

# Walking Through the Art Histories Classroom: Movement and Pedagogies

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## ABSTRACT

In 2019 we initiated a new postgraduate art history course, in the School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand. The course had co-productive goals: first, to respond to the ongoing calls for decolonized higher education curricula in our shared fields of visual and cultural studies; and second, to explore how the teaching and learning approaches loosely grouped under “walking pedagogies” might facilitate this curricular redesign and reimagining. In this paper, we present the successes, failures, and our ambivalences about the course as an example of collaborative and participatory methods in the visual arts. Furthermore, we see this peripatetic movement as a kind of “academic travel” in that it is a form of critical pedagogy involving experiential learning premised on movement into and across new environments and unfamiliar spaces outside the classroom. At the same time, it allows for an extension of the ways in which collaborative teaching practice happens, and a way to expand the expectations of the discipline. Originally we had envisioned the course as a way of contesting the multi-stranded sources of epistemic authority operating in the traditional art history classroom responding to the call for the decolonization of the South African higher education curriculum. As such we began to “walk-with” participants, landscapes (entrenched in settler colonial histories), contemporary arts-based practices, sensory enquiry and affect. In practice, participants found unanticipated sites of resistance, productive disruptions, and electrifying new directions. These included grappling with the manifold, unthought-of entanglements of pedagogic actors (human and otherwise) that arise when the landscape is not treated as a bounded object of analysis, contained by set curricula and examples. The calls to unsettle entrenched dominant Western narratives as part of the work of any decolonial project asks us to revisit our own assumptions about the ways in which the visual is privileged as a way of teaching and knowing. This, we argue, is a departure for a course in art history.

## KEY WORDS

Walking, Decolonized Curriculum, Critical Pedagogies, Visual and Cultural Studies

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019 we initiated a new course. Under the mantle of a postgraduate Postcolonial Art History course, we had two interacting goals: first, to respond to the ongoing calls for decolonized higher education curricula (Booyesen 2016; Heleta 2016; Naidoo 2016) in our shared fields of visual and cultural studies; and second, to explore how the teaching and learning approaches loosely grouped under “walking pedagogies” (Springgay and Truman 2019) might facilitate this curricular redesign and reimagining. In this approach walking operated as both pedagogy and research methodology and allowed students to consider the historical, sociological and post/de-colonial approaches to reading, understanding and (de)constructing art histories today, especially as they are experienced within the landscapes of South Africa.

We see this peripatetic movement as a kind of “academic travel” in that it is a form of critical pedagogy involving experiential learning premised on movement into and across new environments and unfamiliar spaces outside the classroom. At the same time, it allows for an extension of the ways in which collaborative teaching practice happens and a way to expand the expectations of the discipline. One of the animating questions for this special edition: “What makes academic travel different from other forms of travel?” is one that we return to in our own research practices, responses to students’ questions, and conceptualizing curriculum choices in terms of learning outcomes. What, if anything, makes walking as part of this course different from walking for pleasure, for health, in protest, as a parade, or as part of a daily commute (or any of the myriad other reasons that we walk)? In this paper, we present some of the answers we have discovered through an exploration of our successes, failures and ambivalences about the course as an example of collaborative and participatory methods in the visual arts.

## EXPERIENCING LANDSCAPE: WALKING AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES

Walking pedagogies share many of the same aims as critical pedagogic practices in that they seek to offer an ethical and political call to action from their respective participants (Springgay and Truman 2019) and extend the opportunities for dialogue to produce a “radical democratic imaginary...where embodied knowledge, experience and memories are shared, that advances innovations in biographical, visual/performative methods and critical pedagogy” (O’Neill and Einashe 2019, 32). We consider Sandra Styres’ proposition of land as more than a physical or geographical place, that it is “a space (abstract) and place/land (concrete); it is also conceptual, experiential, relational, and embodied” (2018, 27), as motivation for engaging with walking pedagogies. Being outside of the classroom, employing movement, and walking enables a reciprocal study and consideration of the landscape; one that also allows for the development and extension of reciprocity in the newly constituted learning environments.

