

On Foot: Pathways Through Contemporary Literature

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation explores contemporary walking narratives – fictions formally organized around and guided by journeys “on foot” – in order to consider the deeply rooted literary-historical, aesthetic, and ethical relationships among practices of walking, writing, remembering, and haunting. By contemplating the ways in which contemporary authors reimagine the walking narrative as a historically embedded and physically embodied site of experimental spatial and social practices and radical modes of historical consciousness, this project encourages us to question the most obvious ways in which we encounter and represent the world. Walking narratives challenge readers and literary critics alike to reflect on the intimacies and intricacies of paths, place, pace, and point of view, thereby destabilizing familiar conceptualizations of perceptual, geographic, autobiographic, and historical knowledge. At the same time, these insistently and unsettlingly hybrid fictions also reconfigure the boundaries of genre, encouraging a theoretical and aesthetic reorientation of literary-critical knowledge guided by metaphors of spatial and temporal trespass, moments of historical surprise, recognition, and wonder, and networks of bodies in motion.

Integrating the critical-interpretive methods of literary studies with the practice-centered theories of cultural geography and performance studies, this project examines how texts by W. G. Sebald, Iain Sinclair, and Teju Cole engage with interdisciplinary

questions of movement, personal identity, the philosophy of history, and place.

Situating these works within the emerging critical field of “walking studies,” I argue that contemporary walking narratives become textual testing grounds for practices of wandering and wondering that (re)animate the histories embedded in landscape and allow the ghosts of the past to speak in ethically urgent ways. Through the linked practices of walking and writing, contemporary walking narratives open new routes through which to encounter literature and landscape and inspire spectral conversations designed to illuminate new points of entry into past and present, world and word.

Dedication

To my parents, whose *endless* love and support made this path possible, and to
Brad, who *always* believed.

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INTRODUCTION

Footsteps

“Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps.”¹

Contemporary satirist Geoff Nicholson begins his exploration of “the lost art of walking” by contemplating the paradox of locating one’s literal and metaphorical first steps.² “With most journeys,” he explains, “it’s extremely difficult to decide where and when the first step occurs.”³ Acknowledging the metaphysical lack of a stationary place from which to reflect, he claims, “We’re already in motion before we know where we’re going;” therefore, “designating a particular step as first...is a tricky and often arbitrary business.”⁴

Echoing Nicholson, essayist Rebecca Solnit begins her examination of the “history of walking” with a similar moment of rhetorical uncertainty.⁵ “Where does it start?” she wonders of her constantly “wandering” and “straying” subject.⁶ “It starts with a step,” she proffers, “and then another step and then another that add up like taps

¹ De Certeau, Michel, “Walking in the City,” *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

² Nicholson, Geoff, *The Lost Art of Walking: The History, Science, Philosophy, and Literature of Pedestrianism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 1.

³ Nicholson, 1.

⁴ Nicholson, 1.

⁵ Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 3.

⁶ Solnit, 3, 5, 8.

on a drum...the rhythm of walking. The most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world.”⁷

Following Nicholson and Solnit, as well as travel writer, Robert Macfarlane, who notes that the “story” of walking cannot begin by “sitting still,” this dissertation begins in motion, amidst the steady cadence of the walker’s footsteps, the reflective rhythm of his prose, and the insistent and unrelenting murmur of the ghosts that haunt his walks.⁸ It does not aim to identify origins or beginnings – literal or literary first steps – but instead attempts to situate contemporary narratives of walking – fictions formally organized around and guided by walking journeys – in restless conversation in order to explore the deeply rooted literary-historical, aesthetic, and ethical relationships among walking, writing, remembering, and haunting. By contemplating the ways in which contemporary authors W. G. Sebald, Iain Sinclair, and Teju Cole reimagine the walking narrative as a historically embedded and physically embodied site of experimental spatial and social practices and radical modes of historical consciousness, this

⁷ Solnit, 3.

⁸ Macfarlane, Robert, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (New York: Penguin, 2012), xi. In this dissertation, I have chosen to standardize my pronoun use with “he” and “him” when generically referring to walkers and writers. This decision continues to make me uneasy and does little to challenge the standard literary canon of male walking and writing that this dissertation aims, at least implicitly, to unsettle. This decision was based on a desire for clarity, but I also hope my continued use of he/him makes readers uncomfortable enough to question the systematic exclusion of women (and minority writers) from the canonical literature of walking. Though my dissertation does not take direct aim at dismantling this problem, there is compelling, genre-crossing work being done to examine this issue, especially with regard to urban walking, including Laura Elkin’s *Flaneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017); Brent Staples’ now-classic essay, “Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders his Power to Alter Public Space,” *Literary Cavalcade* (Feb, 1998), 38-41; and Teju Cole’s *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011).

dissertation encourages us to question the most “obvious” ways in which we encounter and represent the world. At the same time, by challenging readers and literary critics alike to reflect on the intimacies and intricacies of paths, place, pace, and point of view, walking narratives destabilize familiar conceptualizations of perceptual, geographic, autobiographic, historical, and literary knowledge.

Importantly, narratives of walking, which intentionally wander through numerous forms of literary writing, also call into question familiar stories regarding the singular, linear, unidirectional routes of Western literature. If the traditional framework through which we understand the history of Western literature relies on the imposition of historical and categorical boundaries and the logic of progress and advancement, contemporary walking narratives encourage a theoretical reorientation guided by anxious metaphors of spatial and temporal trespass, moments of historical surprise, recognition, and wonder, and networks of bodies in motion.⁹ In this way, fictions guided

⁹ Simon Cooke’s *Travellers’ Tales of Wonder* was particularly helpful in thinking through how walking narratives compellingly reorient the traditional historical pathways of Western literature. Cooke’s work explores a constellation of contemporary writers whose hybrid, border-crossing narratives adopt the travel form to “recover and renew” a sense of “wonder.” Often making implicit and explicit reference to pre-modern and Renaissance travel writing, these narratives defy simple categorization and reference or adopt the formal and thematic characteristics of a range of genres and fields of knowledge. Cooke argues for the intentional “homelessness” of these contemporary narratives, and concludes that their particular mode of engaging with the world – bodily, historically, and politically – acts to counter modern forms of “disenchantment” and generic reification. My argument is similar in that walking narratives’ intentional dislocation in literary-historical time challenges the impulse to map literature’s temporal and spatial routes along singular, linear, or unidirectional paths. Cooke, Simon. *Travellers’ Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipul, and Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 2-3.

by walks reconfigure the history of literary writing as constellational rather than linear, communicative rather than progressive, and contingent rather than categorically fixed.

Finally, walking narratives also encourage readers to consider the literal and metaphorical value of a multiplicity of meandering, recursive, anxious, and potentially even obscure paths over a singular “correct” path through landscape, self, history, and text. As Solnit states in reference to her unique route through the critical and literary history of walking, “The paths I trace are not the only paths...The history of walking is everyone’s history, and any written version can only hope to indicate some of the more well-trodden paths in the author’s vicinity.”¹⁰ With that in mind, and with the commitment to there being no “fixed location” from which we must start, this dissertation begins in motion...with footsteps.

Preamble(s)

In the early-1860s, New England walker and writer Alfred Barron “began to feel the presence of an invisible companion” haunting his wanderings through the woods around Wallingford, Connecticut.¹¹ “It never spoke to me nor injected any thoughts into my mind,” Barron muses in the preface to his long-since-forgotten 1875 treatise on walking, *Foot Notes; or, Walking as a Fine Art* (*Foot Notes*, vi). Instead, he writes, this “queer” companion “only seemed to want to be near me” (*Foot Notes*, vi). Linking the

¹⁰ Solnit, 4.

¹¹ Barron, Alfred, *Foot Notes, or Walking as a Fine Art* (Wallingford, CT: Wallingford Printing Company, 1885), vi; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (*Foot Notes*, Page Number).

arrival of this mysterious presence to his intellectual and emotional immersion in the writing of celebrated American essayist and zealous walker Henry David Thoreau, Barron, who initially wonders if he is being stalked by “the Evil One,” eventually concludes that his silent companion might in fact be “Thoreau himself” (*Foot Notes*, vi). “I should not have been at all surprised if Thoreau had appeared to me,” he writes, noting the “strong wave of influence” Thoreau’s writing style and walking practices held over the state of his body and mind and “the product of [his] pen” (*Foot Notes*, v, vi). Under the pervasive influence of Thoreau’s literary and spectral “presence,” Barron reflects, his own prose had become “quite different from anything I had ever written before,” and his walks, whether enchanted by the company of “Thoreau’s familiar” or simply beset by “a disordered fancy,” had begun to represent more than just prosaic habit (*Foot Notes*, v, vi). Walking – that homely yet heroic practice – had become, for Barron, an act of literal and literary transformation: the organizing principle, critical method, and haunted poetic of an invigorated mode of engaging with and representing the world.

*

A century and a half later, in early-June 2013, Brooklyn-born walker and writer Eli Mandel began to experience a similar kind of haunting. “It might have been a dream,” Mandel reflects in his short memoir-essay, “Footing Slow: A Walk with Keats,” which chronicles his attempt to walk over six hundred miles in the footsteps of the

English Romantic poet John Keats, but “[Keats] had dictated, or tried to dictate, my every move.”¹² Acknowledging his initial intention to “track” and “hound” Keats “day for day and, when possible, step for step,” Mandel soon realizes the elusiveness of his “quicksilver companion” and frets that he “cannot convince [himself] of some of the most basic facts” of his walking journey (“Footing Slow,” 24, 9, 6). “I wake up and I doubt it,” Mandel admits, even as he recounts the thrilling intimacy of “walking in step” with his ghostly interlocutor and the terrifying exhilaration of believing he is becoming “part Keats” (“Footing Slow,” 5, 18, 31). “Bound” by their “grueling walk” – their “strange and shared endeavor” – Mandel becomes progressively unhinged, yearning to be “closer” to the spirit world of his spectral companion while still coveting the potential to “walk deeply” in his own “genuinely embodied,” sensually “rediscovered” contemporary landscape (“Footing Slow,” 56, 53, 13, 34). Ultimately, dismissing the dualism of past and present, private and shared, Mandel resolves to “trust in the poet...and the paths” that “haunted” him, and, like Barron, finally concludes that it is through the linked practices of “footing slow” and poetic creation – the entangled and “rich history” of walking and writing – that he and Keats, the “dead man” with whom he had been “walking for weeks,” can find a shared place to exist in the world (“Footing Slow,” 6, 34, 63, 46).

¹² Mandel, Eli. “Footing Slow: A Walk with Keats,” *Ploughshares Solos*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (October 2016), 5, 45; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (“Footing Slow,” Page Number).

*

Linked by a shared literary structure and guided by parallel practices of movement and personal accounts of haunting, Barron's and Mandel's walking narratives – dislocated in time and space by over 150 years and two continents – offer one, thematically-rich route into the history of literary walking. Situated in restless counterpoint, these narratives self-consciously locate themselves within the same extensive tradition of thinking about the relationship between walking and writing and rely on uncanny encounters with the ghosts of famous walker-writers as a means by which to unsettle the boundaries between past and present and self and other. They also demonstrate the ways in which walking, or the manner and mode in which one moves through the world, becomes intimately tied to how one decides to represent that world in writing, suggesting an important link between walking, perception, memory, and literary genre.

Importantly, though Barron and Mandel articulate different motivations for their walks – Barron situates himself firmly within the Romantic tradition of walking in nature and Mandel walks in a post-modern landscape defined, at least in part, by literary tourism – both accounts also suggest a naturalization of walking as a means by which to move through and encounter the world. According to Nicholson, walking is often understood as the “most ordinary, natural, ubiquitous activity,” a characterization contemporary chronicler of the history of walking Joseph A. Amato echoes when he

agrees that, “walking is taken to be mundane, ordinary, pedestrian...and thus in all ways worthy of being overlooked.”¹³ However, while Barron’s and Mandel’s walking stories may be guided by a form of movement that often goes “unconsidered,” both writers posit the walk as an extraordinary (and even eccentric) act in need of critical reflection, artistic documentation, and even memorialization.¹⁴ As we have already heard from Rebecca Solnit, walking straddles the boundaries between the “obvious and obscure,” making these two narratives of walking and haunting part of a shared campaign to explore how the “transitory and ephemeral” nature of a habitual, everyday action can disrupt one’s sense of self, defamiliarize one’s surroundings, and catalyze ghostly encounters and unexpected connections across space and time.¹⁵

Situating these stories side by side – or stride for stride – also serves as a jumping off point into the long history of walking in that although Barron’s and Mandel’s narratives contain formal echoes and wander into each other’s paths through unsettling accounts of spectral companionship, their walking experiments are embedded within different historical periods characterized by distinct (though interlinked) cultural

¹³ Nicholson, 61; Amato, Joseph A., *On Foot: A History of Walking* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 3. Commenting on the “disturbing” lack of attendance to walking in literary criticism, Anne D. Wallace, author of *Walking, Literature, and English Culture*, similarly notes that walking often “vanishes” from our readings of literary writing “because it is too common to notice.” She goes on to state that “[t]he extended meanings of ‘pedestrian’ – boring, commonplace, unimportant” demonstrate the “contempt bred of familiarity” and the attendant effacement of walking as a suitable subject for critical contemplation and study. Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁴ Nicholson, 80.

¹⁵ Nicholson, 80.

assumptions about walking as a philosophic, aesthetic, and literary act.¹⁶ Unlike Mandel, whose twenty-first century travel narrative of walking with the ghost of Keats seems to assume the overarching cultural recognizability and subversive implications of its haunted travel genre, Barron's account (and his treatise on walking that follows) comes into being in a nineteenth-century moment in which the ideological, cultural, and generic framework within which "walking itself" would be "enshrined" was still being actively established.¹⁷ Although we'll come back to this framework and history later, it is important to suggest here that Mandel's journey in Keats' footsteps was perhaps enabled – literally and literarily – by Barron's earlier walking encounters and the writing that memorialized them.

To Barron, who self-consciously claims to be under the influence of Thoreau (who, as we'll see, was walking and writing in the generic footsteps of Rousseau and Wordsworth), going on a walk was a habitual act invested with deep personal and perceptual meaning. Walking, Barron argued, was "so stimulating to thought and

¹⁶ Importantly, marking Barron's and Mandel's narratives as located within 'distinct' historical periods characterized by different ideological and cultural assumptions about walking means that we must strive to understand historical and literary periods as constituted, at least in part, by their walking practices. As Amato describes in his "critical narrative of walking," "walking constitutes a continuous and changing dialogue between foot and earth, humanity and the world;" therefore, "by classifying types of walking and distinguishing specific periods of walking, the historian records stages of humanity's altered relationship to its own body, as well as to space, community, society, and the world" (16). In other words, by foregrounding walking (and the ways in which walking practices shape personal identity, perception, and sense of place) as an everyday action invested with deeply-rooted cultural and social meaning, we can consider how narratives of walking come to create and link historical periods and literary movements rather than simply reflect or represent them.

¹⁷ Solnit, 17.

mind" that, in addition to being an apt subject for the literary arts, it also provided an important physiological and metaphorical corrective to humans' limited understanding of perception and personal experience (*Foot Notes*, 15). Under the influence of a walk, Barron writes, "the brain will begin to grow luminous and sparkle," a reaction that prompted him to designate the legs and feet as "reflective organs," and led him to credit his feet with intensifying his experiences of landscape and self at an electrifyingly "elemental" (i.e. ground) level (*Foot Notes*, 15-16).

A century and a half later, Mandel echoes this perspective as he tracks Keats, explaining that walking has made him feel fully "embodied" and "afame," an exhilaration that leads him to conclude that his "legs and [his] mind were strung on the same cord" ("Footing Slow," 31). Here, both men note what Rebecca Solnit calls "an odd consonance between internal and external passage," a way of representing walking and thinking as linked, even interdependent, phenomena. To Solnit, "[t]he rhythm of walking generates a rhythm of thinking," a cerebral and sensual experience that suggests that the mind "is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it."¹⁸ Using perceptual and spatial metaphors, Barron, Mandel, and Solnit all link the walking body to the wandering mind in order to consider walking's particular "utility" for thinking as well as to consider how the history of walking enables the

¹⁸ Solnit, 5-6.

history of thinking to be rendered traceable, or more “concrete.”¹⁹ In this way, the “passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts,” linking the topography of the mind to the rhythms of the sensing, moving body as well as to the paths the feet follow and help create.²⁰

Barron also argues that walking has increased his powers of empathy, or his mind’s receptivity to the thoughts and feelings of others. Like Mandel who later claimed to become “part Keats” on his journey, Barron writes that walking enables him to begin “thinking another’s thoughts” and “feeling another’s feelings,” a point of view that challenges the narrow, stable boundaries of the self and scrambles common assumptions about the interaction between impressions, perceptions, and personal experience (*Foot Notes*, 35). Though this psychological interrelation is not framed as an intrusion, Barron’s and Mandel’s increasing awareness of the impressions and emotions of their fellow walkers (whether real or spectral) creates unnerving moments of physical and mental trespass that are often coupled with alarming moments of self-dissolution.²¹ Driven by linked desires to both find and lose themselves in the landscape, walking and the

¹⁹ Solnit, 6.

²⁰ Solnit, 4.

