it mean to know something? What do our bodies have to teach us? And how can narratives help expose the ways in which embodied knowledge takes place? This process has required that I critically examine my own experiences.

I found that walking brought me into direct contact with the world and made me question many of the assumptions of mainstream society. While examining my experiences walking, I often felt like the practice was at direct odds with the vast majority of the information I had learned in school and indirectly through popular culture, media, and my peers.

In the end, my research was more than just an inquiry into walking as a way of knowing, it became a source of healing. I came to find that walking exposed the many ways in which I had been denied certain kinds of knowledge as a result of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, 2013) and helped me to reconnect to myself and the world. This connection, this renewed relationship, allowed me to understand the pain of being severed from my own ways of knowing and exposed a pathway towards healing. I came to find that contemporary educational systems were not only narrow in their scope of what they considered valid knowledge, they actively suppressed certain forms of knowledge. They are structured to be epistemologically oppressive; denying people their
ways of knowing to connect with community, the land, food, the more-than-human world, intuition, and true survival outside of the capitalist paradigm.

My research journey was admittedly unconventional. I was not interested in following positivist and post-positivist epistemological processes that would inevitably bring me the same kind of knowledge that has often felt so harmful to me throughout my life; knowledge that would be separated from the body, the heart, and soul. Instead, I wanted to engage in an epistemological process that was holistic and meaningful; a process that required me to question what I already knew and be open to learning in novel and unconventional ways.

I focused on ways of knowing, especially the ways of knowing that are intuitive and inherent to being human. I have always been interested in the difference between what it means to know something through one’s own experiences versus what it means to know something through the lens of an educational setting. I have also long been interested in exploring the ways in which knowledge can be controlled, weaponized, manipulated for power, and used as a means of oppression. On one hand, we can consider who controls the flow of knowledge and information (schools, publishing companies, media, etc.) and on the other, who controls what it means to know something in the first place; what is considered a valid epistemological process and what is not; who is considered credible and who is not. Fricker (2013) described this collective othering of certain kinds of knowledge as a form of hermeneutical injustice. I found that schooling took away my own innate ways of knowing and I learned to distrust my own feelings, thoughts, and ideas; especially my own lived experiences that did not align with the
norm. Without the epistemological tools to make sense of my individual and social experiences, I suffered from a kind of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2013). Any attempt to place my life in a context outside of the dominant ways of knowing had been met with confusion and disdain by those with any social or material power. My ways of knowing could not be understood within those frameworks, and I had no access to the kind of power necessary to shift those collective intellectual frames. Now in this moment as a doctoral candidate, my access has changed, and perhaps this research can provide an opening for new dialogues and might help some people make sense of their social experiences in ways that were previously ignored.

I did not set out to have my embodied exploration of walking become a journey of healing, but that is what happened. Walking reconnected me to the ways of knowing that I was born with and helped me heal from the pain of being severed from this knowledge for much of my life. In a society where money, power, status, and success are lauded as our highest goals, I rarely found room for the slow, immersive, quiet ways of knowing that taught me to value just the opposite. Walking taught me about joy, strength, beauty, relationships, and connection. I learned in ways that nourished me; that made me feel alive. As I have said before, it was this feeling of aliveness that made me realize how deadening it feels to be part of a meritocratic, capitalist society in which my value is qualified by what I produce, not from who I am.

If it is true that those with social and material power shape the world in their image, partially through controlling epistemological processes (Fricker, 2013), then I am convinced that the reason that they devalue slow, relational, embodied learning is because
it would lead people to realize that the current structures of learning simply serve to uphold the status quo. Embodied learning can take a person outside of this conditioning and help them begin to see the world in new ways that exist outside of those power structures.

Walking has helped me to see just how beautiful life is. Has helped me to understand what it feels like to be alive and that feeling alive is amazing. It has been healing because, for the first time, I can see the forms of *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007, 2013) inherent in contemporary formalized education and the ways in which these systems have been harmful to me and others. I have regained confidence in my own ways of knowing, my relationship with my body, my connection to place, and my knowledge; that I can know the world and myself if I am willing to slow down, listen, and just be.