Styres’ focus on reciprocity and relationships is central to her work with “indigeneity” and “indigenous contexts” in which cultural positionalities and their relationship to place are vital for the ways in which decolonial praxis can be incorporated into pedagogical practices. Her chapter offers insights and practical examples of how one might actively engage with decolonial praxis and notes the need to engage critically and purposefully with “the tensions, challenges and resistances of locating and positioning Land with a capital ‘L’ within classrooms” (Styres 2018, 25). We have taken up this focus on reciprocity in our attempts to shift the power relations within how the course is structured and offered with varying degrees of success.

Until approximately three decades ago the discipline of art history was extremely Eurocentric and focused almost exclusively on the historiography of what it considered as high art. The subsequent inclusion of postmodern and postcolonial theories saw a shift in focus with the opening of scope to include a range of images, theories and methodologies from other fields within the humanities and social sciences. Similar multidisciplinary developments have occurred within the study of geography during this time – for example the shifts in geographic reasoning,

which saw space as being constructed as a “container”, or blank slate on which activity takes place, now includes the recognition of space being inextricably entangled with, informing and being informed by activity. Similarly, we have leaned on the shift in engagement with landscapes that archaeologist Christopher Tilley (1994) describes as a move from an abstracted, “scientific” space towards a meaning-laden or “humanized” space. This former approach, according to Tilley, was convenient in that it provided a “scale” which facilitated quantitative measurement of the landscape and activity within it. The resulting spatial approach to human impact and involvement with the landscape was effectively reduced to a series of independent layers, which could be overlaid as needed, then removed, resulting in a sanitized representation in which human contact at any point and in any context was merely the inscription left by a transient friction.

Tilley attempts to remediate this by suggesting rather a “sedimentary layering” (1994, 15) of forms of space, these being:

1. Somatic space
2. Perceptual space
3. Existential space
4. Architectural space
5. Cognitive space

These sedimentations undergo constant slippage and they are rarely in perfect alignment. With this in view, the course provides students with opportunities to select which of these layers they are engaging with, and to “pin” them together and to the landscape through their practical, discursive, or aesthetic interventions. We find a compelling metaphor to explain this action in Lacan’s “point de capiton”, or “quilting point”, the point at which “the signifier adheres to the signified” (Larsson 2020). Lacan (1993) writes that this is “the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in the discourse to be situated retroactively and retrospectively.” In much the same way as Tilley and Styres refuse the idea of the landscape as a blank, neutral or empty space, we do not consider the choice of a walking pedagogy as a neutral vector for course content.

Perhaps some examples would be illustrative at this point. In the 2019 cohort, one student, a young woman, indicated during the orientation meeting that she had no experience at all of walking or hiking. This was not extraordinary since the course made provision for all levels of experience. Later, as we all came to know each other it became apparent that far from having no experience with walking she walked several kilometers every day to catch her transport, and as she navigated the often hostile and dangerous cityscape between station and campus. For another student, the mountains and valleys of the Eastern Free State we explored in long hikes on our field trip were deeply evocative of cherished times that she had spent with her grandmother walking substantial distances in a similar landscape going about the routines of rural daily life. A final example was the running gag amongst the group on an isolated hillside on the border between South Africa and Lesotho where mobile phone alerts went off repeatedly every few steps as we were alternatively welcomed and bid farewell from South Africa by the mobile service providers.

These rather prosaic moments, memories and insights emerged during the process of walking and talking and talking about walking. As a group, when reflecting on the day’s experiences they came up multiple times, and in some cases were developed through extended projects. Similarly, as we have reflected on the course we have started to explore them as vignettes that had significance: that these “quilting points” were something special to pay attention to as pedagogical moments. That to walk through the city daily but to not recognize oneself in the figure of the *flâneur* pins together the discourses of crime, gender, race and the particular history of place and (not) belonging. That to have experienced deep and formative pleasure in long walks learning about land and the life on it but to not recognize oneself in the practice of hiking, sutured together discussions about South Africa’s ossified presuppositions about race and gender and leisure: what recreation looks like and what labor looks like in the same landscape. That the intrusions of mobile

phone alerts provided an aural re-mapping on to the landscape of settler-colonial borders, boundaries, and ideas of nationhood taken over by neoliberal capital's incessant "courtesies" vying for attention.