²¹ For Barron, who seems acutely aware of the debt his writing owes to Thoreau, this empathetic “trespass” into Thoreau’s mind is also framed as a problem of literary ownership and intellectual property. A more paranoid reading of the beginning of *Foot Notes* might interpret the entirety of Barron’s introduction as an anxious apology for (or petulant defense of) the resemblance his work bears to that of Thoreau, rather than as an extended marvel at the walk’s potential to simultaneously unsettle and increase one’s powers of empathetic identification. However, this vexed relationship between the walk and trespass – and the anxiety it creates in the walker-writer – ultimately becomes part of the point, representing a central concern as to the integrity of the bounded self and the ownership of literal and literary routes through landscapes and ideas.

connected process of written reflection create the liminal conditions through which both men can explore the flexible limits of self and other and the ethical implications of alternative formulations of companionship, intimacy, and empathy.²²

Importantly, Barron's deeply personal account of walking, which pushes back against rigid conceptualizations of personal identity and perception, also carries implicit cultural assumptions regarding who should be doing the walking and how the practice should be carried out, demonstrating how the "art" of walking gets linked to and participates in the creation of cultural and social norms relating to gender, race, class, national identity, physical health, and moral virtue. In his moralizing and instructive nineteenth-century account, Barron naturalizes walking as an exclusively male practice meant only for those with white skin, able bodies, and quick minds and pursued for personal improvement and poetry, both of which he understood as part of a project of nation building. Thus defined, walking becomes a far less radical and inclusive "art" than previously suggested, closing down rather than opening up this improvisational

²² Anyone who has ever heard the ubiquitous moralizing edict that one should not judge before he/she has walked a mile in another's shoes will recognize the discursive and metaphorical relationship between walking and empathy expressed here. Interestingly, this popular sentiment suggests that empathetic identification can be achieved by imagining oneself in another's place and recognizing another's complicated path to the present, a process that is popularly understood as deeply ethical. However, walking literature challenges this clear and relatively simple process of empathetic identification by asking readers to consider how walking in another's shoes (or, in this case, tracing another's footsteps or paths) unsettles both self and other. Rather than validating the self's stability, coherence, and powers of identification, Barron and Mandel (and Sebald, Sinclair, and Cole) explore the ways in which empathy – traditionally understood as an imagination-driven intimacy or psychological and spatial proximity to person, place, or historical event – often disrupts and even subverts one's relationship with self and other, creating moments of both alarm and insight. Part of my argument here is that walking literature challenges the popular ethics behind the impulse towards identification, exploring the unnerving and ghostly implications of empathy and positing new frameworks for recognizing and acknowledging both similarity and difference, intimacy and distance.

act by offering a particular type of walker and a particular type of walk as the singular ideal. Transcendent and outside of history, Barron's ideal walker exists in vexed contradistinction to his own experiences of walking and haunting, which, as we've seen, include highly personalized instances of reoriented perception, reorganized physiology (metaphorically speaking), and associative spectral connectivity. Paradoxically, Barron-the-walker breaks down and renders fluid the social and cultural restrictions of Barron-the-writer's own ideal, demonstrating the fascinating way in which walking, and its poetic representation, move between universal (ideal) and particular (historical) meanings, proffering an ideal only to challenge it.

Ultimately, Barron's account of walking offers an intriguing orientation point from which to begin an exploration of walking "as a conscious cultural act" – an act that creates and carries philosophical and historical meaning and aesthetic and moral significance – "rather than a means to an end."²³ Barron introduces the walk as a site of ongoing struggle between prescriptive versus improvisational movement and universal ideals versus personal histories, thereby positioning walking as a mode of movement

²³ Solnit, 14. Both Solnit and Amato talk at length about the difference between walking as a conscious (and often subversive) cultural act as opposed to a practice meant simply to deliver one from point A to point B. According to the simplified version of their story, as walking was overtaken by alternative – and always faster – forms of movement (the coach, the train, and eventually the car), the practice of walking morphed from a quotidian to an intentional and deeply symbolic act. This shift in the meaning of walking from everyday obligation to extraordinary choice was both shaped and reinforced by its representation in literature. As we'll see, walking became an ambulatory alternative that held both reactionary and revolutionary cultural and social implications, shaping both public policy and the social imaginary of place, national identity, moral virtue, health, and the literary arts. For more on the historical shift from compulsory to elective walking, see Part IV of Solnit's *Wanderlust*, the Introduction to Amato's *On Foot*, and Chapter I, "The Results of Destination," of Wallace's *Walking, Literature, and English Culture*.

and creative thinking capable of disrupting familiar forms of seeing and knowing both self and world. Barron's nineteenth-century walk also serves as an uncanny portal through which to explore the motivations, influences, and practices of someone like Mandel, whose contemporary pursuit of (the ghost of) Keats similarly renders walking as an expansive art "invested with wildly different cultural meanings" and in need of embodied exploration and literary representation.²⁴ In restless counterpoint, Barron's and Mandel's walking narratives haunt *each other*, thereby asking readers to brave the indeterminacy of spectral connection to consider walking as a "subversive detour" through place, time, and text.²⁵

Another Place to Begin

Although wandering is not encouraged in a dissertation, walking – as a conscious cultural act – is resolutely improvisational, leaving room for unpredictable meandering, multiple routes of return, and risky trespass. This dissertation, as an exploration of contemporary narratives of walking, takes these roaming qualities of a walk seriously, and understands them as an aesthetic and ethical imperative as well as a formal guide. Like the embodied experiences walking narratives aim to recall and investigate, the recounted walk – or the walk as it's represented in literary writing – encourages "digression and association," a style Rebecca Solnit contrasts with

²⁴ Solnit, 3.

²⁵ Solnit, 12.

alternative, “stricter” modes of discourse governed by rigid logic (analytic philosophy), chronological progression (biography), or cause and effect (history).²⁶ Because walking narratives allow space for rerouting as a way of rethinking one’s point of orientation, perspective, and purpose, the next step is to double back to consider another way to begin.

*

In his 1967 address to the International Poetry Forum, poet A. R. Ammons sets out to explore the essence of poetry by suggesting that “a poem is a walk.”²⁷ Balking at the task of delivering a lecture meant to answer “where a poem comes from, what it is, or what it is for,” Ammons resorts to metaphor, positing the walk as a “reasonably secure” analogue for a poem.²⁸ Although he claims not to be interested in walking “as such,” he argues that if we want to “see the poem,” we actually need to “look” at something else.²⁹ Calling this method of inquiry “clarification or intensification by distraction,” Ammons claims that by investigating the structure, patterns, and motivations of a walk, the “mystery,” “plentitude” and “contradiction” of poetry might become clearer.³⁰ Put another way, Ammons resolves to approach his subject by taking an alternative route – one that uses the descriptive and explanatory powers of metaphor

²⁶ Solnit, 21.

²⁷ Ammons, A. R. “A Poem is a Walk,” *Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues*, Ed. Zophia Burr (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 12.

²⁸ Ammons, 16.

²⁹ Ammons, 16.

³⁰ Ammons, 16, 20.

to track his subject in search of elucidative correspondence and likeness. Using the walk as both critical method and interpretive guide, Ammons also employs walking's digressive and improvisational tactics in order to seek his everyday-yet-evasive subject. To Ammons, a poem is not simply a walk; a poem is a form of writing that must be approached on foot.³¹

I bring up Ammons' speech here, partly because I wish to echo his circuitous method of critical approach (a method that I will eventually link to the elliptical narrative style of Sebald) but also because, despite Ammons' professed (though perhaps disingenuous) lack of interest in the actual practice of walking, his exploration of the component parts of a walk – where a walk comes from, what it is, and what it's for – helps us navigate our way towards the aesthetic history of walking by illuminating the creative connections between the interlinked phenomena of walking, thinking, and poetic writing. Ammons' work is also useful in that, despite his attempts to approach the definitional essences of both walking and poetry, he readily admits that his metaphorical mode of inquiry is not meant to suture strict definitions to inexhaustible terms. Just as Solnit links walking to digression and association, Ammons argues that

³¹ For another example of the walk as a metaphor for critical method, see Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Originally delivered as the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, Eco's text uses the walk as a formal guide to lead readers through the inner-workings of nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction. Citing Jorge Luis Borges' metaphor of the "wood" as a "garden with forking paths," Eco begins his critical exploration of fiction by "entering the woods" and reflecting on his desire that readers find their "own path" through fiction with an awareness of both their route and their ability "make choices all the time" (6). In Eco's formulation, mindful readers are imagined as sensitive and inspired walkers who are encouraged to follow Eco's footsteps as he moves through the narrative trails of literary texts.

“definition, rationality, and structure” are simply particular “ways of seeing” that “become prisons when they blank out other ways of seeing.”³² Walking, then, as interpretive guide, method of critical exploration, and uncanny metaphorical double opens rather than closes his investigation into poetic writing, leaving room for endless questioning and reinterpretation rather than advocating an interpretive ethic of unyielding clarity or definitive conclusion.³³

Like Solnit, who explores how the walk creates an “odd consonance between internal and external passage,” Ammons begins his investigation by proffering the walk (and its written representation) as the “externalization of an interior seeking,” noting how the walk, often “magnified as the journey” represents an oft-employed structural guide for poetry.³⁴ In philosophical terms, Ammons’ analogy between the internal and external links the shared practices of walking and poetry to phenomenology, which foregrounds perception, sensation and embodied experience as key components of subjectivity and expressive engagement with both world and word. Following Ammons, literary critic Roger Gilbert argues that the conjunction of the internal and external represents the “central aim” of the walk, both as embodied experience and textual

³² Ammons, 15.

³³ Ammons clearly articulates his investment in an ethics of interpretation that values openness over closure and conclusion when he states, “My predisposition...is to prefer confusion to oversimplified clarity, meaninglessness to neat, precise meaning, uselessness to overdirected usefulness...If we remain openminded we will soon find for an easy clarity an equal and opposite, so that the sum of our clarities should return us where we belong, to confusion and, hopefully, to more complicated and better assessments” (15).

³⁴ Ammons, 16.

poetics.³⁵ According to Gilbert, who reads Ammons' metaphor as fundamental to contemporary poetic representation and practice, the walk works to "erase the difference between text and experience" in order "to assert and sustain an absolute coincidence of language and bodily sensation."³⁶ Defining the poetic walk as "a brief excursion directed toward no practical goal but undertaken purely for the pleasures of movement, reflection, and aesthetic perception," Gilbert explores the phenomenology of both the walk and the poem as a "radical coalescence of...form and experiential matter."³⁷

Tellingly, given Ammons' implicit reference to phenomenology and Gilbert's complementary assessment of the poetic merging of text and experience through the practice of walking, Ammons' citations of specific walking poems are invariably connected to and directed by the lyrical, first-person "I," suggesting a common heritage between literary walking – as a contemplative and embodied form of immersion in the world – and certain strains of poetic writing as a means through which to explore subjectivity and the ongoing, co-constitutive encounters between interior self and external landscape.³⁸ Importantly, however, though Ammons' characterization of a walk

³⁵ Gilbert, Robert. *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 4.

³⁶ Gilbert, 4.

³⁷ Gilbert, 3-4.

³⁸ Here, Ammons' poets of choice are William Wordsworth ("I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud") and Robert Frost ("The Wood-Pile" and "Away!"). Gilbert cites Ammons' own "Corson's Inlet" as "a spectacular illustration of how the very shape of the poem may be molded to follow the fluid contours of the walk" (4).

implicitly gestures toward lyric subjectivity and Romantic philosophical tropes, he is careful to also characterize the walk (and thereby poetry, as a whole) as uniquely capable of incorporating “contradictions, inconsistencies, explanations and counter-explanations” without exhausting its potential as a mode of critical encounter and expressive engagement with the self and world.³⁹ To both Ammons and Gilbert, the poetics of the walk are characterized by “continual motion,” which, rather than following an orderly interior logic or seeking resolution or synthesis, “must remain plastic and responsive, always ready to shift direction as the moment may prompt.”⁴⁰ Both phenomenologically and poetically speaking, then, the walk is capable of holding multiple geographies and perspectives in creative tension as well as bearing the traces of both internal and external landscapes that bridge the boundaries between self and world and self and other.

Ammons’ speech is also theoretically helpful in its explication of the “resemblances” between his two linked subjects and the ways in which the form of a walk is ultimately (re)embodied formally in a poem. To Ammons, a walk resembles poetic writing in four ways: “First,” he writes, “each makes use of the whole body.”⁴¹ Referencing the importance of physiology – or various body parts and systems – to the process of walking, Ammons explains that walks are “not simply a mental activity” but

³⁹ Ammons, 15-16.

⁴⁰ Gilbert, 8.

⁴¹ Ammons, 16.

fundamentally embodied pursuits, created and complemented by “rhythm,” “feeling,” “sound,” and both “conscious and subconscious mental activity.”⁴² This “total involvement” of the body in the realization and experience of the walk is echoed in the “physiology of the poem,” or the way in which pace, path, and purpose materialize in writing, as well as in the terms through which that writing is critically considered and interpreted.⁴³

Gilbert and Solnit make Ammons’ point more concrete by mentioning the historical importance of the walk to the process of poetic composition, itself. Citing John Milton, William Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens as his representative examples, Gilbert writes that “many poets...have preferred to compose while walking, finding in the rhythm of their bodies a kind of metronome for the rhythm of their poems.”⁴⁴ Likewise, Solnit spends an entire chapter of her history of walking exploring the relationship between the rhythm of Wordsworth’s poetry and the cadence of his ceaselessly moving legs and feet, noting that Wordsworth’s “steps seem to have beat out a steady rhythm” for his poems, “like the metronome of a composer.”⁴⁵ Quoting Seamus

⁴² Ammons, 16. According to Rebecca Solnit, walking is “the intentional act closest to the unwilling rhythms of the body, to breath and the beat of the heart” (5).

⁴³ Ammons states, “The pace at which a poet walks (and thinks), his natural breath-length, the line he pursues, whether forthright and straight or weaving and meditative, his whole “air,” whether of aimlessness or purpose – all these things and many more figure into the “physiology” of the poem he writes” (16). Also, although he doesn’t mention analytical or interpretive terms by name, he is certainly thinking of poetic feet as part of the metrical ‘physiology’ of a poem.

⁴⁴ Gilbert, 3.

⁴⁵ Solnit, 114. Citing Wordsworth as “an unavoidable personage in any history of walking” and quoting Christopher Morley who wrote that Wordsworth was “one of the first to use his legs in the service of

Heaney, Solnit understands Wordsworth as a crucial figure in the quest to create a “physiological relation” between the composing poet and the “music” of his poem, a link that binds the habitual movement of the body to the “dreamy rhythm” of thinking and writing, itself.⁴⁶

The second resemblance Ammons explores concerns the metaphysics of a walk in a manner that recalls Nicholson’s insistence on the impossibility of walking’s true origins, beginnings, or ‘first steps.’ According to Ammons, “every walk is unreproducible...[e]ven if you walk exactly the same route each time.”⁴⁷ For Ammons, the ephemerality of a walk’s “anticipations, moods, fears, [and] thoughts,” is important in that it makes each new walk “necessarily an act of discovery” or “a chance taken...that may lead to fulfillment or disaster.”⁴⁸ This ongoing exposure to metaphysical uncertainty and epistemological risk invests the walk with a heightened perceptual, sensual, and reflective energy that challenges any preference for aesthetic or

philosophy,” Frederic Gros tells a similar story about the link between Wordsworth’s body, mind, and pen. Gros writes, “[Wordsworth] walked up and down, murmuring, and used rhythmic body movements to help find the right lines,” and states that “his poetry is infused with a walking rhythm, steady, monotonous, unshowy.” Gros, Frederic. *A Philosophy of Walking*. Trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 2014), 209-10.

⁴⁶ Solnit, 114. Solnit extends Ammons’ argument, here, by proffering the walking poem as an aesthetic object capable of preserving the physiology and tempo of the poet’s steps. Citing Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” as a specific example, Solnit argues that the poet’s physiological memory can be reactivated through contemporary performance. To Solnit, speaking the poem “revives the strong rhythms of [Wordsworth’s] walks two hundred years ago” (114). Here, we have another fascinating formulation of haunting, bodily intimacy between poet-walker and reader-walker. Through the spoken words of the poem, the reader’s body momentarily holds and recasts the rhythms of the poet’s legs, temporarily bringing the poem and the poet-walker back to life.

⁴⁷ Ammons, 17.

⁴⁸ Ammons, 17.

psychic stability. Additionally, if no walk is ever identical even if routed along the same path, then experiences of similitude or familiarity might easily be felt as unsettling rather than comfortable or psychologically reassuring. This ambivalence between the familiar and unfamiliar suggests Ammons' "unreproducible" walk might be philosophically and phenomenologically tied to the Freudian uncanny, emotionally manifest in strange instants of resemblance or recognition. In Ammons' conceptualization, the walk, which he simultaneously understands as pure form ("every walk is...") and endlessly particularized content ("...unreproducible"), becomes the perfect vehicle for the uncanny, combining a mode of moving through the world that is persistently familiar but always defamiliarizing. Although Ammons does not link walking directly to the uncanny or the uncanny directly to creative insight, both his objects of critical analysis and the framework through which he explores them rely on unsettling resemblances and interpretive risk-taking as paths towards illumination and discovery. As Ammons metaphorically describes, regardless of what has been said or learned about a walk, its routes, or its representation, every walk retains its fully-embodied, "unreproducible," "separate existence," a quality that requires each walk to be met with courage in the face of "partial assurance" and risk.⁴⁹

Finally, the third and fourth resemblances between a poem and walk describe their similarly recursive paths and their distinctive, embodied forms of motion. Because

⁴⁹ Ammons, 17.

our contemporary walking texts will grapple with Ammon's third point of likeness – that a walk “turns one or more times, and eventually *returns*” – it is important to consider what Ammons means when he proffers the return as an essential part of the form and aesthetics of a walk.⁵⁰ To Ammons, the return, whether implied or explicitly recounted, doesn't necessarily signal resolution or an arrival at restful stasis; nor does the return always suggest a coming home or a re-centering of an unsettled self. Instead, the return represents the realization of the full shape of the walk. “With the first step, the number of shapes the walk might take is infinite,” he states, and even as the walk begins to define itself, “freedom remains total with each step: any tempting side road can be turned into on impulse, or any wild patch of woods can be explored.”⁵¹ Despite this seemingly unlimited freedom, however, to Ammons, the ultimate aim of the walk is not only to explore the possibilities of infinite pathways but to recognize how these possibilities are realized in patterns governed by transformative and uncanny logics of intuition, association, and interconnection. The walk's return is not simply a process of coming back to a point of origin but a beginning point for recognition of what the walker may have been “searching” for or trying to “actualize” – consciously or not – all along.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ammons, 17 (emphasis his).