**Connecting Back to My Own Education**

I know that my own experiences in formal education will resonate with some people and not others. I was a student on the margins. When I was young, I lived in poverty, moved often, struggled to conform to rigid behavior expectations, and was inconsistent in my academic performance. I was often incredibly bored and found myself having to sneak learning. I would read books under my desk or do research projects on my own, instead of doing the worksheets that I was given as homework. I was always asking *why* and wanting to engage in meaningful discussions around interesting topics. And while I know that not all people will relate to my experiences in school, I do not think they were particularly novel. Most students, at least a few times throughout their education, have asked: *Why are we learning this? What’s the point? Is this all there is?*
Those questions have driven my interest in the field of education since childhood and eventually brought me to this research. I remember asking these questions over and again of myself, of adults, and of anyone who would listen. What I did not understand then, and have only come to understand more recently, is that my formal education did not make sense because it was in service of a society that does not (to me) make sense. A society that is built on a legacy of genocide and slavery. A society that ignores the causal conditions that keep people in poverty. A society that is the wealthiest the world has ever seen, yet only through the unabashed exploitation of human labor and natural resources.

The education system was never about learning, it was about preparing me to participate in this society, and to not question its problems. I was not receiving an education relevant to my life, but rather being indoctrinated into learning how to uphold forms of oppression and injustice. When I came to understand this, I was understandably heartbroken. The thing I loved most in the world, learning, was being used to control and manipulate. It had become a tool to perpetuate oppression. Those who succeed, mostly did so by being willing to engage with these systems of exploitation. Many of us who fell through the cracks, did so because we could not bring ourselves to be part of these exploitative mechanisms.

What would it mean to learn for learning's sake? What would it mean to learn if it was not a form of manipulation, control, or upholding the status quo? Would it look different? How would outcomes be measured? Would they be measured? What if we thought about education as a place where we engaged in collective meaning-making or co-negotiated epistemological inquiry? What if education was not thought of in terms of
the economy or jobs? How might the world look under new systems of epistemic agency?

These questions continue to occupy my thoughts and guide my desire for change.

Walking as a way of knowing is not about learning a specific set of facts or even engaging with a specific disciplinary field. It is not about a destination. And walking is not just about walking. It is about epistemic autonomy. Not in the sense of individualism, as epistemology is always iterative and situated within the context of social negotiation. But autonomy in the sense of being freed from forms of epistemic manipulation that are in service to exploitative capitalism and oppressive power structures.

For most of my life, I have known that I did not want to participate in upholding these power structures, however I often struggled to see them clearly and understand how they were maintained. The process of engaging in a walking focused embodied inquiry brought these structures into clear focus and gave me new insight. I was able to see the power structures inherent in automobile infrastructure. I was able to see the ways in which nature had been manipulated for human use, without much thought towards *reciprocity*. I was able to understand many important ways of learning and kinds of knowledge that were mostly left out of my formal education: things like developing a relationship with plants and ecosystems, understanding the language of the built environment, understanding multiple epistemological processes, learning how to discover who I was and how to tell my own stories, learning how to care for each other and the earth, and most importantly learning how to connect to and care for my mind, body, heart, and soul holistically.
In so many ways, formal education was part of a machine that broke me into fragments. Born whole, I slowly, over time, began to fracture. While faced with the prospect that the only way to succeed in this world was to join the same systems that were so harmful to me and my life, I have often felt a sense of hopeless despair. However, part of this despair was that I never had another path. I could never see a way to bring myself back together. But that is *exactly* what walking did. Walking not only showed me just how beautiful and wondrous the world is, but it showed me who I was and helped to make me whole again.

**Recommendations for Practice: Envisioning a Better World**

I am going to use narrative to envision my recommendations for practice. Because our current modes of education reflect the (broken and violent) society in which we live, I am going to imagine what our world might look like if our educational goals went beyond the capitalist paradigm. I am going to imagine education the way I believe it could and should be done to support a society that cares for each other and the planet, as opposed to one that values consumption and exploitation.