In short, we see cultivating the idea of these unpredictable and unplanned "quilting points" as an active intervention. They are determined by the confluence of place, people, histories and coincidence. They are both a choice and provocation to students to work towards determining what their own priority will be that will then act as the point that they use to pin through or quilt together the layers that the landscape affords. This is a departure from the traditional ways in which landscape or even postcolonial art theories are taught within the discipline in our context – no longer distanced and able to be bounded objects of study and analysis, our engagements have foregrounded decolonial praxis which have resisted mainstream approaches to teaching and learning and surfaced the assumptions located in the hidden curriculum, forcing all participants to confront the relations of power and privilege that exist within the discipline, the learning environment and academia in general (Styres 2018, 32-33).

### **EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY IN THE HISTORY OF ART CLASSROOM**

Originally, we had envisioned the course as a way of contesting the multi-stranded sources of epistemic authority operating in the traditional History of Art classroom. Through the process of collaborative teaching we began working with the idea of "research-creation", the "complex intersection of art, theory, and research" identified by Springgay and Truman (2019, 152), in order to explore ways in which walking could assist in our understanding of individual aesthetics and as relational and socially engaged practices. As such we began to "walk-with" participants, landscapes (entrenched in settler colonial histories), contemporary arts-based practices, sensory enquiry and affect. As Springgay and Truman note:

witness is not simply about group walking practices, but rather emphasises complicated relations and entanglements with humans, non-humans, Land, and an ethics of situatedness, solidarity and resistance. Walking-with is a deliberate strategy of unlearning, unsettling and queering how walking methods are framed and used in the social sciences and arts. (2019, 4)

The course experiments with the possibilities for walking pedagogies for this specific educational setting. At its core, it is a teaching and learning practice using a collaborative and participatory method that includes sensory inquiry. In order to shift our understanding of these ideas, the walking seminars took seriously the position that our location itself needed to be reorientated. Based on the concepts of *epistemic walks* (Augusto 2007), *walking as pedagogy* (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017) and *walking and landscapes* (Tilley 1994; Pearson and Shanks 2005) our engagement with both knowledge production and research methodologies all took place outside of the classroom whilst walking in different landscapes and environments. We were also interested in testing the limits and possibilities of incorporating the non-visual senses in a discipline that centers the principle of mastering and mastery through visuality.

### **COURSE DESIGN AND PEDAGOGIC PRINCIPLES (NOT) IN THE CLASSROOM**

The postgraduate course on Postcolonial Art History was offered to Honours and Masters students within the department of History of Art at the University of the Witwatersrand for the first time in 2019. In 2020 and 2021 the course was profoundly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we tried to find alternative ways of offering the course under active pandemic and social distancing conditions, we felt that this compromised too many of the core principles of the collaborative, shared and reciprocal ways of "walking with" that underpinned the aims and

outcomes of the course. In 2022 we offered the course again. We have had modest numbers of students enrolled (eight in 2019 and seven in 2022) and we have explored different configurations of shared and solo walks, seminars, and self-study. However, both iterations of the course took the form of a seminar program that focused on the historical, sociological and post/decolonial approaches to reading, understanding and (de)constructing art histories today, especially as they are experienced within the landscapes of South Africa. No hiking experience was required to enroll for the course and all the hikes and walks were aimed at beginners. What also remained consistent was the course's block release format aimed at an immersive learning experience during a week-long excursion.

In 2019 the group traveled together to the Eastern Free State, an area outside of the small town of Clarens and close to the spectacular Golden Gate National Park. While we remained in South African territory, the paths that we walked lay right along the border with the mountainous sovereign state of Lesotho that lies inside and completely encapsulated by South Africa. During this week of walks (guided by a professional field guide) we encountered the border as a constant ephemeral companion, we often overlooked our neighboring state from the highground, hearing their radios and voices, catching sight and smell of their fires from the adjacent valley. In 2022, the group walked in the spring green grasslands of Mpumalanga on a farm near the towns of Carolina and Emanzana. Again lead by guides, our hikes re-traced the paths between the extensive Bokoni stonewalled settlements that have been the hub of a complex settled agricultural history and trade routes that stretched as far as Ponta Macaneta, on the northern edge of the Bay of Maputo (Delius, Maggs and Schoeman 2012).