⁵¹ Ammons, 17.

⁵² Ammons, 18.

Though Ammons goes on to contest the notion that walks always come to such coherent or recognizably meaningful conclusions – indeed, he ultimately suggests that walks are both “useless” and “meaningless” – his investigation of the walk pushes readers to consider the manifold ways in which walking – as embodied practice, illuminating metaphor, and critical method – comes to shape our understanding of the relationship between moving, thinking, and writing.⁵³ In Ammons’ conclusion that a walk “involves the whole person,” is “unreproducible,” and “turns and returns,” we can begin to see how walking becomes capable of holding “wildly different meanings” and incorporating “contradictions, inconsistencies, explanations and counter-explanations.”⁵⁴ Activated as an interpretive concept and innovative practice and infused with both risk and reward, walking works to structure and stage encounters that bridge internal and external worlds and challenge the way we see, understand, compose, and critically comment on a multiplicity of poetic texts.

A Short Route Through the Literature of Walking

As we heard from Barron and Mandel, the movement of the feet enables and inspires the movement of the mind in ways that make self and world unfamiliar, sparking creative association, uncanny connection, and surprising moments of intense insight and psychic dissolution. And, as we’ve now learned from Ammons’ apt

⁵³ Ammons, 19.

⁵⁴ Ammons, 18.

metaphor, the poetics of walking works to communicate and embody the subtleties of this process of ambulatory defamiliarization by exploring how interior and exterior are co-constitutive, investigating the (un-)reproducibility of familiar routes, creating space for risky trespass and return, and incorporating contradictions that thwart the relentless quest for conclusive definition or perfect knowledge. The walk, routed through Barron, Mandel, and Ammons, is an embodied cultural practice capable of holding a dense cache of universal and particular meanings that have, over time, subtly revolutionized how we understand personal identity, place, and perception.

Before we get into the particulars of how our contemporary walking texts shift the cultural meanings of walking and adapt the form to their own poetic and philosophical interests, it's important to look back at how the history of literary walking has been critically and geographically mapped. Although Solnit already noted that any history of walking will always be "partial" and "idiosyncratic" – representative only in the particularity of its routes through genre, place, and time – and though Amato similarly claims that any "critical narrative of walking must ultimately be more evocative than comprehensive," a search for the literary 'origins' of the relationship between walking and writing leads us through a canon of walking in western literature that stretches all the way back to the homeward-bound epic.⁵⁵ Linking the walk to the

⁵⁵ Amato, 16. Roger Gilbert looks even further backward for the origins of literary walking, arguing that the "earliest literary walk" actually occurs "quite literally in the beginning" with Yahweh's walk through the

foundational literary structures of the journey or quest, walking in the epic served as a means to link geographic sites and heroic deeds – places and histories – but also as a mode of movement through otherworldly spaces. The katabasis, for example, or the epic hero's descent into the underworld, was often undertaken on foot, highlighting the potential of the walk to be a form of literal movement into (and out of) liminal spaces and symbolic movement through sites of spectral transit.⁵⁶

Early modern writers also explored the relationship between the walk, the quest, and liminal space in order to establish narrative modes through which they could consider ritualized forms of spiritual awakening and personal and social transformation. To cite perhaps the most obvious example, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the great seventeenth-century Christian allegory of pilgrimage to the "Celestial City," represented walking as the burdened means by which "everyman" could make his way from earth to his spiritual, heavenly home. Importantly, this narrative of pilgrimage was represented as a dream sequence, so its mode of movement wove back and forth over the terrain of real, imaginary, and symbolic worlds, melding the prosaic details of a unique journey on foot – chance encounters, diversions, roadblocks – with the symbolic implications of the walk

Garden of Eden. From the Garden, however, Gilbert too jumps straight to the Homeric epic, arguing that the walk as a "structural principle" "can be traced to the 'wandering' section of *The Odyssey* (Gilbert, 35-6).

⁵⁶ The Greek katabasis is echoed in Dante's *Commedia*, another important example of an early walking poem. Importantly, Dante's work merges epic conventions with those of the spiritual pilgrimage, marking the similarities and differences between the questing form of walking in the epic with the more passive and transformative (and often allegorical) forms of walking in the pilgrimage.

as a universalizing spiritual journey with clearly prescribed conventions and goals.⁵⁷

Although walking helped shape the form of the epic and the literary pilgrimage by structuring the routes characters followed between real and symbolic places, critics argue that it wasn't until the eighteenth century that walking became the subject of sustained philosophical attention. According to Solnit, "Rousseau stands at [the] beginning" of this effort to understand walking as a conscious cultural act meant to stimulate the mind, investigate the landscape of self and world, and structure words on the page.⁵⁸ To Solnit, Rousseau's understanding of walking was fundamentally tied to his philosophy of human nature. "Natural" man – that solitary, rural wanderer, free from the corruptive forces of civilization and society – was also, by nature, the "ideal walker," observant, drawn to the natural world, and free to move through the physical landscape and the terrain of his own mind alone and on foot. Philosophy and literary structure became inextricably linked as Rousseau, casting himself as the ideal walker – "in the world, but apart from it" – became increasingly invested in keeping a "faithful

⁵⁷ Though I only mention pilgrimage as literary form, here, it is important to remember that the pilgrim is "not only a metaphor for the human condition," but also has "concrete, historical existence." As Gros notes, the medieval Christian pilgrim had distinct "juridical status" that was recognized both locally and (generally) abroad and highly ritualized ways of moving through the world. He also had particular motives for undertaking his journey that often had to do with witnessing, penance, intercession, and thanksgiving (110-114).

⁵⁸ Solnit, 17. Amato echoes Solnit's argument by dubbing Rousseau the "Father of Romantic Walking" and arguing that "[n]o one better delivers us to the origins and heart of romantic walking" than this "father of romantic pedestrianism in Europe and North America" (108.) Amato's discussion of Rousseau's influence also links Rousseau to Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt in order to argue that eighteenth-century forms of travel, adventure, and natural history also contributed to the social and cultural influence of Romanticism and the newly entrenched centrality of walking in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular consciousness.

record” of both his walks and the “reveries that occup[ied] them.”⁵⁹ In Rousseau’s estimation, walking was natural, which rendered it both pure and moral; intimate, which linked it to the local landscape and the landscape of the self; improvisational, which meant it could lead the feet and the mind through any space or subject; and poetic, which suggested the walk worked as a catalyst of reflection and imagination and could lead to creative ideas and lyrical expression. Giving his body, mind, and pen “free rein” to “follow their natural course, unrestricted and unconfined,” Rousseau experimented with the walk as physical ritual, mental catalyst, and literary structure, pioneering a manner of thinking about walking as a mixture of performance, philosophy, and poetics that inspired his contemporaries and remains resonant today (*Reveries*, 35).

Romantic thinkers – notably Wordsworth, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Muir, and Keats, among others – followed in Rousseau’s philosophical and literary footsteps, idealizing and popularizing walking in nature as a “transformative,” “indispensable ‘poetic’ mode” of movement that offered a “sense of communion” with nature and an “elevated state of mind.”⁶⁰ Bolstered by the aesthetics of the sublime as well as shifts in patterns of transportation, urbanization, labor, and leisure, Amato argues that Rousseau-ian Romanticism “outfitted the minds of nineteenth-century

⁵⁹ Solnit, 21; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Trans. by Peter France (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004), 35; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (*Reveries*, Page Number).

⁶⁰ Amato, 103.

Western walkers” with the enduring belief “that going on foot was a true way to experience self, nature, and truth as one.”⁶¹ Walking also became a means by which writers – especially nature poets like Wordsworth – could personalize and localize Rousseau’s idealistic (though ultimately tragic) story of natural man by providing a means by which to transport its subjects to a “simpler and more basic time.”⁶² For the Wordsworthian “pedestrian,” moving on foot served as a “poetic, metaphorical, or even ideological means” to recast pre-industrial relationships to landscape and labor as well as transport the adult psyche back to the intensities of wonder, imagination, and innocence that would become familiarly associated with the intellectual and emotional life of childhood.⁶³ Linking poetry (and high culture) with the pastoral and an investigation of purified versions of self and nature (both of which were framed as antithetical to civilization), Romantic walkers sought routes towards the prelapsarian past, both in footsteps and word, that could reactivate the relationship between the natural world, the thinking mind, and the sensing body.⁶⁴

By the nineteenth century, however, Rousseau’s and Wordsworth’s romantic walker in nature was not the only kind of person using his feet to explore the world. In step with an emerging industrial economy and urban society which pushed romantic

⁶¹ Amato, 103-4.

⁶² Amato, 123.

⁶³ Amato, 123.

⁶⁴ For more on the relationship between Romanticism and the pastoral, especially as it relates to an idealized and nostalgic version of pre-industrial labor relations, see Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

writers insistently towards the countryside and a nostalgic interpretation of rural past, the urban pedestrian also took to his feet, pounding the pavement and refashioning the walk into an investigation of the textures of modern life. Combining extended meditations on the philosophy and politics of urban planning, the affects and intensities of the urban crowd, and the emergence of industrial capitalism and consumer culture, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin identified the nineteenth-century urban walker, or the flâneur, as the quintessential figure of modern life.⁶⁵ Transposing the romantic walker's interest in and attention to the natural landscape onto the urban stroller, Benjamin described the flâneur as a man of leisure who "goes botanizing on the asphalt," taking in the world around him in order to orient himself to the social and material life of the emerging city.⁶⁶ Echoing his nineteenth-century muse Charles Baudelaire, whom Benjamin credits with first describing the flâneur as a particular type

⁶⁵ Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*. Trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Verso, 1997), 35. Benjamin's contribution to critics' understanding of the culture and history of urban walking cannot be overstated as most histories and anthologies of walking devote entire sections to his thoughts on the history of modernity, urban geography, and the figure of the flâneur. See, for example, Solnit, Chapter 12, "Paris, or Botanizing the Asphalt;" Gros, Chapter 21, "The Urban Flâneur;" and Amato, Chapter 6, "City Walking."

⁶⁶ Benjamin, 35-6. In using the term "botanizing," Benjamin was also pointing to a particular type of investigative gaze that harkened back to those walkers and writers who were engaged in projects of natural history – identifying, cataloguing, and naming the kinds of plants they found on their proto-scientific walking pursuits. This investigative gaze becomes important for Benjamin as he goes on to explain that the city offered walker-writers a new kind of place to describe and catalogue, a fact that yielded a new "panorama literature" – the *physiologue* – that included "sketches" of "types" of city persons and places. Benjamin explains, "From the itinerant street vendor of the boulevards to the dandy in the foyer of the opera house, there was not a figure of Paris life that was not sketched," and "after the types had been covered, the physiology of the city had its turn." Benjamin, 35-6. The flâneur, then, becomes both observer and observed – a walker and writer of modern life – and also a figure to be identified, sketched, and marveled at by others.

of urban walker, Benjamin argues that the city street represents a “dwelling” for the flâneur, a place where he can be, as Baudelaire imagined, “in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and infinite.”⁶⁷ Fascinated by the flâneur as a figure connected to a late-nineteenth-century moment when select European cities (but especially Baudelaire’s Paris) were “becoming so large and complex that [they were] for the first time strange to [their] inhabitants,” Benjamin echoed Baudelaire’s fascination with the figure of the flâneur as a man who reveled at being both away from home and at home anywhere, including amongst the anonymous city crowd.⁶⁸ Benjamin therefore associated the flâneur with a sensitivity of observation and fundamental alienation that rendered the flâneur’s relationship to self, society, and modernity intensely ambiguous. According to Amato, the flâneur’s “reflective pedestrianism, both emotive and critical, resonated ambiguity,” making the flâneur a difficult figure to pin down and define. However, this ultimately became part of the flâneur’s figurative appeal: because he was never “anchored in a place” nor embedded within a clearly defined “social alliance,” Amato claims “[the flâneur] possessed an ambivalence that formed a distinct optics of perception” – an observant but aloof gaze that became the source of new forms of

⁶⁷ Benjamin, 37; Solnit, 199. Benjamin’s description of the flâneur here anticipates both phenomenological (especially Heideggerian) and post-phenomenological (especially Deleuzian) philosophies of dwelling and affect that have become crucial to current critical conversations regarding the practice and representation of walking in both literary studies and cultural geography.

⁶⁸ Solnit, 199.

dwelling in, detecting, and describing the scenes and meanings of the city and modern life.⁶⁹

By the early twentieth century, the flâneur, whom Solnit argues never existed except “as a type, an ideal, and a character in literature,” was also being joined by urban walkers who similarly took to the city streets to enjoy both the solitude and social life of the crowd.⁷⁰ Virginia Woolf, for example, argued that walking represented a means through which she could shed the trappings of house and home and extend herself into both the visual contours of the city and the multitudinous selves of others around her. In her famous 1930 essay on walking, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” Woolf writes that when one steps out on a walk, she excretes the “shell-like covering” of home and self in order to become “an enormous eye,” “gliding smoothly” across the surfaces of the streetscape and plunging into the “current” of imagination and reverie.⁷¹ Eager to cast off the inflexible burdens of any singular identity, Woolf’s urban walker revels in

⁶⁹ Amato, 174-5. For Benjamin “detecting meaning,” and especially hidden meaning, in the city’s busy streets actually represented an important permutation of the flâneur’s distinctive observational art, bringing life to another kind of urban walker: the detective. (Benjamin, 43). Benjamin’s generic touchstone is Edgar Allen Poe. Solnit and Amato, however, turn to Charles Dickens as their representative example. Often remembered as an insomniac and avid nightwalker, Charles Dickens’ novels are full of detectives and inspectors who must decode and untangle the intricacies of city life through keen observation enabled by obsessive urban walking. Dickens also described his own solitary (and often fanatical) walking practices in his nonfiction, experimenting with many different walking types – the pedestrian, the tramp, the detective, the athlete, and the pilgrim – to explain his relationship with both walking and place (Solnit, 184-5). According to Amato, Dickens’ walking and writing also anticipated and helped catalyze an era of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century social reform that began at street level (177).

⁷⁰ Solnit, 200.

⁷¹ Woolf, Virginia. “Street Haunting: A London Adventure.” *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*, www.ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/. Accessed 8 Jan 2018.

2018.<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91d/chapter5.html>.

metaphors of nature and landscape – particularly streams and forests – to explore the ways in which the walk renders “fluid” the “straight lines of personality” and creates temporary “footpaths that lead...into the heart of the forest where live...our fellow men.” By walking, Woolf seeks a Rousseau-ian enlarging of the self and casts her metaphorical all-seeing eye over (and into) those around her in the hope that she might find momentary points of “anchorage” in the lives and stories of other people and places.⁷² In this way, she describes, one can “give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.” To Solnit, Woolf’s walks serve as a means by which her imagination can roam even further than her feet, allowing reverie and associative connection to dictate the digressive and recursive path of both steps and thoughts.⁷³ Woolf’s walks also become the starting point for literary experimentation, as both her fictional and nonfictional walks work to subvert neat, objective representations of temporal, spatial, social, and personal life.

The modernist walker (who was importantly made epic in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*) contemplated the movement of the feet in order to investigate the structures and

⁷² Through walking, Rousseau believed he could “double the space of [his] existence” – an apt Romantic metaphor for Woolf’s walking pursuits more than a century later (*Reveries*, 35). Importantly, Woolf’s modernism did not completely dispense with many of the more Romantic notions of walking as a means by which to make the mind, body, and world unite or cohere. While literary modernism is often understood as a clean break from Romanticism, walking texts can also be read as an important source of thematic and formal continuity between literary eras. See also, *Walking and the Aesthetics of Modernity: Pedestrian Mobility in Literature and the Arts*. Eds. Klaus Benesch and Francois Specq (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁷³ Solnit, 187.

assemblages of the self, and the (literary) walks that so enamored writers like Woolf often prompted a movement inward towards representations of a fluid and mobile interiority that was inspired by but often privileged over representations of the external landscape. The details of the modern urban landscape were important, however, as the availability of public space, improvements in sidewalks and sewers, and emphasis on improving the circulatory routes of pedestrian commerce increasingly made cities of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries easily navigable on foot. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, Solnit argues, the Western – and particularly American – psyche was becoming increasingly privatized and “suburbanized,” mirroring the spatial structuring of highways, parking lots, and fences that she believes “transformed” man’s “perception of the relationship between bodies and spaces.”⁷⁴

Building on a familiar Marxist social and cultural critique of post-modernity, Solnit continues, post-WWII developments in transportation, (post-)industrial capitalism, and information technology affected a revolution in the way contemporary humans perceive, understand, and use both time and space.⁷⁵ “Bodies,” she observes,

⁷⁴ Solnit, 256.