In my ideal world, all human beings are loved, respected, and cared for by society at large. People’s basic needs are met, and we have reimagined daily life, including our modes of education. Everything has slowed down a bit. People work less and have more time with friends and family. School is no longer a building you go to, but a process with which you engage. There are educators everywhere, as knowledge has been democratized and it’s understood that anyone can contribute. There are still teachers and experts, those who have dedicated their lives to learning and sharing what they know, but they are not
the only ones who have knowledge to share. Learning is not seen as something done in one place and only during certain times of the day. The tools of inquiry are widely understood and used in all aspects of daily life. Together people always solve problems, explore ideas, test out theories, and build upon others’ knowledge in the service of mutual care and support.

In this world, people learn about where they live. They know the plants and animals like they know their family and neighbors. They know the rivers, and forests, and meadows. They know where their food comes from and actively participate in growing, catching, and harvesting, as well as knowing how to care for the land, plants, and animals in perpetuity. The people have a relationship with the seasons and the cycles of life and death.

In my imagined world, people walk most places they go. Automobiles are rare and only used for specific purposes, if at all. Perhaps technology helps alleviate the need for cars, or perhaps the dramatic shift in lifestyle has. People move their bodies as an act of self-love, care, and as a way to know. They understand, like the people in the Kadir Forest (Madhuri et al., 2017) do, that walking is a way of knowing and connecting deeply with the world around you. They know their way around and use all of their senses to understand their world.

In this world, learning and curiosity are encouraged and stories are a daily part of life. The ongoing narratives of people’s lives are shared and listened to. There are opportunities to share stories through voice, music, art, and writing. Stories are valued as
foundational community knowledge, insights into people’s lived experiences and opportunities to know each other better.

In this world, learning is always in service to collective growth and understanding and to the care of each other and the planet. People are valued and nurtured for their intrinsic contributions to the whole. Unlike today’s world, this world does not see learning as a linear progression of performance tasks, but rather an iterative and emergent process, with no set destination. For those whose innate curiosity is central to their lives, there are community spaces for research, discussion, and the exploration of ideas. These are not places where people engage intellectually to later extract wealth from society in the form of a job, just rather places where people gather to support and care for their communities through intellectual discourse.

In this world, people’s minds, bodies, hearts, and souls are all seen as being connected and equally important parts of a person to develop. It is understood that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower and that knowing is more than just something we do with our minds alone. There is also heart knowing, body knowing, and soul knowing. And then there is the knowing that is found in each part of us, the kind of knowing that makes us whole, that makes us feel alive. The kind of embodied knowing that I experienced years ago on that beach and again the kind of knowing I feel when I walk.
Recommendations for Practice: The Here and Now

When I think about education today, I often ask the same questions I have asked since I was a child: “What is the point? Why are we learning (or teaching) this?” And, just like when I was a child, I hear essentially the same answers, “Because you (they) will need to know this someday. That this knowledge will be valuable for getting into college and eventually getting a job (or a better paying job, or a raise, or power).” Our educational systems, even the most progressive ones, tend to focus on how the only valuable education is one that prepares you for work. It is always transactional. Linear. Designed like a machine.

I chose to study walking as a way of knowing because it is none of these things. We cannot standardize a walk nor predetermine what one might experience along the way. In the capitalist sense of practicality, walking as a way of knowing is impractical. It is an act of rebellion—one that does not conform to standardization. Therefore, trying to bridge the practice of walking with the practice of teaching is tricky, as schooling is often a way that society works to uphold the status quo and teach people the skills of conformity. Walking as a guide for teaching asks us to be bold and to take risks. It asks us to understand and question the ways that we each perpetuate epistemic injustice, pushing our students to adopt certain ways of knowing that may inhibit their innate connection with themselves and their embodied experiences.