We tried to interpolate the land as historical, physical, aesthetic, and sensory non-human companion in all our walks. Ranging from 3km-10km and urban to rural landscapes students and staff all gained a different sense physically of what the learning opportunities required. Over the course most students actively participated and there was a range of inputs (from taking point on hikes, meal preparation, leading the reading discussions) and supporting each other in the various circumstances we encountered. We were generally impressed by students' commitment to the experimental learning format and what they were communicating about their experience of the learning outcomes. In thinking about this relationship between different walking subjects (instructors, classmates, guests, other hikers, guides, animal companions) and the land we have frequently called on Tilley's layers of the landscape and the metaphor of "quilting" those layers through the embodied action by the individual walker.

We saw different "quilting points" selected, developed, discarded, revived and rejected. These included as diverse approaches as: encountering deep-time at a cosmological and geological scale; landscape's shaping through a history of extractive mining; landscape as source of indigenous medicine; a visualized rhythm analysis of the body's movement across terrain; how traversing physical landscapes can be mapped linguistically and semiotically; how obstacles in traversing physical landscapes are metaphoric for other kinds of crossings; how listening to music in the landscape can reshape how it is experienced. We observed how this list of quilting points students explore starts tentatively, multiplies, proliferates, and then ebbs towards final project submission week.

However, this kind of pedagogic encounter is not familiar to students. Likewise, in our roles as instructors and researchers we continue to grapple with the ambivalences of this mode of teaching and learning. This form of engagement as decolonial praxis is not always easy to do as we attempt to "unsettle and disrupt the status quo within educational contexts" (Styres 2018, 33). To this end we developed some strategies to anchor and shape the learning experience before we embarked on the major multi-day excursion. We scheduled a series of walks in and around the Johannesburg/Gauteng area. These were designed to give us all as course participants a chance to get to know each other and gauge our fitness levels and familiarity with hiking as an activity.

Each of the hikes was prefaced with a text or provocation to read or engage with beforehand. These provocations are related to the course reading materials. In 2019 these were relatively short, for example:

*“Doing/thinking... How is decoloniality enacted? Bearing in mind Mignolo and Walsh’s ideas of ‘starting with the activity of thinking and theorizing from praxis’, (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p.9) what observations can you offer about Tswaing through hiking the trail and encountering the traces evident in the landscape and the histories captured in existing narratives?”*  
(Prompt for day hike excursion to the Tswaing Meteorite Crater, North West Province, 2019)

However, students reported struggling to translate the prompt into a meaningful instruction that would lead to an end product that they felt comfortable with as legitimate and acceptable academic output. Responding to this feedback, in 2022 we provided more structure to these prompts, calling them “walking kits” and borrowing heavily from The Walking Lab’s “Walking Propositions” (Truman and Springgay 2016) and the kinds of documenting practices of ethnographic fieldwork. Students were provided with an envelope printed with basic information to capture the date and site of the walk and instructions to record their observations about place, practice, and personal process framed by the prompts: “looking in”, “looking about” and “thinking about.” In addition, inside the envelopes were the instructions for a specific task for the day’s walk and materials needed to record responses (for example; watercolor paper, note cards, maps, collection packets for samples, in one instance even a small plastic palette for mixing pigments).

### **AMBIVALENCES AND AMBIGUITIES: REVIEWING THE EXPERIENCE OF A WALKING PEDAGOGY**

In practice, participants (students and instructors) found unanticipated sites of resistance, productive disruptions, and electrifying new directions. These included grappling with the manifold, unthought-of, entanglements of pedagogic actors (human and otherwise) that arise when the landscape is not a bounded object of analysis but expands to include: unlooked for experiences of aesthetic and affect; the pleasures of meal preparation and the pain of long days of walking; the role of instructor as a mobile yoke that was slipped on and off, passed on, shared, refused, endured, and embraced in different measure by participants in different moments.