⁷⁵ Theorists of postmodernity typically argue that the postmodern experience is at least partly defined by the supplanting of the category of time with that of space. For example, Fredric Jameson argues that the postmodern is a cultural moment in which history has been flattened in favor of endless surfaces, yielding forms of culture expression that exist in an echo chamber of the perpetual present. The relationship to Solnit, here, exists in her preoccupation with the postmodern as a moment obsessed with flat, featureless space (which includes the space of television and internet screens) and compressed perceptions of time. She understands this as a process of disembodiment – of “severing human perception, expectation, and action from the organic world in which our bodies exist” (257). For Jameson’s definition and critique of the postmodern, see Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke

“are perceived as too slow, frail, and unreliable for our expectations and desires,” a notion that, for her, goes hand in hand with the world not being any longer “on the scale of our bodies” and feet. Echoing the preoccupation of post-modern philosophy and cultural criticism with symbols and simulations, Solnit characterizes the second half of the twentieth century as an era defined by newly dominant modes of technological and aesthetic mediation between body, mind, and world. To Solnit, the television, telephone, home computer, and Internet “complete the privatization of everyday life,” accommodating a “retreat” from public space, social relationships, and historical memory that make it increasingly unnecessary (or even impossible) to go “out into the world” at all.⁷⁶ Screens and the ubiquity of endlessly reproducible images, which take the place of actual geographic sites in the physical world, hasten the process of disembodiment that attends the loss of shared public space, turning walking into a form of individual protest against social, cultural, and technological developments that Solnit believes disciplines bodies and minds to be deferential and still.⁷⁷

University Press, 1992). See also Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1990).

⁷⁶ Solnit, 253.

⁷⁷ Through this claim, Solnit gestures towards theorists of space (especially Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault), suggesting that power gets embedded in different forms of spatial construction, including suburban/urban design and civil engineering, in order to govern forms of spatial practice that make bodies and minds more easily (self-)controlled. Ultimately, Solnit is interested in the physical ways this type of power becomes manifest but also in the ways walking challenges the coherence and power of spaces that have been engineered to control/discipline bodies through particular forms of spatial and social logic. See

Here, the post-modern walker becomes an ironic figure based in an oddly paradoxical historical and cultural moment characterized by seemingly limitless mobility amidst a blind – and blinding – attachment to stationary screens and self-reproducing loops of sameness. In one form then, the post-modern walker simply becomes the “tourist,” another figure often seen as a quintessential metaphor for (post-) modern man.⁷⁸ Seeking authenticity and self-discovery in places thought to be most different from home, tourists, as they are commonly caricatured, aspire towards cosmopolitan ideals of global citizenship but often settle for staged encounters with new geographies, histories, and cultures that will simply yield the best evidence of their having done something – anything – at all. Tourists’ walking – and the photographs taken on their walks – cement his status as having been part of a spiritually-meaningful, culturally-broadening pursuit, however obviously that pursuit has been pre-packaged, culturally sanitized, or directed by and towards the aims of global consumer culture.

Although this is a decidedly unfair characterization, I mention the dreaded figure of the tourist – so often represented as a model for ridicule and ire – because that

also Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), and Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).
⁷⁸ The concept of the “tourist” was famously developed by social scientist Dean MacCannell in *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. MacCannell’s work is centered around unpacking the relationship between new forms of middle class tourism and leisure time and the quintessentially ‘modern’ quest for meaning and authenticity. MacCannell, Dean, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

figure becomes a fundamental point of contact for contemporary walker-writers who seek to understand the tourist, with all its obvious flaws, as a vital figure in an ongoing conversation about how we move through, think about, and represent our relationships with landscape, literature, and self. Using the tourist as a foil, contemporary walkers grapple with the alleged postmodern, or touristic, flattening of space and time and the advancing sameness of social and cultural life in order to consider reinvigorated ways of engaging with self and world that can begin on the ground, with something as simple as footsteps. By experimenting with perspective, scale, and route, and by recasting tourists and their walks (and their photographs) as more than just objects of parody, contemporary walkers seek to radicalize the possibilities of the walking tour in an era where bodies and movement outside the enclosed spaces of buildings, homes, and vehicles are often met with suspicion and distrust. The contemporary walker, then, considers how tourists might walk the routes of pilgrims or organize their thoughts on landscape like the Romantic poets or relate to the passing crowd like flâneurs in order to consider their movement and the structures of their thoughts as sites of an ongoing, contested and communicative history of walking – not a straight line of footsteps to the present, but a constellation of linked literal and literary practices that converse and interact, advance and retreat, and, ultimately, endure.

*

In this speed walk through the canon of walking literature, *walking* – as a

particular mode of moving within and engaging with both world and word – takes a backseat to the *walker*, the representative figure behind the practice, who becomes a foundational literary archetype. Wandering through the vast world-historical spaces of the epic, the religious dreamscapes of the early modern, the sublime geographies of the romantic, the urban cityscapes of the modern, and the dystopian simulations of the postmodern, the walker as archetype represents a kind of empty receptacle infused with the spirit of the age and embodied through the characteristic aesthetic particularities of its literary-historical period. The epic hero, the religious pilgrim, the romantic poet, the urban flâneur, and the contemporary tourist all walk, but the particularities of their walking are only read as important within the larger context of their representative status within discretely-formulated literary-historical periods.

Although this is an over-simplified version of this archetypical reading, its attempts to locate and identify walkers as they (re)emerge and endure throughout literary time privileges a reading of universal character type that makes the presence of the walker in literary writing a foregone conclusion – a banal inevitability – rather than the consequence of a sustained effort by writers to grapple with questions about the human body, consciousness, memory, landscape, and community through the grounded particularities of different types of walking practices. Although I have spent a significant amount of time working through some of the basic critical characteristics of walking and walking texts, the particularities of individual walking journeys complicate the

simplicities of interpretation offered by reified generic categories and universal archetypes. It is only when we consider the particularities of the *purpose* and *pace* of the walker's movement, the *place* in which he walks, the *paths* he takes, the way he *perceives* the world around him, the way walking shapes his *personal identity*, and how the walk and the text that memorializes it create and shape each other that we can understand how category, type, and character interact with (rather than define) the contours of walking texts. The walker as archetype does not necessarily serve as the literal or literary beginning for new walking encounters and texts but haunts literary narratives by signaling to a larger network of walkers occupied in similar projects of encountering and representing the world at ground level.

One way to consider the critical interplay between the typical and the particular of walking texts might be through simple example: a religious pilgrimage, for instance, organized around a holy site, embarked upon for reasons of spiritual significance, and governed by rituals that shape (and often discipline) the activity of both the body and mind, yields a walk of profoundly different geographic shape, psychological texture, and personal significance – and a walker governed by different desires and motivations – from the flâneur's urban stroll, undertaken in order to intently but disinterestedly observe and catalogue the sights and sounds of the city and the restless pursuits of the urban crowd. However, both walkers consider how their bodies are embedded within and interact with physical space; both walkers reflect on how their thoughts and feelings

are shaped by natural and built landscapes; both walkers wonder how movement governs their interaction with the people, objects, and landscapes around them; both walkers consider how walking activates unique pathways of knowing, remembering, and relating to present and historical time; and, perhaps most importantly, both walkers contemplate how to poetically textualize walking and thinking through a process of written reflection that has served to shape the contours of literary movement(s).

Here the walker is not simply an a-priori archetypical figure that emerges to embody the walking practices representative of a specific historical moment; instead, the walker, motivated by enduring questions about the mind and body, pursues particular, historically-contingent practices of walking that are shaped by different purposes, paces, places, paths, and perspectives. That this walking figure reemerges again and again in literature has less to do with his archetypicality than it has to do with the pedestrian scale of his approach to questions of the human body and mind and the ways in which his walking reflections echo, transform, and respond to the particularities and textualities of historical and literary time. According to Amato, “walking constitutes a continuous and changing dialogue between foot and earth, humanity and the world.”⁷⁹ The critic’s job, then, is not only to “classify types of walking and distinguish specific periods of walking,” but also to unearth and respond to “this rich conversation” by

⁷⁹ Amato, 16.

contemplating how “humanity’s altered relationship to its own body...space, community, society, and the world” has been recorded.⁸⁰

Obscuring the infinite particularities and intentional purposes of their walking, the walker as archetype overlooks how the deeply contested terms through which walking and its attendant practices of being in the world – moving, seeing, experiencing, interacting, desiring, and reflecting – have been represented and theorized over time. As Solnit notes, walking “trespasses through everybody else’s field,” shaping the terms through which scholars conceptualize disciplines as diverse as “anatomy, anthropology, architecture, gardening, geography, political and cultural history, literature, sexuality, [and] religious studies,” but refusing to remain confined within anyone’s carefully plotted (and fenced) field of expertise.⁸¹ Here, Solnit uses a walking metaphor to explain a generic achievement of walking texts: walking texts intentionally trespass into unfamiliar physical and conceptual territory, detouring onto unfamiliar ground in order to resist the literal and metaphorical enclosures that delimit our openness to different kinds of encounters with self, world, and word. Trespassing on the geographic, philosophic, and literary topographies of their contemporaries, walking texts create a dynamic social world of walkers that communicates through uncanny networks of literary and historical reference rather than dutifully remains enclosed within the

⁸⁰ Amato, 16.

⁸¹ Solnit, 4.

predetermined borders of discretely plotted historical periods or literary movements. Insistently returning to follow the literal footsteps and the philosophical pathways of their walking contemporaries, literary walkers explore the relationship between the universal and the particular (the archetypal and the divergent) by returning, again and again, to the particularities and varied purposes of walking as a way of encountering, experiencing, and knowing the world.

Contemporary Walkers and Walking Studies

By considering the figure of the walker as he wanders throughout literary time, the last section focused on how contrasting representations of walking became linked to a larger history of literary movements in the west. In this literary-historical tradition of walking studies, walker-writers are tied to specific forms of cultural and aesthetic expression routed through familiar periodizing structures and aesthetic terms such as the Romantic, the pastoral, or the post-modern. However, critics interested in the aesthetics and representation of walking have also produced alternative taxonomies of walking intended to explore how writers from different historical periods adopt and revise specific “types” of literary walking in order to link familiar forms of representation across literary space and time. For example, in *The Wild Places*, the second book of writer Robert MacFarlane’s “loose trilogy” on the relationship among walking, landscape, and literature, MacFarlane suggests that the “category of walker has many subdivisions,” including “marathon men,” “flâneurs,” “psychogeographers,”

“adventurers,” and “wander-wonderers.”⁸² In each of these categories, MacFarlane places particular writers and artists he describes as working in distinct walking traditions rather than discrete literary-historical periods. In this way, MacFarlane is able to contest common assumptions about literary and historical time by linking romantics with modernists, nature writers with urban flâneurs, and pre-modern adventurers with post-modern hikers, all of whom adopt peripatetic lifestyles to inspire creative ways of moving, thinking, and writing.

Gilbert offers another classificatory structure in his study of the literature of walking by focusing on how different types of poetic walks can be arranged through thinking about the walk as metaphor. By attending to the ways in which walking poets explore different forms of temporality, modes of perception, methods of description, and types of experience, Gilbert offers both the walk and the walking poem as ongoing experiments with the metaphysics of aesthetic form. First acknowledging the fundamental difference between a walk, which he describes as a transient experience situated in un-reproducible time, and a poem, which he describes as a permanent, reproducible textual artifact, Gilbert seeks to consider how the walk poem – situated between the ephemeral and the eternal – both creates and reflects the aesthetic structures of a vast array of art forms.⁸³ Echoing Ammons’ metaphorical proposition that a poem is

⁸² Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places* (New York: Penguin Book Ltd, 2007), 79-80.

⁸³ Gilbert, 32.

a walk, Gilbert organizes his exploration of walking poetry through detailed explanations of what a walk can be or how a walk can act for different poets. To that end, Gilbert arranges the chapters of his *Walks in the World* first by poet, then by the walk's metaphorical double, beginning with "Robert Frost: The Walk as Parable" and ending with "A. R. Ammons and John Ashberry: The Walk as Thinking." Along the way, he also offers the walk as "occasion," "music," "revelation," and "sample," offering each art form, technique, or object as an alternative way of thinking about the possibilities of what a walk can be, do, or represent – structurally, thematically, and personally – to an array of twentieth-century walking poets.

The literary-critical mode is not the only way to think about the critical history of walking, however. According to cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer, over the past decade, walking has come under "increased academic scrutiny" not only as the subject of artistic representation but as a particular kind of "social practice."⁸⁴ Lorimer refers to this emerging field of critical work as "walking studies," arguing that it calls attention to "what might be considered the founding, or constituent, elements of this most basic of human activities...the *walk*, as an event; the *walker*, as a human subject; and, *walking*, as an embodied act."⁸⁵ Located at the intersection of literary and performance studies, anthropology, sociology, and human geography, contemporary walking studies have

⁸⁴ Lorimer, Hayden, "Walking: New Forms and Spaces for Studies of Pedestrianism," *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, Ed. Tim Cresswell and Peter Merriman (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 19.

⁸⁵ Lorimer, 19, emphasis his.

been heavily influenced by the work of theorists such as Michel de Certeau, whose understanding of walking as a “practice of everyday life” pioneered new critical discussions about spatial and social relationships, power relations, place awareness, textuality, and human agency and creativity that begin “down below,” at the level of urban pedestrianism.⁸⁶ Thinking with Certeau, who considered the walker as both reader and producer of the text and texture of the city, scholars and artists have increasingly “used walking as the pivot around which they hinged...observations on the...nature of everyday life,” integrating the theoretical and methodological concerns of an array of disciplines to consider walking as both art form and critical practice.⁸⁷ Encompassing modes of ethnographic fieldwork, artistic performance, historical encounter, and creative writing, the “rise of walking” has therefore emerged amid an ongoing call in the humanities and social sciences to think through “movement, knowing, flow and place” in order to “examine how movement is enacted, felt, perceived, expressed, metered, choreographed, appreciated and desired.”⁸⁸ Over the past decade, this larger set of interests has been formalized around the “new mobilities paradigm” in the social sciences and “mobility studies” in the humanities, yielding work

⁸⁶ Certeau, 93.

⁸⁷ Pink, Sarah, Phil Hubbard, Maggie O’Neil & Alan Radley, “Walking Across Disciplines: From Ethnography to Arts Practice” (*Visual Studies*: 25:1, 2010), 2.

⁸⁸ Pink, 2; Merriman, Peter and Lynn Pierce, “Mobility and the Humanities” (*Mobilities*: Vol 12, Issue 4, 2017), 493.

on the movement and migration of people, goods, capital, and ideas on an incredible array of different scales and routes.

Integrating the critical-interpretive mode of literary studies with the practice-centered theories of human geography and performance studies, the following chapters explore contemporary walking texts by W. G. Sebald, Iain Sinclair, and Teju Cole as a way to engage with current interdisciplinary questions of movement, historical consciousness, personal identity, and place. As fundamentally hybrid texts that play with the literary conventions of the novel, travelogue, essay, and autobiography, this constellation of contemporary walking writers have generated touchstone texts that have not only sparked the (re)emergence of critical interest in the literature of walking but have also worked to rethink the genre of literary criticism itself. By embedding cultural and historical criticism in the roots of narrative, these walking texts ask scholars and readers to rethink the formal properties of criticism by rerouting critical practices through the rhythm and perspective of the moving feet. In this way, walking texts become a kind of third space for new modes of critical encounter – characterized by openness, hybridity, and risk – with literary text and world.

CHAPTER ONE

Solitary Walkers, Spectral Geographies

In his introduction to the 2012 special issue of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Timothy Bewes grapples with the “particular challenges” of contemporary fiction by acknowledging the problem of time.¹ Quoting Soren Kierkegaard and Henri Bergson, both of whom wrestled with the phenomenon of temporality and the philosophical and phenomenological impossibility of arresting time to look backward at it, Bewes writes “Contemporary fiction is a shifting and evolving thing; the exercise of making it the object of scholarly investigation cannot help but diminish its temporal quality, remove it from our understanding, [and] turn it into a phenomenon that exists only in the past tense.”² To Bewes, the problem of pinning down contemporary fiction, a fundamentally unstable object of inquiry, in order to understand it as a coherent object or literary phenomenon involves freezing it in time and forcing it “into stasis by the analytical gaze,” a critical move that limits modes of interpretive engagement and traps literary scholars into organizing their thoughts around “conceptual” and periodizing “structures” contemporary fiction intentionally calls into question.³ Following Fredric Jameson, Bewes acknowledges that the very modes and practices of “scholarly

¹ Timothy Bewes, “Temporalizing the Present,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 45:2 (Summer 2012), 159.

² Bewes, 159.