I entered the field of education because I care deeply about humanity and the planet. I wanted our species to continue, and for us and the planet to heal. I have always thought that education was the way I could help make that happen. Unfortunately, I have
found exactly the opposite. Educational institutions have turned out to be places where many harmful ideas are taught. Ideas like meritocracy, capitalist productivity, resources extraction, colonial thinking, individualism, exclusively western ways of knowing, and disembodied learning. School is also a place where “norms” of society become entrenched. The norms of ability, race, intelligence, social interaction, family, national identity, language, body image, and so much more. And many of these “norms” in our society are harmful, especially those that create hierarchies of power and privilege and allow for some people to thrive while others are forced to struggle. For me, as an educator, this realization has put me face to face with the fact that I have often participated in these systems that perpetuate harm.

I love learning. And educational institutions are supposed to be places where learning is the focus. But what happens when that learning is in service of maintaining structures of power than only benefit a few? Is it possible to make change from the inside? How do we dismantle these harmful (often implicit) practices and systems? Or do we need to tear down what we have built and start anew? The practice of walking taught me that my formal education harmed me. But it has also taught me that I have been complicit in that harm, despite my best intentions, as an educator. Currently, school is a place of indoctrination and behavior modification in service of maintaining unjust power structures. Yet, what teacher wants to push back? Who among us wants to put our students at a disadvantage by not properly preparing them to compete in this inherently violent and unjust system? Who can afford true liberation?
I do not have the answers, but I do know that more of us need to be willing to take risks in pushing back. More of us need to be willing to put our reputations and our careers on the line to do what is right by the vast majority of people who are not currently thriving by “getting an education” as it is designed today. However, this is not a call to double down and re-commit to ensuring our students can succeed in these harmful systems, it is rather a call to stop participating in these systems altogether.

Pushing back against transnational education requires that educators question the whys and how’s of everything they do. We must ask ourselves: “Does this practice serve the structures of power? Or does it serve the holistic interdependent growth of my students, the community, and the planet?” What would it mean to have learning that is “non-practical,” experimental, embodied, relational, and joyful?

More of us need to question the status quo. We must ask who is benefitting from the current system (and if it is us who is benefitting, we must ask to what end)? More of us need to be willing to slow down. Slow down our practice. Slow down our lives. We must stop feeding the machine that asks us to go faster and faster and faster, until we and our students no longer know who we are or where we are going. More of us need to have a relationship with the land on which we live and be able to share that relationship with our students. We need to be part of where we live, not just live on the land as lifelong guests. And, more of us need to walk or move our bodies in whatever ways feel right for us. We need to develop loving and meaningful relationships with ourselves and ensure that our bodies are always integral to the learning process.
At the end of the day, each educator is an embodiment of their beliefs and knowledge. We walk through the world being what we believe. If we slow down, we are modelling the value of slowness (and that perhaps the capitalist idea of speed is not the only way to be). If we know the land, we can share the land. We can demonstrate what being in relationship with place can look like. And, if we move our bodies, love our bodies, and trust our bodies with learning, then we can show others how to do the same.

Most importantly, I believe that all educators need to spend time getting to understand their own ways of knowing. We need to ask, how we know what we know. We need to ask how our ways of knowing perpetuate or interrupt epistemic injustice and violence. And we need to understand that we do not teach subjects; we teach people. People who want to connect with themselves, their communities, and what it means to be alive. The current transactional nature of education interferes with these connections; however, we as educators can change that. We can embody these values and take the risks necessary to make sure that learning is liberatory for all those involved, including ourselves. Embodied learning is not just simply about a change in practice, but a change in who we are and how we show up in the world. It is a recognition that we are embodied representations of what we think and what we know. Every day we enact our beliefs in our actions. If we believe that the status quo is just, then we can continue to engage with education in the same ways we always have. Yet, if we see the injustices inherent in these systems, it is up to us to find new ways to embody new roles as educators.

For me, I found that walking was a way to rebel, a way to expose truths about the nature of existence, and what it means to develop a relationship with place. I found that
walking showed me ways of knowing that had previously been obscure and inaccessible. Walking is the embodiment of what I believe. It happens slowly, at a human pace. It connects me to the land. And it shows me who I am and what it means to be alive. Every time I walk, I am being what I wish to see in the world. I am demonstrating what hope and freedom feel like. I am attempting to be a bridge, between the world as it exists in the here and now, and the way I hope it will one day become.
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