This approach inverted something about the expectations around classroom performance: Those students who could talk confidently about the landscape and read the traditional academic literature responded and engaged differently to those who felt confident walking or hiking in the landscape. We witnessed completely different senses of confidence, familiarity and abilities to contribute in those two different spaces. This became part of our attempt to respond to the decolonial and yielded more than talking about themes, theory, or content, it became rather an active attempt to shift whose capital counted where and when.

As such we were led to reconsider whose, and what, forms of knowledge were privileged over others in this newly configured learning space. We wanted to go beyond the traditional forms of book and image learning as the basis for the traditional art historical classroom where we teach students how to analyze the concept of “landscape” and which privileges certain ways of knowing, forms of cultural capital, and kinds of knowers. We were pleased with how the course succeeded in offering students different entry points that would not be available in the traditional classroom. At the same time, we recognized the ambiguity in the destabilization of previously achieved forms of “mastery.” To varying degrees students were successful in reestablishing a new sort of equilibrium. In this we were reminded again of Styres, who points out the difficulty of engaging with decolonial praxis for students, noting that “there is a general unwillingness to engage with the

uncomfortable process of decolonization because decolonizing is an unsettling process of shifting and unravelling the tangled colonial relations of power and privilege” (2018, 30).

We also found it difficult to navigate some of the persistent ideas of walking and learning. A successful walking pedagogy requires a willingness for unlearning. Postgraduate students, and especially postgraduate students with a love for and interest in Art History, have had years of schooling and tertiary education that have calcified the idea of the walking tour or the educational walk as a pedagogical genre that is quite different from a walking pedagogy. A key difference is that while the walking tour is a bounded, discreet learning moment, a walk premised on a walking pedagogy is a cumulative, process-based open-ended learning opportunity. We found students looked for and actively desired the former’s clearly laid out route to content mastery and the more didactic role of the instructor as one who transmits knowledge. The more we resisted being enrolled into the subject position of teachers or instructors and repositories of content knowledge and the more we prioritized experiential learning, the more we sensed students’ frustration at what they seemed to perceive as the “withholding” of expertise. For students the walking pedagogies required a greater set of risks than they may have expected from a course. The difficulty of decolonial praxis and our use of walking pedagogies resisted the assumptions around what “travel” may come to mean for the participants and the associated rewards. Within traditional academic programs the risks and rewards are clearly defined and there remains an assumption that the reward largely outweighs the nominal risks for students who stick to the “itinerary” (reproduce knowledge, master disciplines, reinforce hierarchical power structures). Their structure is echoed across other educational contexts where privileged positions of knowledge production and power remain intact. What our course design required was greater risk-taking and challenge; not only of the power relations and ideas of who was the final repository of knowledge and experience, but also, as Styres reminds us, “of students’ own prior knowledge, positionalities and the resulting implications of what they have learned from course material” (Styres 2018, 34). Students’ hesitancy in this regard continues to be something for us to take seriously and opens the possibility to consider alternative strategies for this part of the decolonial praxis in future iterations of the course.

Another aspect that we continue to grapple with is our assumption that anyone could do the course – or at least could manage the walks without being a hiker. Part of the engagement was about the body learning what it feels like to be immersed in the environment, to pay attention to things like food and water, distance and your feet, physicality and fatigue: in other words, the explicit anchoring into the landscape which we wanted students to experience. That being said, the method is not one that is all about accessibility and there were a number of aspects that despite our intentions re-encoded and reinscribed certain kinds of relations. For example, the gendered ways that we allocated accommodations and indeed the ways that the students wanted to arrange accommodation options. These gendered roles further played out along the lines of labor that were observed, adhered to, and happily subverted. Critically, the course and its use of the walking pedagogy has yet to be tested in terms of physical accessibility as we have not had a diverse range of physical and other abilities represented in our student cohort.