³ Bewes, 159.

attention,” need to be revisited and fundamentally restructured as critics try to address the questions posed by the literature of the present.⁴ By acknowledging the unique temporalities of contemporary fiction, or the ways in which these texts are situated in and cannot be wrenched from moving time, Bewes suggests that critics’ troubling investment in “understanding” literary works (where “understanding” involves objectifying and differentiating “between the world and the work”) might be productively dismantled and reimagined.⁵

Literary critic Theodore Martin similarly views the contemporary as a conceptual and historical problem. Though he argues for the value of the “burst” of “scholarly attention given to contemporary culture over the past fifteen years,” he contends that the contemporary “as a critical category” remains remarkably amorphous and difficult to define – both “unreliable” as a “form of historical measure” and vague as a categorizing concept or interpretive strategy.⁶ “Given its fuzziness as a period, its drift through time, its diminished critical distance, and its incommensurability with everyday life, how does the idea of the contemporary come to have any meaning for us,” Martin asks.⁷ Noting, with Bewes, that “the contemporary doesn’t afford us the usual privileges of hindsight” or temporal “distance,” Martin recognizes how the concept compels critics to think deeply about the “politics” of how we “imagine” the “present,” ultimately

⁴ Bewes, 159.

⁵ Bewes, 159-60.

⁶ Martin, Theodore, *Contemporary Drift* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1-2.

⁷ Martin, 4-5.

arguing that the term might be most productively understood as a “strategy of mediation” or “means of negotiating between experience and retrospection, immersion and explanation, closeness and difference.”⁸

This chapter engages with Martin’s inquiry into the conceptual meaning of the contemporary by pairing his questions of interpretation alongside Bewes’ imperative to “re-temporalize” the present. While Bewes sees scholars reproducing a troubling “ideology of ‘contemporaneity’” in their attempts to make the literature of the present into a static object of critical analysis, this chapter examines how the figure of the walker-writer explores this problematic by imagining alternative modes of historical consciousness, radical social and spatial practices, and uncanny psychic states that destabilize readers’ experience of the present and challenge critics to consider temporality in all its relational potential.⁹ With Martin, who argues that “contemporary fiction” “requires us to consider” how “aesthetic objects invent their own ways of thinking historically,” I suggest that contemporary narratives of walking challenge readers and scholars’ conceptualization of the “now” by insisting – thematically, aesthetically, and ethically – on practices of critical contemporaneity that are linked to particular ways of moving through and writing about the world.¹⁰ In the most basic sense, contemporary fiction asks readers to consider a fundamentally unsettling set of

⁸ Martin, 5.

⁹ Bewes, 159.

¹⁰ Martin, 6.

linked questions: What does it mean to be (a) contemporary of the past, and what might our experience of the world look and feel like if we conceptualize our present historical moment as part of a constellation of potentially linked times, events, persons, and objects in which the past and future are always present and ready to burst into the now.

This chapter focuses on the fiction of W. G. Sebald, an author gripped by the possibilities of psychic and spiritual connection across time and space and driven by the question of what it means to be a contemporary of the past. Sebald's distinctly mesmerizing, genre-defying 'prose fictions' insist on situating the ghosts and remains of the past in conversation with the present and often focus on the phenomenology of personal and collective memory, the politics of displacement and exile, the philosophical and scientific legacy of the Enlightenment and modernity, and the traumas of violence on the human and natural world.¹¹ Born in the German Alps in 1944 and relocating to Norwich, England for most of his adult life (until his abrupt death in a car accident in 2001), Sebald produced tantalizingly autobiographical works of fiction, often written from the melancholy perspective of the solitary walker, a figure who serves as a stand-

¹¹ Rejecting the category of the novel, Sebald used the term "prose fictions" for all four of his major narrative works, including *The Rings of Saturn*, and argued that this "form" of fiction "exists more frequently on the European continent than in the Anglo-Saxon world." Schwartz, Lynne Sharon, *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 37. According to J.J. Long, whose monograph explores the ways in which Sebald's work thematizes the "problem of modernity," criticism of Sebald's work focuses on a number of "topoi," including "the Holocaust, trauma and memory, melancholy, photography, travel and flânerie, intertextuality and Heimat." J. J. Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1.

in, or double, for Sebald himself.¹² Insistently probing the literary and historical past, Sebald's solitary walker inhabits an archetype whose meditations, reveries, memories, and desires carry the literary echoes (and generic "accretions") of the epic hero, the religious pilgrim, the romantic poet, the modern flâneur, and the postmodern tourist, a narrative choice that imbues the intimately personal and deeply historical routes of his walks and writing with the consciousness of an entire social world of literary walkers.¹³

The Rings of Saturn, Sebald's third work of fiction (but second to appear in English translation), finds his semi-autobiographical solitary walker wandering through the Suffolk countryside in melancholy contemplation of the landscape, the natural world, the ruins and remains of history, and the relationship between self and other.¹⁴ Following his thoughts as they intricately weave together the past and the present, fiction and fact, and reality and dreams, Sebald's novel reanimates the past by positing the walk as a radical form of contemporaneity: a mode of historical consciousness that allows the past and the present to interlink, forming intricate and fragile (but often profound) webs of connection across physical, historical, and psychic space. Though

¹² John Wylie identifies the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* as Sebald's "narrative doppelgänger," noting that all four of Sebald's major works "are presented by a first-person narrator whose circumstances and personal history have much in common with those of [Sebald]." Wylie, John, "The Spectral Geographies of W. G. Sebald," *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 14 (2007), 171.

¹³ Martin, 7.

¹⁴ *The Rings of Saturn*, the third of Sebald's four "prose fictions" was published in German in 1995 as *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*. This was Sebald's second work to be translated into English by Michael Hulse, and it was published in English without the original German subtitle, which translates to "An English Pilgrimage." Sebald, W. G., *The Rings of Saturn*, Translated by Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999); hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (*Rings*, Page Number).

these extended periods of contemplation are enabled by the literal walk, moments of connection are ultimately prompted by the somber reordering of memory and methodical recording of the walk's path in prose, a mutually-constitutive set of practices that demonstrates the importance of the walk as both an embodied action in the physical world and a formal literary framework that dictates the text's narrative path. The walk as formal structure also controls the ways in which connections will ultimately be revealed to both the narrator and the reader – in fits and bursts of “epiphantic” geographic, historical, and personal revelation or in a slow ferment of reflective contemplation and dreamy reverie.¹⁵

Through writing, Sebald's walks across the county of Suffolk become a model for radically re-temporalizing the present. Sebald's routes through the landscapes of place, time, and text become haunted social spaces in which the ghosts of the past (located in nature, ruins, archives, objects, and persons) mingle with the walker-writer, challenging the physical and psychic boundaries of time and place. For cultural geographer John Wylie, Sebald's fiction represents a generically innovative form of “ghost-writing” that engages with the past in a distinctly “spectral” manner.¹⁶ Following Derrida, Wylie suggest that “the spectral ushers in an endless process of returning, without ever arriving,” confounding neatly arranged “orders of past and present,” and unsettling the

¹⁵ Wylie, 175.

¹⁶ Wylie, 173.

logic of place and self.¹⁷ Through an insistence on understanding the physical landscape and fictional text as spectral, Wylie argues Sebald's writing posits new forms of literary historiography and creatively reformulates the "metaphysics of place."¹⁸

Crucially, both the literal walk and the layered text also become a map and key for new forms of interpretive engagement that challenge the methods and forms through which scholars practice literary criticism. After *The Rings of Saturn* appeared in English in 1998, countless walkers sought to follow Sebald's narrator's geographical footsteps through the county of Suffolk in search of the haunted sights, connections, and moods he recorded in his writing.¹⁹ Though this type of re-walking follows a pattern of literary pilgrimage and "footsteps tourism" already becoming popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sebald's prose helped open space for creative walking experiments that have inspired alternative formulations of geographical and historical encounter and textual knowledge.²⁰ English documentarian Grant Gee, for example,

¹⁷ Wylie, 172.

¹⁸ Wylie, 173.

¹⁹ See, for example, Doyle, Rachel B., "Rambling with W.G. Sebald in East Anglia" *New York Times*, 22 April 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/travel/24footsteps.html>, Accessed 8 Jan 2018; Jeffries, Stuart, "WG Sebald: Darkness on the Edge of Anglia," *The Guardian*, 25 Jan 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/jan/25/wg-sebald-suffolk-walk>, Accessed 8 Jan 2018; MacInnes, Paul, "The Rings of Saturn: Walking Through History," *The Guardian*, 13 August 2015, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/aug/13/the-rings-of-saturn-by-wg-sebald-walking-through-history, Accessed 8 Jan 2018; Platt, Edward, "Walking in the Footsteps of W. G. Sebald, Hiker, Novelist, Strange Genius," *Daily Beast*, 5 June 2014, www.thedailybeast.com/walking-in-the-footsteps-of-wg-sebald-hiker-novelist-strange-genius, Accessed 8 Jan 2018; and Smith, Phil, *On Walking...And Stalking Sebald* (Dorset, UK: Triarchy Press, 2014).

²⁰ Barbara Schaff argues that literary tourism was already "fully established" by the mid-eighteenth century when Shakespeare's birthplace became a "national shrine" during the "Stratford Jubilee" in 1769. Literary pilgrimage, in particular, blossomed in the nineteenth century when tourists flocked to the Wordsworths'

challenged the simple pilgrim-tourist model of the text-inspired walking tour by recording his attempts to follow and find Sebald along the walking routes in *The Rings of Saturn* through film, creating a haunting documentary that blends together biographical storytelling, memoir, historical narrative and travel reportage to probe the conventional boundaries of literary criticism. By insisting on the embodied practice of re-walking as a means through which to encounter and reanimate the ghosts of writer, landscape, and text, and by positing film and photography as essential technologies through which one can interact with and respond to Sebald's "spectral geographies," Gee's *Patience (After Sebald)* works to enact a more expansive and experimental vision of the possibilities for literary-critical knowledge.²¹ Approaching *The Rings of Saturn* as an interactive and visual text, Gee's film explores the novel's aesthetic and narrative layers in search of generative and surprising links between experiences of reading, walking, writing, and filmmaking that illuminate the textual, historiographic, and geographic patterns Sebald's work sought to trace.

Lake District and Byron's Italy, seeking the footsteps and familiar haunts of their poet heroes. To Schaff, these moments mark a "new kind of literary tourism" that focused on the "material and the authentic" and announced the birth of the "heritage industry" in Britain. Schaff, Barbara, "In the Footsteps of...: The Semiotics of Literary Tourism" *KulturPoetik*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2011), 167-8, 173. Donna Landry confirms this history of literary tourism, noting that by the late eighteenth century, the emergence of the travel guide and the popular aesthetics of the picturesque were transforming the ways in which people saw, sketched, and consumed the landscape as a place to see on foot. Landry, Donna, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 19.

²¹ Wylie, 171; *Patience (After Sebald)*, dir. Grant Gee, (London: Artevents, 2012), Film.

The method and mood of Gee's work, which is infused, aesthetically and thematically, with Sebaldian pathos and haunted by the specter of the solitary walker (both the archetype and Sebald's ghost), echo that of *The Rings of Saturn*. The documentary reflects the formal structure of the text that inspired it, using the walk as narrative structure and searching for a means through which to activate the past and trigger connections across historical time and through physical, virtual, and visual space. However, Gee's walking experiment also leaves critical room for suggestive moments of narrative surprise, confusion, and disappointment as he realizes that his film will not finally be able to perfectly replicate Sebald's style nor fully access the interiority of the writer himself. Ultimately, Gee's film, like Sebald's fiction, demonstrates that the practice of being a contemporary of the past – of seeking moments of connection between the past and the present and allowing these idiosyncratic and uncanny associations to activate potentialities for the future – requires a delicate balance of allowing the physical world to speak through the embodied walk, reordering memories and impressions through writing, photography, and film, and experimenting with the extraterritorial spaces of fiction to incite evocative and allusive connections between disparate places and times.

I. What is the Contemporary?

Before we weave our way into *The Rings of Saturn*, it is important to further investigate how the contemporary has been philosophically and aesthetically

conceptualized, as the theoretical intricacies and practical importance of the term represents a unifying point of concern for thinkers whose work questions the temporality of the now and intentionally unsettles disciplinary boundaries and textual genres. In order to stage our own encounter with Sebald's work and incite our own sets of revelatory connections with the ghosts of *The Rings of Saturn* and the Sebaldian past, it will be helpful to think of Sebald's fiction as engaged in sustained theoretical conversation with thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, and Sigmund Freud, a group whose writing becomes intimately linked if we view it alongside the narrative paths of Sebald's solitary walker.

By working our way through the ideas of these writers, we will try to imitate, at least in part, Sebald's method of making connections across textual and theoretical space in order to trigger moments of uncanny likeness that will open Sebald's writing to further creative inquiry rather than capture it in an interpretive box and explain it through reference to theory. Though this set of thinkers approaches aesthetics, the philosophy of history, ethics, and the study of the self and personal identity from different disciplinary vantage points, they are interested, like Sebald, in re-energizing historical consciousness by offering new metaphors of connection that defy linear logics of historical cause and effect and gesturing toward the unique powers of the poet (or the poet-walker) as a practitioner of radical, embodied forms of historical investigation and textual engagement.

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Though Sebald's fiction most immediately signals a sustained conversation with Benjamin, Agamben (whose work is, of course, indebted to Benjamin) actually addresses the question of the contemporary head on. In his well-known essay, "What is the Contemporary?" Agamben argues that the question "What does it mean to be contemporary?" represents one of the most pressing concerns for literary scholars who want to upset traditional models of aesthetic and historical analysis.²² For Agamben, this set of questions arises in the context of a broader inquiry into our ethical relationship with literary texts, and he begins by considering our responsibility as readers towards texts that may be "many centuries removed from us," as well as those that may be "more recent, or even very recent" ("Contemporary," 39). Though he initially defers the definition of what it might mean to be (a) contemporary, Agamben quickly sets up contemporariness as an interactivity that occurs amongst events, subjects, and objects in and through time. To Agamben, history is always relational, and though the distance between the self and historical time may be experienced (at the textual and phenomenological level) as infinitely distant or intimately proximate, there is no stable position from which one can directly "access" the past, only points of oblique or juxtapositional entry. Positing the practice of being a contemporary as an ethical

²² Giorgio Agamben, "What is the Contemporary?" *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as ("Contemporary," Page Number).

“exigency,” he suggests that our relationships with the texts we read and interpret and the historical events they explore carry weight that transcends abstraction and affects how we understand and move through the present world as well as how we conceive of the future (“Contemporary,” 39).

Oddly, given Agamben’s usual philological rigor and his eagerness to trace words back to their origins, he does not spend time in this essay breaking down the actual word ‘contemporary,’ nor does he seek to postulate its historical usage. If we consider the Latin roots of the word *contemporary*, however, we can begin to see interesting parallels between Agamben’s provisional exploration into the contemporary and his ideas regarding the relationship between *being* a contemporary and the ethics of our encounters with texts. According to the OED, the term ‘contemporary’ was first used in the mid-seventeenth century and comes from the Medieval Latin “*contemporarius*.” Broken down into its constituent parts – ‘con,’ which means ‘together with,’ and ‘tempus/tempor,’ which means ‘time’ – and recombined, the term contemporary can be roughly translated to ‘together with time.’²³ This literal translation of the roots of the Latin word provides a fascinating working definition of the contemporary as fundamentally linked to experiences of conjunction and simultaneity. However, it is a definition Agamben might find simultaneously fitting and vexing: fitting because the

²³ “Contemporary, adj. and n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/40115. Accessed 8 Jan 2018.

word gestures towards an ontology of the contemporary that includes its relational valences (a characteristic to which the idea of “togetherness” speaks), but vexing because Agamben’s first stab at his own definition of the contemporary is delivered through the concept of the “untimely” (“Contemporary,” 40).²⁴

Thinking with Nietzsche (and through Roland Barthes’ interpretation of Nietzsche’s thought), Agamben explains that philosophy and history have always had a troubled relationship with time, especially when the time of concern is the present. For Nietzsche, Agamben argues, the problem of the present is one of both proximity and perspective – of being too close to something to understand or explain it and unwilling to adjust one’s troubled point of view. When one is too deeply embedded in his time, Agamben explains, or when he “coincide[s] too well with the epoch” and is “perfectly tied to it in every respect,” he cannot “come to terms with his time and take a position with regards to the present” (“Contemporary,” 40). For Agamben, then, contemporariness is not necessarily about being “together with time,” as a reading of the Latin definition might suggest. Instead, being a contemporary involves a relationship with the present characterized by “disconnection” and “out-of-jointness,” or by a

²⁴ Theodore Martin provides another helpful etymological summary by tracking how and when the term ‘contemporary’ “first acquired a historical connotation.” He explains that although the word assumed its modern form as “a characteristic of the present period” by the end of the nineteenth century, “[i]t did not become a fully institutionalized category until much later, with the mid-twentieth-century emergence of fields like contemporary literature and contemporary art.” Martin’s short history demonstrates that, as an “indexical” measure, “the contemporary all but guarantees that its referent will shift over time,” a process he metaphorically calls “drift” (2-3).

relationship distinguished by ambiguity and estrangement rather than effortless conjunction, familiarity, or (self-)recognition (“Contemporary,” 40).

“Contemporariness,” Agamben argues, “is...a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism” (“Contemporary,” 40).

One of the reasons Agamben’s definition of the contemporary will become so important to our reading of Sebald’s walks is that disjunction, rupture, and anachronism represent both formal structure and recurring themes throughout *The Rings of Saturn*. As we will see, Sebald’s walks are beset by disorienting narrative gaps, dislocations in physical and psychic time, and mesmerizing streams of memory that weave the perspectives of multiple storytellers together into a ghostly amalgam of echoing narrative voices.²⁵ Often these points of disjunction and interpretive ambiguity cause readers to halt forward progress in order to return to previous pages and reorient themselves in the text’s time and space. However, this process of moving backwards to move forwards (only to move backwards again) is part of the broader ethical and phenomenological point of Sebald’s fiction. To Joanne Catling, Sebald’s work achieves forward movement not through “narrative drive or plot development” but instead

²⁵ Marianna Torgovnick describes the characteristic “interpenetration” of voices in Sebald’s fiction as a “choral effect” specifically designed to capture the “theme of shared catastrophe.” Torgovnick, Marianna, *The War Complex: World War II in Our Time* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 123, 127.

through oscillating, juxtapositional, and self-referential “echoes and coincidences, resonances and paradoxes, the shimmering interplay of memory, dream and reality.”²⁶ To Wylie, Sebald’s narrator’s “wanderings serve to move the story...forward” but only through a meandering and recursive “discursive style” that can “best be described as mesmeric or hypnotic,” “ebbing and uncertain.”²⁷ To be and to follow a Sebaldian (and Agambenian) contemporary, then, readers of *The Rings of Saturn* must let the meandering text play with their sense of temporal unity and narrative coherence, simultaneously surrendering to his walker’s entrancing voice as he leads readers through the Suffolk countryside and gets lost among its ghosts and ruins, while also going back, reorienting, and sorting through his layered stories in search of patterns and narrative threads that link together what initially seems like a “motley” collection of “life histories, intertextual ramifications, dream sequences and...autobiographical narratives.”²⁸ The walker and the reader must both be willing to become unmoored, entangled, and uncomfortably lost, but also courageous enough to forge ahead to see where diverging or circuitous routes and new perspectives might lead.

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As we will see later with Benjamin, Agamben initially offers the poet as the

²⁶ Catling, Joanne, “W.G. Sebald’s Landscapes of Memory,” *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W. G. Sebald*, ed. Rudinger Gorner (London: UCL Press, 2003), 46; originally quoted in Wylie, 175.

²⁷ Wylie, 175.

²⁸ Torgovnick, 119; Wylie, 174.

privileged figure to explore, unearth, and gaze at the ghosts of historical time, so it is important to note that Agamben uses poetry to add flesh to the critical framework of his reading of the contemporary. Working his way through Osip Mandelstam's poem, "The Century," Agamben uses the temporal metaphor of the "century-beast" to explore the ways in which the poet must "firmly hold," or "lock," his "gaze" on time in order to "perceive" and "grasp" his present epoch and history's relationship to it ("Contemporary, 42).²⁹ To Agamben, the poet occupies the ambiguous position of being out of step with his own time but therefore paradoxically able to perceive its inner workings and connections with the past. Quoting from Mandelstam's poem, which asks who will be able to "weld together with his own blood / the vertebrae of two centuries," or who will be able to suture the "shattered backbone of time," Agamben answers "[t]he poet, in so far as he is contemporary...is at once that which impedes time from composing itself and the blood that must suture this break or this wound" ("Contemporary," 42). Here, the poet is charged with the impossible task of locking eyes with unsettled time and sacrificing himself to the metaphorical "century-beast" in order to "start the world anew" ("Contemporary," 42). Problematically, though, the century-beast, in its unwillingness to be tamed or directed is constantly looking over its shoulder "to contemplate [its] own tracks," thereby continually thwarting the poet's dangerous

²⁹ For a full translation of Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam's poem, see *The Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, Trans. Burton Raffel and Alla Burago (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1973). For Agamben's partial translation, see "What is the Contemporary?" pp. 42-43.

interpretive quest ("Contemporary," 43).

Mandelstam's poem gestures toward the paradoxical desires of personified time as it constantly looks backwards in consideration of its own trajectory and plows wildly ahead into the future unencumbered by the weight of the past. In Agamben's reading, the poet must figure out how to reconcile the backwards and forward movements of time in order to gain a perspective on both his age and times past and "weld" together the fractures of the broken century-beast to lead his fellows into a new epoch ("Contemporary," 43). The problem remains, however, that the poet cannot exist in concert with this new time, for having sacrificed himself, suturing the wounds of the struggling century-beast with "his own blood," he becomes broken himself ("Contemporary," 43). The century-beast's fracture becomes the poet's own, and though he is singularly able to gaze on the light and darkness of his own time, he lives without a temporal home in the past or present and must painfully relive the fracture again and again. For Agamben, the poet's willingness to struggle with time, which, in Mandelstam's poem struggles right back, marks him as both courageous and cognizant of the call to be a contemporary, even as time (and especially the time of the present, which is most proximate but also the most obscure) infinitely distances itself from his gaze.³⁰

³⁰ According to Agamben, "Our time, the present is in fact not only the most distant; it cannot in any way reach us," and the contemporary is courageous in his recognition that the light of the present, "while directed toward us, infinitely distances itself from us" (46).

Moving beyond the scope of Mandelstam's poem, Agamben also defines the contemporary as the person who "puts to work a special relationship between different times" ("Contemporary," 52). Directly channeling Benjamin's conceptualization of messianic time, he writes, "If, as we have seen, it is the contemporary who has broken the vertebrae of his time...then he also makes of this fracture a meeting place, or an encounter between times and generations" ("Contemporary," 52). This aspect of the Agambenian contemporary represents the most important characteristic of Sebald's solitary walker, whose textual remembering of his walks through writing enables instants of the past to be put in direct relationship to the "time of the now" in order to reorganize the ways the walker (and the reader) thinks about both history and the present ("Contemporary," 52). Agamben argues:

This means the contemporary is not only the one who, perceiving the darkness of the present, grasps a light that can never reach its destiny; he is also the one who, dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond" ("Contemporary," 53).

The Agambenian contemporary, the poet who is unafraid to gaze into the light and penetrate the darkness of his time, is simultaneously the central character in the Sebaldian canon and the critic who works to heed Bewes' call to re-temporalize. In the literary-critical example, the scholar who acknowledges and follows Agamben's demand to be contemporary works to unfreeze the literary text from his own backwards glance (a glance that mirrors the gaze of Mandelstam's century-beast), which will

immobilize and objectify it, in order to put the text back into conversation with moving, unstable, struggling time. This willingness to open the text to conversations among different times represents the contemporary's ultimate interpretive goal, and it marks the contemporary's willingness, following Agamben and Bewes, to relinquish the urge towards critical mastery in favor of an openness to connections that seem to arise independent of the critic's will, connections to which he, in Agamben's words, "cannot not respond."

Again, it is important to remember that the primary means through which Agamben (and Sebald) imagine connections between the past and present manifest is through the process of poetic writing. Agamben's poetics of the contemporary arise through the form of the critical essay, which he breaks into fragments that continually gesture back to an extended reading of a poem that serves as a metaphor for the embodied poet-contemporary himself. Sebald's contemporaneity arises as the solitary walker traverses the physical landscape and follows the paths of his memory in order to find, in walking and writing, a mode of living that is constantly open and responsive to the darkness and light of both present and historical time.

II. Century-Beast, Angel of History, Sebaldian Walker

Looking forward to look back, Sebald's writing and his efforts to be a contemporary with the past are also characterized by a willingness to allow associative thinking to act as a guide. Though we will see that this is a carefully crafted feature of

his narrative aesthetic, Sebald's solitary walker follows his feet in order to prompt his thoughts towards unexpected routes and idiosyncratic associations that seem to arrive in his head (and on the page) completely free of his will. Often, Sebald's psychic routes take shape through connections he claims he "could not help but think," making it the reader's task to allow the movement of Sebald's meditations to wash over him while also seeking to find the threads that bind together the events, objects, and people that make up Sebald's hypnotic narrative and memories (*Rings*, 5). Because Sebald allows associations to act as both prompt and guide – a practice of surrendering to connection that will be echoed by Gee's documentary – it is important to consider the threads of association we have made between our theorists of the contemporary and how these inform the trajectory of our own narrative encounters.

One of the most compelling theoretical echoes we see linking Bewes and Agamben occurs through the contemplation of an image – that of the backwards-turned head gazing over his own shoulder towards the past. Bewes invokes the backwards glance through his reading of Kierkegaard's famous saying that "temporal life" can never be fully understood because "at no instant" can one "find complete rest to adopt the position: backwards."³¹ His cursory reading of Kierkegaard's aphorism allows him to imagine the critic of contemporary literature as similarly backwards facing, a stance which he reads as a problem if we wish to acknowledge and examine the rich

³¹ Bewes, 159.

embeddedness of literary texts in moving time. Agamben, on the other hand, invokes the backwards glance as an image and metaphor of time itself. Thinking through Mandelstam's poetic century-beast, who looks over his shoulder to observe his own path into the present, Agamben interprets the impulse to look backwards as a wound or fracture in time that the poet must paradoxically repair and rend in order to gaze into the darkness of his own epoch and situate the past and present in perpetual, relational conversation.

Invoking the associative spirit of Sebald, then, we *cannot help but think of* Benjamin's "Angel of History" when we compare the backwards glances of Bewes' critic and Agamben's century-beast. In one of the most frequently cited passages of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin reads a Paul Klee painting in which he sees an angel looking backwards towards the ruins of history. To Benjamin, the angel seems:

...as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread...His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise...This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³²

³² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), 257.

Situated alongside Bewes and Agamben, Benjamin's angel becomes another evocative figure of the contemporary that permeates the aesthetic unconscious of *The Rings of Saturn* and informs the solitary walker's associative routes through space and time. In fact, Benjamin's angel, whose relationship to the past and the piles of wreckage hurled at his feet is characterized both by intense empathy and paralyzing estrangement, becomes a compelling analogue for the Sebaldian solitary walker himself. As the solitary walker weaves his way forward through the countryside, his mind constantly drifts backward in an attempt to penetrate the "mists" and "veils" of history that hover over the desolate landscape, indicating the seemingly "endless destruction" wrought by mankind on the natural and human world (*Rings*, 57, 59). Investigating the traces of the past, Sebald's walker, like the angel of history, attempts to make sense of what he sees with the hope of "making whole what has been smashed," or finding a way to truthfully represent the past that makes it intelligible to the present and accessible to the future, but, over and over again, he is overwhelmed by the weight of entire epochs past, visions that loom like a mirage in front of him but sink back into a "black and impenetrable maze" when approached (*Rings*, 31).³³ Ultimately, both angel and walker find themselves alone, singularly able to perceive the troubling trajectory of history but wholly unable to change its course or live within it, making them both exiles, without a home in time and

³³ Benjamin, 257.

unhinged from a place of comfort or rest.³⁴ The angel is caught in the debris at his feet and “propelled” into an uncertain future “to which his back is turned,” while the walker perpetually wanders the landscape in search of a past he can never fully recover or realize. Like Agamben’s poet, who embodies the fracture of time, both the angel and the Sebaldian walker seem doomed to perpetual homelessness and solitude.

However, for the poet and the solitary walker, this state of exile becomes a place of intense creativity, where the courageous response to the wreckage at one’s feet is gazing at it with open eyes, remembering or hypothesizing how it got there, and writing about it. Through writing, the poet-walker finds a (temporary) home in literary conversation and re-enters the social world from which he has become untethered. Fiction becomes the experimental space in which the poet, the walker, the critic, and the angel can imagine their way into different times, places, and persons and forge relationships that reorganize our understanding of the links between different historical moments, including the present and possible futures. Fiction becomes the place where history can be re-temporalized and re-socialized, prompting experiments with proximity and distance as well as conversations and practices of listening that make the past speak.

The creative imperative of Sebald’s solitary walker – his impetus to relive and reorder his memories, record his walks, and enter the extraterritorial and interstitial spaces of fiction – follows Benjamin’s thinking further in that, ultimately, the walker-

³⁴ Benjamin, 258.

writer does not seek to “articulate the past...‘the way it really was.’”³⁵ Instead, he attempts to “blast open the continuum of history” and re-populate “homogeneous empty time” by exploring “the constellation” his present forms with different moments and narrative versions of the past.³⁶ In this way, the walker breaks down traditional cause-and-effect-based models of history in favor of a Benjaminian historiography constructed from scraps and fragments and characterized by shocks, temporal arrests, narrative gaps, and the imaginative and associative potential of memory and poetry.³⁷

Though the process of writing does not necessarily represent the redemption of the poet-walker or the end of his exile, his perpetual loneliness and the horror with which he looks over his shoulder are perhaps assuaged by fiction’s singular ability to reach across space and time and reanimate the specters of history. Through fiction, the walker-writer and the reader-critic bear the responsibility of becoming contemporaries with both text and past, entering a shared social and textual space where memories that “flash up at a moment of danger” become the means through which the pile of wreckage at the angel’s feet, weighed down and swept over by a destructive ideology of progress that demands a blindness to the past, can begin to be made whole again.³⁸

³⁵ Benjamin, 255.

³⁶ Benjamin, 262-3.

³⁷ Benjamin, 262.

³⁸ Benjamin, 258.

III. Saturn's Rings

Although it may seem like our encounter with Sebald's solitary walker is being infinitely deferred – as if we are getting closer and closer but never finally to the point of direct contact with Sebald's text – it is partly because his narrative project involves layering personal memories, historical moments, aesthetic observations, and literary references on top of one another so that the threads he weaves and associative paths he follows never fully climax or reach a point of literal or figurative resolution or rest. Instead, *The Rings of Saturn* operates through overlapping temporalities and poetic crescendos that defy linear logics, connecting places, people, objects, and ideas not through privileged points in a sequential narrative timeline but through moments of uncanny association and oblique reference. Critically, Sebald's text compels us to respond similarly. By suggesting creative or meandering points of theoretical or aesthetic entry into Sebald's text, we can defer the drive towards interpretive closure and practice a form of criticism that savors (rather than is suspicious of) interpretive suspension or unrest.

Because Sebaldian time is referential and overlapping, another way to conceptualize his narrator's walks, might be to imagine them as elliptical rather than linear, a configuration that gestures towards the text's enigmatic title. "The rings of Saturn," an epigraph to Sebald's novel reads, "consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all

likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect..." (*Rings*, v). This "tidal effect," or "Roche limit," represents the novel's emotional affect, cosmic aesthetic, and historical project described in the language of celestial physics. In this formulation, Sebald's linear text, which gathers momentum around particular physical landmarks and philosophical questions, gives way to an elliptical (or revolutionary) text whose narrative paths orbit a set of interlocking themes and images that act gravitationally to incite particular kinds of associative and connective pathways. When Sebald's text seems to gather symbolic momentum – or alternatively, when Sebald's tenuous associations and fragmented memories seem to dissolve before him – the walker approaches his own Roche Limit, advancing painfully close to moments of breathtaking revelation that always threaten to disintegrate before him, falling in ruins at his feet.

Again, Benjamin's 'Angel of History' becomes a compelling metaphorical double for the poet-walker as both figures desperately strive to "make whole" the fragments that have been ripped apart by the tidal forces of history. Both feel an ethical imperative to gaze at the ruins before them in order to reassemble the broken fragments of the past and find a redemptive means by which to move towards the future. In this case, however, the walker ventures into a narrative space the angel has not yet trod. While Benjamin describes his angel as being propelled backwards helplessly into the future, Sebald's melancholy walker experiments with modes of walking and writing that

continually probe the Roche Limits of physical space and literary genre, transforming a literal, linear walk (that does ultimately have a beginning and end in time) into an elliptical prose narrative that orbits a gravitational field of connecting images, themes, historical references, and personal memories.³⁹ Not only do these shared themes shape the walker's path, they also re-connect seemingly disparate narrative fragments into complex associative patterns that will lead the poet-walker towards the planetary mass of historical truth. Unfortunately, the closer the walker approaches truth and the more insistently his fiction probes generic boundaries, the more likely his physical and narrative experiments are to burst apart and crumble into disassociated fragments. At the same time, however, it is only by following the elliptical paths of Saturn's fragmented rings as they hover around the planet's potentially destructive Roche Limit, that historical truth can burst into being in the form of Benjaminian "flashes" of insight, or instants of the past that erupt into the present in "moments of danger."⁴⁰ And even as these flashes threaten to overwhelm the walker, they also propel him forward to follow the links and patterns of historical memory that hover precariously but revolve endlessly around the impenetrable, unreachable mass of historical reality.

³⁹ Torgovnick see Sebald's insistent "testing" and "probing" of the nature of connection and literary genre as central to Sebald's narrative ethics. She writes, "Sebald's books...test the limits of how information can and cannot be put together and of how histories circulate from one person or book to another...Sebald tests the viability of the novel after 1945 because...the genre thrived within the same systems of rational thought and modernity that have given us industrial excess, imperial hubris, and world war" (118).

⁴⁰ Benjamin, 255.

IV. Reveries Revisited

Ultimately, whether we understand Sebald's walks as strings of linear association moving forward through time or as ellipses circling around particular images and themes, *The Rings of Saturn* asks readers to follow the meanders and revolutions of the walker's routes through landscape and memory without the promise of a final destination or concrete answers to the difficult questions he asks about the shape of history, the walker's place in the world, and his accountability to the memories of both the living and dead. This deviation from the traditional quest narrative, which posits a heroic goal or coveted object as the reason for and end result of the walk, is part of what makes Sebald's walks both compelling and unsettling. If Sebald's walker were an epic hero, he would make history and find his way back home to hearth and happiness by the end of the text. However, as was already discussed, the exiled poet-walker's only home is in his writing – in the fictions that arise from his encounters with the outside world and represent the textual results of a practice of probing the past (and his relationship to it) in order to seek both solace and social space for historical (and autobiographic) contemplation. This positions Sebald's poet-walker closer to the generic world of the Romantic walker (rather than the epic hero), a figure born in prose by the psychic and philosophical wanderings of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Though Rousseau's solitary walker differs in fundamental ways from Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn*, his reflective voice and narrative pathways carry the

literary echoes of Rousseau's meandering reveries and provide a compelling point of contact between walkers of the past and present. As was stated earlier, though Sebald's solitary walker is a distinct individual with a deeply personal understanding of his walks and reasons for writing, we can also understand him as a vessel for the consciousness of a vast social world of literary walkers that spans centuries of poetic time and historical terrain. Although Sebald does not literally follow Rousseau's footsteps or reference Rousseau as a direct inspiration or source, his imperative to be a contemporary with the past directs readers to consider the ways in which *The Rings of Saturn* converses – consciously or not – with the literary and historical routes (and roots) of walkers of previous eras. In short, we must ask ourselves how Rousseau's walker haunts Sebald's text and how the generic traces of Rousseau's walks and reveries shape Sebald's physical footsteps, associative pathways, and formal literary style.