## CONCLUSION

The undoing impulse of the decolonial asks us to arrest our assumptions about the totality of the visual as a way of knowing. This, we argue, is a departure for a course in art history. We note the ambiguity of what students gleaned about traditional aspects of postcolonial art history. We were careful not to reinscribe colonial relations of power and privilege through the imposition of the canon and so, while materials remained available throughout the program for students to return to and engage with, staff did not focus on summarizing content and debates as may be expected from traditional seminar formats. This is potentially an inescapable ambivalence in institutional curricula and a walking pedagogy that, in this context at least, is experimental and deployed in the service of decolonial praxis. The paradox of university course requirements and these ways of

knowing remain. We continue to grapple with the ways in which curriculum and its design and implementation are required to be “disciplined” into a recognizable format, and the urgency of decolonized praxis. We note that this produces tensions for students who, occupying multiple positions, are required to engage with experimental, “undisciplined” epistemology and simultaneously required to produce traditional academic outputs. Furthermore, students have largely come to university at great personal cost to acquire precisely the kinds of capital that were being challenged by the course and we realize how profoundly destabilizing this could be.

In closing we return to the shared ideas at the start of the course and why a walking methodology provided an appropriate route to fulfil our aims. Firstly, it provided a means to experiential learning that took us outside of the classroom. It facilitated a focus on the collaborative pedagogic approach rather than a particular visual methodology. It allowed us to surface the hidden curriculum, those unwritten values and unspoken rules of legitimacy and expectations that abide in institutional ideas of competence and mastery. We believe this is where the course has been most successful, where this pedagogical approach allowed us all to engage explicitly as equally vulnerable participants with frailties and feelings about the walks and all of the associated experiences became very apparent and present in discussions. There is no doubt that this course revealed all our investments in ways that would not have been apparent through the discursive or visual modes familiar to the classroom.

As lecturers, our commitment to disrupting ideas of mastery, of epistemic distance and objectivity as response to decolonial praxis found traction in this method and likewise the goal of disrupting ideas of land and landscape and its role in colonial history. Rather than reproducing and reinscribing those histories we consider this a necessary intervention. In so doing we are not laying claim to the full spectrum of the potentials for walking pedagogy as liberatory, as ours was a more modest aim, but it was fundamental in shifting our teaching practice away from content.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

**Nicola Cloete** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Curatorial, Public and Visual Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. Born in South Africa, she completed an undergraduate degree in Dramatic Art at Wits University, a Master's degree in Gender Culture and Politics at Birkbeck College, London, and worked in academia and television as a researcher before returning to Wits to take up a position in the Wits School of Arts and completing her PhD in Political Studies. Her research and teaching focus on an interdisciplinary approach to visual and cultural studies with a specific emphasis on memory studies, slavery in South Africa, and gender and race theories as they pertain to the politics of representation. Her recent research examines the memory politics in representations of slavery in post-Apartheid South Africa. She is currently writing a book, supported by the Advancing Humanities Grant, called *Holding Memory: Slavery and Post-Apartheid Cultural Production*. She has recently been awarded the Zumkher Prize for Scholarship in Public Memory (2022), and held the Harvard South Africa Fellowship (2011-2012), and she serves on the editorial board of the academic journals *African Studies* and *De Arte*. She has also served on the boards of the Market Theatre Foundation (2008-2011) and the advisory panel for Music and Theatre of the National Arts Council.

**Catherine Duncan** is a lecturer in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Culture Studies Department in the School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her teaching practice is grounded in curiosity, reflexivity, and the belief that learning is a relational, situated practice. She prioritizes creating conditions for discovery and conversation, fostering inclusivity, and embracing collaboration with colleagues and students as co-learners. Being located in a School of Arts, much of her teaching practice and research into the scholarship of teaching and learning focuses on creative research and participation. As a Film and Media Studies scholar, her teaching and research are oriented towards popular texts and the audiences who enjoy them, especially South African and transnational fan networks, translocal audiences, and participatory media cultures. She is particularly interested in the informal circuits of the creative industries within these fan networks.

**Anton Coetzee** is a PhD student in History of Art at the University of the Witwatersrand. The centerpiece of his research is the creation of three-dimensional digital copies of archaeological and heritage objects and sites, with a theoretical focus on their ontological multivalence, and how they may be reconstructed as epistemic objects without reinscribing colonial practices of collection and cataloguing. Extending these ideas to the understanding of landscapes as colonially created epistemic objects – created using technologies of surveillance and cartography – offers us new lenses through which to consider their decolonization.