As we will see, one of Sebald's primary affective and investigative modes of engaging the past is through unsettling encounters with doubles and doppelgängers, figures of haunting association that influence his paths through the countryside and reroute his attention towards insightful (though ultimately unstable) threads of historical awareness or connection with the dynamic autobiographical self. These doubles become an important component of the otherworldly affect that hovers around Sebald's narrative, and their presence triggers moments of dread and doubt that exist uncomfortably alongside feelings of deep affinity and natural relation. To Freud, this

ambiguous coupling of unfamiliarity and recognition, aversion and affinity, and distance and proximity represents the “quality of feeling” known as the uncanny – an experience he rooted in the enigmatic phenomenon of feeling the foreign embedded within the familiar.⁴¹ Following Sebald’s own method, then, we might imagine Rousseau as an uncanny Sebaldian double, a figure whose footprints materialize as uncanny generic markers that unconsciously guide the walker’s path through textual space. In this way, Sebald “cites” Rousseau in a deeply Agambenian sense, gesturing towards his walking counterpart not as an evolutionary precursor in a teleological line of literary descent, but as a constellational point in an ongoing colloquy of surprising literary relation and aesthetic reference.⁴²

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Like Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn*, Rousseau’s *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* is an intensely personal and deeply idiosyncratic work. Written during his exile from Paris and unfinished at the time of his death, the book, which was originally designed to consist of ten “walks,” follows Rousseau’s solitary wanderings around the Isle de St. Germain as he contemplates the landscape of both world and mind.⁴³ Distressed by his recent public disgrace and subsequent self-removal from society, Rousseau begins his

⁴¹ Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 123.

⁴² Agamben, 53.

⁴³ Rousseau had written nine walks at the time of his death, but only seven were completed and revised. France, Peter, Introduction, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (London: Penguin Books, Ltd, 2004), 10.

autobiographical reveries with an exilic statement that demonstrates the depth of his sense of physical and social alienation and the intensity of his existential and ontological crisis. "So now I am alone in the world," he writes, "with no brother, neighbor or friend, nor any company left me but my own" (*Reveries*, 27). Without the "natural" connections of family and without a larger social network of neighbors and friends, Rousseau abjectly wonders "What am I?" and "What has become of me?" and sets out through his reveries to make himself and his solitary place in the world the "object" of his inquiry (*Reveries*, 27).

In order to study himself and find "consolation, hope and peace of mind," Rousseau resolves to embrace his isolation and direct his intellectual gaze inward (*Reveries*, 32). "Everything external is henceforth foreign to me," he states, and his newfound "duty" will be to meditate on his "inner life" and give himself over to the "pleasure" of "conversing" with his "soul" (*Reveries*, 31-2). Although Rousseau professes an acceptance of seemingly infinite solitude, he still posits conversation (albeit with himself) as the primary relational means through which he will "gain new knowledge" of his "nature" and "disposition," seeking to render his self as an object of intellectual and emotional inquiry with a stable "nature" and inherent "disposition" (*Reveries*, 32). To do this, however, Rousseau must, at least implicitly, confront the philosophical paradoxes of personal identity and perspective. Proposing to distance himself from his self in order to gain an objective point of view and comfortable resting place from which

to consider his own character – a fixed position from which he can look backwards on his own history in order to understand and evaluate his present – Rousseau also retains his privileged status as a *subject*, an intimate, proximal position privy to the “successive variations” and “daily fluctuations” of his dynamic human “soul” (*Reveries*, 33). Seeking closeness and distance as well as a way in which to meet, converse with, and evaluate himself as both subject and object, Rousseau encounters the challenge of finding a formal means through which he can represent seemingly contradictory points of view and arrest the unruly flow of moving time.⁴⁴

Drawn to the grounded “cadence” of the moving feet and the soaring reveries incited by practices of walking, Rousseau attempts to “preserve” the variations and fluctuations of his mind and body by “keeping a formless record” of his walks and corresponding thoughts (*Reveries*, 32). By removing the restrictive boundaries of logic, reason, and literary form, Rousseau believes his feet can prompt his mind (and ultimately his pen) to drift, inspiring new routes of insight into the self and observations about its relationship to the outside world. Yet, Rousseau’s textual reveries are far from “formless.” Indeed, they are carefully ordered, governed by elaborate, detailed, and

⁴⁴ Personal identity, point of view, and temporality represent familiar philosophical and phenomenological themes in Romantic walking texts. Literary critic John Elder argues that Wordsworth, in particularly, struggled “throughout his poetry with the problem of how personal identity may comprehend one’s experiences in the past and the personality’s present moment.” Like Rousseau, Wordsworth turns to the walk as a literal and literary means through which to evaluate and represent the “discrepancies in the sequence of his selves.” Elder, John, *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 97.

characteristically literary sentences that suggest a propensity to mental meandering but also a careful (even painstaking) process of reasoned reflection.⁴⁵ However, Rousseau's reveries insistently resist philosophical rigor, refusing entrapment within the formal enclosures of a singular literary or philosophical genre in favor of more cursory attempts at knowledge that resemble the experimental "essais" of Michel de Montaigne.

Despite his ultimate efforts to distance his work from Montaigne's, Rousseau's writing is intentionally essayistic, both improvisational and constituted by trials or attempts to work through questions or problems without the necessary telos of a resolution or answer. Although Rousseau describes his project as one designed to fulfill the goal of self-legibility, the formal qualities of his writing – the exploratory form of the essay, the wandering nature of his walks, and the unfinished character of his conversations with himself – suggest that self-knowledge is forever incomplete and the soul, far from being a stable object of study, is both relational and in a constant state of flux. In the most basic sense, Rousseau's solitary walker is journeying towards a familiar unattainable destination: the fixed position from which to look backwards. In doing so, however, Rousseau situated the walk as a privileged form of movement in the quest toward self-knowledge and an innovative literary form through which to play with the

⁴⁵ In his introduction to Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Peter France remarks on the "traditional prose eloquence" of Rousseau's writing as well as the how hard Rousseau worked to attain the "harmony" of his sentences (14). Noting the effort of translating Rousseau's writing from French to English, France argues that "the language of the Reveries, far from being the natural jottings of a dreamer" represent painstaking effort and contain carefully deployed literary devices such as "repetitions" and "symmetrical groupings" that belie Rousseau's promise to keep his writings "formless" (14).

challenges of representing both perspective and personal identity.

Like Rousseau, Sebald's walker is an outsider who makes trials or attempts at clearly seeing and articulating self and world. Also like Rousseau, Sebald's walking and writing are intentionally hybrid, combining the formal innovations of the essay within the generic contours of autobiography, memoir, diary, and travelogue in an attempt to grapple with questions of the nature of sociality, the human soul, and one's place in history. Both writers approach narrative as provisional, unfinished, and dynamic, and as a space for deeply relational perspectives that belie that rigidity and systematic structures of logic and reason. And both rely on writing that follows the paths and pace of walking to ensure their narratives remain emergent, unstable, and impressionistic – textual spaces capable of discovery, contemplation of the unexpected, formal and thematic meandering, and an openness to retracing one's steps.

However, unlike Rousseau, whose walks were self-consciously designed to redirect his thoughts inward toward himself and his "true" nature, Sebald's walker is constantly gazing outward, losing himself amidst the traces of destruction he encounters in the Suffolk landscape. While Rousseau posits the walk as a means through which to know himself through the repudiation of social and historical entanglements in the outside world, the walker in *The Rings of Saturn* remains wary of insisting on his central position even within his own narrative, searching for a formal means through which to contemplate the possibility of historical truth unrestrained by the governing structures

of time, place, personal experience, and literary genre. Unlike Rousseau who walks in search of his inner essence and a stable, safe resting place from which to contemplate the past, Sebald's solitary walker wanders, remembers, and writes to take stock of a world whose organizing principles and underlying meanings resist intelligibility and often remain obscure or veiled in darkness. Through walking, Sebald's narrator seeks connection rather than self-knowledge (and a textual space in which to remain unsettled rather than stable) through patterns of thinking and acting that are deeply responsive to landscape and place, histories of violence and destruction, the links between self and other, and the possibilities of looking at the world from points of varying perspective. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the walker's observations and memories spiral outward rather than turning (exclusively) inward, thereby activating networks of association that do not always lead back to the Rousseau-ian autobiographical self.

V. Anatomy of a Walk

As Wylie notes, "At the beginning of all W. G. Sebald's works, there is a voyage, a journey of some kind," and *The Rings of Saturn* is no different.⁴⁶ Opening the text by way of a recollection, Sebald's narrator begins by orienting readers, at least momentarily, in the time and place of a walking journey. "In August 1992," he recalls, "when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a

⁴⁶ Wylie, 175.

long stint of work" (*Rings*, 3). Initially looking back on the walk in order to communicate its redemptive potential, the narrator recalls, "I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast" (*Rings*, 3). Subtly shifting affective registers from the memory of well being to the creeping approach of inner unease, however, the narrator muses:

I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star. At all events, in retrospect, I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages (*Rings*, 3-4).

Although we are only a few sentences into the narrator's story, Sebald has already thrust us into a world of interlinked temporalities that make up the unsettled connective tissue of the narrative's past(s) and present. The time of walking, the time of reflecting, and the time of writing, respectively marked as "August 1992," "a year to the day after I began my tour," and "now," quickly begin to blend as Sebald's narrator sets out not only to recount the paths of his walks, but to recall and represent the process of remembering and investigating them through prose. It is through this practice of assembling, arranging, and evaluating what he "wonder[s] now," what he understands "in retrospect," and what he reaches "far back into the past" to see that Sebald's narrator

begins to piece together the details of his physical and intellectual wanderings and unlock the “networks of objects and things” and the “lost histories” that open up the past – even if only provisionally – to the present.⁴⁷

Recalling events and emotions with varying levels of precision and haziness, Sebald’s narrator spends the rest of the first chapter meditatively contemplating the origins of his unease by following his thoughts as they make their way through personal memory, literary allusion, philosophical reflection, and artistic contemplation in search of ways in which to enter and illuminate history. By “making and testing connections” between events, objects, persons, and themes, Sebald uses his narrator’s reveries to begin probing the ethics of historical storytelling, considering the points of view through which the past can be approached or perceived as well as the contingencies of (our understanding of) historical reality.⁴⁸ Contemplating the nature of affinity, correspondence, and analogy, the narrator implicitly asks how one *ought* to begin the project of historical storytelling and wonders how different approaches might transform

⁴⁷ For Torgovnick, it is ultimately this *process* of questioning and connecting that represents the “broader” ethical “vision” of Sebald’s narratives and his underlying “theory of history.” Foregrounding a “meditative state of mind” that works through the repeated practice of “accessing memory...perceiving connections...parsing and refining the possibilities of identification – and then beginning the process again,” Sebald’s books participate in the “defamiliarization” of both novel and world, a practice that prompts “geographies of space and time” to “expand.” Sebald’s “process books,” Torgovnick argues, prompt readers to see the world “anew but never safe, never settled, never complacent,” an ethical unrest that allows neither history nor memory to remain fixed or finished (116, 121).

⁴⁸ Torgovnick, 117.

both storyteller and reality.⁴⁹

Transformation (in its various forms) represents a unifying theme in Sebald's narrative and the metaphorical framework underlying the routes of memory and literary reference in the first chapter. Reflecting on the peculiar "paralyzing" illness that took hold of him a year after his walk through Suffolk, the narrator remembers dragging himself from his hospital bed in order to look out the window and "assure" himself of the "reality" beyond the quiet enclosure of his room (*Rings*, 4-5). He recounts:

In the tortured posture of a creature that has raised itself erect for the first time I stood leaning against the [window] glass. I could not help thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs the armchair and looks out of his room, no longer remembering (so Kafka's narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him. And just as Gregor's dimmed eyes failed to recognize the quiet street where he and his family had lived for years, taking Charlottenstrasse for a grey wasteland, so I too found the familiar city, extending from the hospital courtyards to the far horizon, an utterly alien place (*Rings*, 5).

Attempting to articulate and understand his sudden estrangement from his own body and surroundings, Sebald's narrator turns to literary analogy, comparing his "tortured posture" and dissociated gaze to those of Kafka's famously metamorphosing

⁴⁹ The question of how one "ought" to approach historical storytelling underlies both Sebald's fiction and nonfiction. In *The Rings of Saturn*, this question is approached through literary form; however in Sebald's "Air War and Literature" lectures, this question is asked explicitly. "How ought such a natural history of destruction begin?" Sebald wonders, as he contemplates the collective amnesia of the German population towards the devastation of the allied air raids during World War II. Should it begin with a technical "summary," a "scientific account" of a "phenomenon," or a "pathographical record?" Or should it be through the artifice of fiction, photography, or film? Ultimately, Sebald's lectures are designed to challenge how different kinds of information and objects (understood through different metrics of authenticity and truth-value) get pressed into historiographic service, thereby shaping how we conceptualize and respond to the (traumas of the) past. Sebald, W. G. *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, Inc., 2003), 33, 60.

character. Like Gregor, whose inexplicable transformation from man to giant insect ultimately leaves him unable to recognize his home, relations, or previous desires, the narrator feels that the familiarities of his body and city have become “utterly alien,” a state of being he seems most readily able to describe through literary likeness. Surveying the scene in his hospital room as if from the third person, the narrator identifies himself as Gregor’s double, an uncanny relationship he reveals he “could not help thinking.”

Gesturing towards the simultaneous contingency and inevitability of analogy and association, the narrator’s perennial refrain *I could not help but think* represents the echoing framework through which *The Rings of Saturn* explores the spellbinding nature of connection. By orienting his reflections and memories around that which he cannot help but think, Sebald’s first-person narrator yields control of his own narrative authority and signals his openness to following routes of association that seem to originate outside himself. Through walking, remembering, and associating, the first person becomes permeable – able to be acted upon from the outside and unable to fully claim intimate ownership of the shape of his own reveries.

For literary critic Torleif Persson, this insistence on “narrative distance” represents a hallmark of *The Rings of Saturn*’s “impersonal style,” an “idiosyncratic” “mode of reflection” that “de-emphasizes individual agency” in order to “synthesize meaning from the interstitial space that exists between what we normally think of as

different points of view.”⁵⁰ Rather than remaining “subject-centered,” Sebald’s narrator persistently presents his memory and feelings as “disaggregated,” or “passive, diffuse, and lacking in agentive power,” in order to “forge pathways” for “attentiveness” that are not monopolized by the first person, experiential point of view.⁵¹ This mode of reflection allows Sebald’s narrator to assemble and juxtapose surprising combinations of experiences, allusions, and perspectives in order to consider how even the most tangential associations or fleeting likenesses can illuminate the tangles of history and act as new forms of witnessing or testimony.

This cessation of narrative authority begins almost immediately as the narrator moves from the memory of his hospital stay to an account of how his thoughts take shape in the present. “Now that I begin to assemble my notes, more than a year after my discharge from the hospital,” he writes, “I cannot help thinking of Michael Parkinson who was, as I stood [in the hospital] watching the city fade into the dying light, still alive in his small house in Portersfield Road, busy perhaps, preparing a seminar or working on his study of Charles Ramuz, which had occupied him for many years” (*Rings*, 5-6). Propelling his narrative forward by looking back and then receding from view, the narrator’s memories of Michael, who he describes as an inveterate scholar and walker, begin an incredible thread of allusive, layered association that allows his thoughts to

⁵⁰ Persson, Torleif, “Impersonal Style and the Form of Experience in W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*,” *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer 2016), 205-6.

⁵¹ Torleif, 206-7.

travel from friendship to Flaubert to Dürer to Thomas Browne to Rembrandt to Descartes and back again in order to investigate how “an apparent chaos” of association can also come to represent “a perfect kind of order” (*Rings*, 9). Employing a “periscopic” technique in which “everything is related around various corners,” Sebald’s narrator navigates his way through this seemingly “miscellaneous” list of subjects by orienting the broad trajectory of his thoughts around an investigation into the “odyssey” of Thomas Browne’s skull and the idiosyncrasies of his thought (*Rings*, 11).⁵² However, this quest to locate the remains of the seventeenth-century writer also becomes a means through which the narrator can begin to approach the traces of destruction he encounters on his walk and unearth the overlapping images, metaphors, and questions through which he might contemplate his relationship to the past.

Crucially, Sebald’s narrator’s meandering inquiry into the people, events, and ideas of the past is fundamentally tied to questions of the ethics of writing and the aesthetics of literary technique. Part of the order amidst the “chaos” of association, then, can be found in the ways in which the narrator probes the style, modes of inquiry, and philosophical methods of his list of linked subjects. Flaubert, Thomas Browne, Rembrandt, and Descartes become linked through their shared contemplation of the nature of reality and fiction and then juxtaposed in order to demonstrate the multiplicity of ways in which one can approach the “order of things,” and the textures of both text

⁵² Schwartz, 37; Torgovnick 119.

and past (*Rings*, 18). Evidence, essence, aesthetics, and perspective all get explored through an examination of literary style that places Flaubert's "fascination with obscure detail" and "fear of the false" alongside Browne's insistence on perspectival "distance" and "the eye" of the "outsider," and Descartes' "disregard" for embodiment and the "flesh" alongside Rembrandt's artistic obsession with the working body and wariness of the violence of the "anatomical" "gaze" (*Rings*, 7, 13, 19).

Although this process reveals tensions between the ideas and methods of his subjects, it also allows Sebald's narrator to explore multiple interpretive strategies and contingent routes of connection that "cut across space and time in surprising and unconventional ways."⁵³ By intermingling literary-critical practices (attuned to biography, history, and form) and situating detailed ekphrastic and close readings alongside moments of speculation and wonder, Sebald's narrator opens space for meditative modes of critical reflection that tests the boundaries of immediacy and distance as well as the integrity of fact and fiction. Resolutely unafraid of the question "what if," Sebald's narrator connects Browne with Rembrandt through the possibility of historical association that challenges the unequivocal critical desire for evidence and documentation. He muses:

In January 1632, while Browne was in Holland...the dissection of a corpse was undertaken in public at the Waaggenbouw in Amsterdam...Although we have no definite evidence for this, it is probable that Browne would have heard of the

⁵³ Perrson, 207.

dissection and was present at the extraordinary event, which Rembrandt depicted in his painting of the Guild of Surgeons... (*Rings*, 11-12).

By investigating what is possible or “probable” between Browne and Rembrandt, Sebald’s narrator follows traces of speculative likeness that prompt texts to speak to each other (and to readers) spectrally. While the narrator admits there is no evidence to prove Browne’s presence at the dissection and later can only wonder as to the “angle” from which Browne might have “watched” the event, the possibility of Browne’s presence haunts Rembrandt’s painting just as the dissection lingers amongst Browne’s consideration of the “innermost essence” of things (*Rings*, 19). Criticism becomes a speculative, haunting exercise where the possibilities for association can be used to inform perspectives on the past without closing history off from “the invisibility and intangibility of that which moves us” or makes us think in new ways (*Rings*, 18).

Ultimately, it is walking as narrative structure that enables Sebald’s narrator to embark on “temporally and spatially disaggregated trails of association” and meditative, interweaving reverie.⁵⁴ By providing the formal framework for the restless tension between past and present, intimacy and distance, and movement and paralysis, and by allowing space for digression and spectral association, the walk becomes a space of narrative potential – holding the possibility for both aesthetic and historical illumination and reorganizing the ways in which readers approach the textualized past

⁵⁴ Persson, 209.

and forms of historical encounter in fiction.

VI. The Walk Revisited

Originally conceived of as a documentary pilgrimage that would follow the wandering routes of *The Rings of Saturn*, Grant Gee's film, *Patience (After Sebald)*, also represents a captivating experiment in haunting (this time through film) and a compelling exploration of the bounds of literary criticism. Combining the formal structures of the travelogue, memoir, and essay with the visual aesthetics of historical photography and experimental cinema, Gee's film pays tribute to Sebald by exploring both his biography and fiction in search of the uncanny affinities, spectral geographies, and webs of textual connection Sebald's work seeks to illuminate. Rather than attempt to decode or unravel Sebald's writing in order to offer viewers an authoritative or evaluative reading, Gee's film converses with Sebald's narratives by playing with the referential and evidentiary potential of documentary realism, the frameworks of literary genre, the aesthetics of filmic perception, and the temporal arrests of photography to conduct its own experiments in Sebaldian storytelling. Seeking closeness to his fellow walker as well as ways through which to keep Sebald's memory alive, Gee's documentary activates the uncanny art of footsteps walking to find new ways in which to converse with Sebald even "after" his death.

To Gee, as for Sebald, the process of grappling with a literary text in this way – of exploring how and why Sebald's work is so affecting without forcing his prose into a

rigid interpretive framework or giving up its sense of mystery and otherness – becomes an alternative to academic literary criticism and an ethical project that opens up Sebald’s writing to further intellectual and emotional consideration. Gee’s film leaves room for feeling and fascination, bewilderment and wonder as legitimate responses to literary texts and encourages embodied exploration in the world and “patient” listening as alternatives to the interpretive enclosures of traditional forms of literary-critical engagement. Gee’s documentary, therefore, represents both an exploration of and an experiment in Sebaldian forms of historical consciousness, aesthetic relation, and literary community that makes Sebald’s work speak in new voices across different forms of visual (and auditory) media.

Although Gee’s documentary often seeks to echo Sebald’s haunting aesthetic through the visual codes of film – black and white photography, superimposed images, natural light and shadows, ambient music, and visual and aural static – his work also insistently defies expectations in order to explore how new media might illuminate alternative aspects of Sebald’s work. For example, rather than opening his film with lingering images of the Suffolk landscape as one might expect, Gee’s documentary begins by presenting viewers with flattened satellite images of earth littered with dozens of location pins and complex networks of connecting lines. Readers of *The Rings of Saturn* can immediately recognize the geographic routes of Sebald’s narrator’s walks through Suffolk as well as the linkages of places to which his mind wanders as he

follows his feet across the landscape and through time. However, Gee's opening also suggests a new way of visualizing the geographic scope and uncanny networks of connection that govern Sebald's narrative, positing network graphs and the zoom function as exciting forms of Sebaldian experimentation in perspective, orientation, and relation. Though Sebald's narrator in *The Rings of Saturn* engages with landscape in analogue forms – through walking, guidebooks, and archival documents – Gee turns to satellite imagery and geographic information systems to conceptualize the relations and interconnections of Sebaldian space.

As the satellite images in the film successively cut to reveal increasingly 'zoomed-in' places on the map (from the earth, to Europe, to Britain, to East Anglia), viewers are able to see the individual elements that make up the satellite images in increasing detail. However, as buildings, green space, and roadways materialize, links and networks fade, leaving viewers with a sense of the intricacies and potential beauties of the world at human scale but without the sheer breadth of accumulated connections and associated places that capture the global scope of Sebald's mental and physical meanderings. Finally, once the images zoom in close enough, the pin in Norwich lights up and reveals the filmmaker's exact location on the map, while, in the background, a voiceover reads the first page of *The Rings of Saturn*. Cutting to a flickering, ghostly black and white image of the title and opening page of the novel, the film leaves mapping technology behind to move back to rhythms and patterns of the moving feet.

*

Though much of the physical movement in *The Rings of Saturn* is accomplished on foot, train routes also shape the narrator's geographic meanderings as well as the progression of his thoughts. Unsurprisingly, then, the first moving image in Gee's film is a tracking shot of the National Express East Anglia train as it waits to pull out of Norwich Station bound for the coast. Shot in black and white, viewers initially see the train from the platform, but as the train begins to move, the film cuts, seamlessly transporting viewers inside the car to watch, like Sebald's narrator, out the window as we begin to travel "past the back gardens, allotments, rubbish dumps and factory yards" of the outskirts of the city. By putting us on the "same" train as Sebald's narrator (and by narrating the landscape in his words), Gee initially suggests that his film might follow the exact steps of the narrator's walk to try and see the East Anglian landscape through his eyes. As the train continues down the tracks, however, an additional subtitle – "A walk through *The Rings of Saturn*" – recalibrates our expectations. Although we might encounter some of what Sebald's narrator has seen during his wanderings towards the coast, Gee's film is not designed to replicate the narrator's walk step by step so much as simulate or experiment with Sebald's meandering method in search of reference and revelation. "A walk through *The Rings of Saturn*" becomes a means by which Gee can patiently search for Sebald by visiting and re-discovering the places Sebald's narrator visited, sifting through the way he ordered narrative events, exploring

critical interpretations and emotional attachments to his narrative, and ultimately using film as a medium through which to unearth new relationships, unexpected coincidences, and surprising connections that might illuminate Sebald's textual aesthetics, theories of history, and personal experience to old and new audiences alike.

Like *The Rings of Saturn*, which juggles multiple storylines, time periods, and geographic locations and heaps historical events and personal narratives atop one another, Gee's film works in visual and narrative layers to explore the connections between Sebald's biography, his writing (and its influences), and the physical landscape as well as the method and mood of his work. On film, this layering is achieved by alternatively displaying text over images and splitting the screen to display multiple images (and follow multiple narratives) simultaneously. For example, as the train departs from Norwich and we accompany Sebald's narrator in his observations out the window, we simultaneously find ourselves in an aestheticized, black and white version of the present but also in the literary time and space of the novel – "The Rings of Saturn, pg. 29, Canning," to be exact. The overlaid text we see on the screen serves to locate us in both narrative and geographic space, so although our journey on the Norwich train might be happening on film in the first-person present, it is also linked to the fictional temporalities of Sebald's walks and memories.

Gee adds another layer of visual and narrative information by embedding another walk into his film: his own. Shot with a flip camera pointed downward towards

his feet, Gee's literal footsteps are filmed in color and embedded in the middle of the screen as they traverse a landscape that materializes eerily in the background. The juxtaposition of Gee's point of view with the references to Sebald's narrator's textual voice again points us to the paradoxes of Gee's method. On the one hand, we're following Sebald's text – walking with him in order to walk our way into his narrative; on the other hand, however, our attempts to see through the eyes of Sebald's narrator are always mediated by Gee's camera's frame, leading to a different (though no less fascinating) set of meditations on the landscape and narrative.

Ultimately, Gee's film achieves the kind of critical contemporaneity that underlies Sebald's unique literary style and broader theory of history. By mirroring Sebald's melancholy aesthetic, following him through time and space, and opening up his text to new associations and encounters distinct to the filmmaker and viewer, *Patience (After Sebald)* serves as an important reinvention of the genre of literary criticism. Resisting the urge to freeze Sebald's fiction in literary time to look back on it as a static object that can be interpreted, understood, and quickly forgotten, Gee heeds the call to re-temporalize, paying tribute to Sebald through the embodied practice of footsteps walking and the aesthetics of experimental cinema. Activating a spectral critical space through which filmmaker, text, author, and critic-viewer are invited to converse with, listen to, and haunt each other, Gee offers a powerful alternative framework through which to approach author and text, aesthetics and history.

CHAPTER TWO

Historical Witnessing at Walking Pace

If there is a specter that haunts this dissertation, it is the ghost of Walter Benjamin, whose angel of history became the representative image for the Sebaldian contemporary and whose associative critical method and reliance on metaphor and textual mosaic explodes literary and cultural criticism's rigid boundaries and offers new ways to make sense of the literal and figurative paths of the solitary walker. As I described in the last chapter, Sebald's literary aesthetics pay homage to Benjamin in the surprising ways in which events, objects, and individuals become connected through complex psychological, geographical, and historical webs and create constellations of association that challenge the traditional norms of historical discourse, the novel, nonfiction (particularly travel writing), and autobiographical narrative. Importantly, I also noted that this associational style, which insistently probes the nature of connection, prompts readers to become acutely aware of recurring images and psychological patterns that act as symbolic landmarks throughout Sebald's text and exert a kind of gravitational pull that shapes Sebald's physical movement as well as the trajectory of his prose.¹ These topographic and textual markers represent ideas and linkages that we

¹ To Timothy Bewes, the question, "What connection could there be?" lies at the heart of Sebald's theory of the novel. Bewes writes, "The question is a perennial one in Sebald: it is asked repeatedly, such that the question of connection, the problem of connection, might be said to be the central preoccupation of his

ultimately “cannot help but think,” and, as readers, we slowly begin to replicate Sebald’s method (almost as if in a trance), thereby becoming creators of our own connective networks that inexorably escape the bounds of his text.

Following Sebald, we are prompted to note the ways in which physical and literary cues – quotations, landmarks, and references to objects, writers, or other walkers – activate particular relationships between ideas, images, and objects, and we begin to see these references come alive both inside and outside Sebald’s fiction. In a sense, the text begins to wander outside its physical boundaries causing readers to notice how patterns and references reach beyond the text and into the world. Through this process, we begin to note how we, as readers and critical thinkers, are being asked by Sebald’s Benjaminian walker to discover the ways through which we are constantly converting the world into text and theorizing our own dynamic (and often unstable) embeddedness in time and space through literary and historical reference. Sebald’s prose estranges the familiar world, thereby helping us to see it anew. His style triggers a mode of looking and attentive engagement with our spectral surroundings that subtly becomes part of the reader’s own conscious experience, echoing the methods of historiographic and poetic interrogation and surprise engendered by Benjamin.

writing.” Bewes, Timothy, “Against Exemplarity: W. G. Sebald and the Problem of Connection,” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Spring 2014), 3.

If this recap of Benjamin's method, channeled through Sebald's prose, seems abstract or divorced from our day-to-day experience of reality, it is because this process of seeing is always represented through writing. Benjamin's method relies on a worldview in which the ordinary everydayness of objects, physical space, and the ideas through which we see the world transcend the prosaic and are always ready to be activated for symbolic meaning. In the most basic sense, the world is always ripe for comment and imaginative meaning making – for metaphor and poetry – and, to Benjamin (and Sebald), engagement with the past and hope for the present and future require not only that we think with an eye towards poetic association but that we represent and, perhaps more importantly, create those associations through text. The world of commonplace objects is always-already enchanted and begging to be (re-) discovered through the poet's eye, and, to both Benjamin and Sebald, the privileged manner of engagement with the world is through the walk. The Benjaminian flâneur and Sebald's melancholy walker would be lost without the accompanying project of written remembering, however, and it is through his prose that the walker makes a seemingly static world active and continually sees, represents, and reinvents history, autobiography, and topography through text.

In restating some of the main points of the last chapter, I also want to continue to lay bare the methods, structure, and associational trajectory of this dissertation, as well as how it has been shaped through an ongoing engagement with the narrative theories

of both Benjamin and Sebald. As was previously stated, readers of Sebald's prose unconsciously begin to think in his narrative style, which works through linked webs of association that propel the narrator and his readers across space and time *and* through dense gravitational fields of events, objects, and places that pull both narrator and reader into orbit around particular textual themes and images. In the first case, Sebald's narrative asks readers to notice the inventive, experimental, and even hypothetical ways in which objects, historical events, ideas, and images can be understood as linked and how the most fragile or tenuous (or even outlandish) associations can ultimately be looked upon as inevitable – connections that cannot help but be made. In the second, Sebald prompts readers to notice how webs of association slowly gather around resonant (though not always obvious) textual symbols, themes, or images that pull the narrative into haunting elliptical orbit and create a kind of cosmic organization for its constellational linkages. In Sebald's prose, these two methods interact through constant tension: as networks of association find their celestial place orbiting particular themes and images, the system begins to collapse under its own weight, threatening chaos and a kind of black hole, or vacuum, of meaning. Sebald's text therefore operates at the hazardous limit where theorizing connection leads to moments of near-blinding revelation or almost complete psychic and narrative implosion (or bodily paralysis), a state explored by Sebald's narrator, who walks, thinks, and writes at the fault line between sanity and madness and sociality and estrangement.

At the risk of over-dramatization and metaphorical strain, the management of this Sebaldian narrative method – the desire to recognize connection at the risk of over-identification and full system collapse – often resembles the task of the dissertation writer. As the dissertation’s gravitational mass endeavors to pull everything into its orbit, the system threatens to collapse, and its governing set of texts, themes, and images deviate wildly from their charted course in order to wind their way into new texts and landscapes, creating uncanny and surprising moments of recognition and literary echo. To Sebald and Benjamin, however, this textual and psychic meandering, or digression, is part of the point. As Hannah Arendt explains in her introduction to Benjamin’s critical essays, Benjamin “entrusted himself to chance as a guide on his intellectual journeys of exploration” and was acutely attuned to “correspondences” between the “most remote things.”² A Benjaminian critical project, then, must be receptive to the uncanny and governed, at least in part, by the practice of identifying, remembering, and creating webs of connection through critical commentary. This dissertation, therefore, becomes an attempt to demonstrate how the solitary walker’s literary style begins to (un)consciously control how we make connections between text and world and how these connections can be recognized, explored, interpreted, and reimagined through even the most mundane of critical mediums.

² Arendt, Hannah, Introduction, “Walter Benjamin 1892-1940,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, by Walter Benjamin (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), 43, 14.

*

In that spirit, then, I will again look backwards to move forward. At the end of the last chapter, I posited Grant Gee's documentary as a compelling alternative to traditional literary criticism in that it insists on the embodied practice of re-walking as a means by which to respond to Sebald's life and work. By mirroring the formal and aesthetic structure of Sebald's text and attempting to activate Sebald's fiction through contemplative interactions with his texts and images as well as through personal reflections and deep ruminations on landscape and place, Gee tries to approach the essence or spirit of Sebald's life and prose with full knowledge that he will constantly be rebuffed by his subject and unable to perfectly replicate Sebald's melancholy aesthetic or resurrect his ghost. Instead of trying to capture Sebald within the rigid interpretive framework of traditional literary criticism, then, Gee's visual narrative takes an alternative approach. In order to be a critical contemporary of the author and narratives he examines, Gee mirrors and then refracts Sebald's method, leaving room for critical surprise and personal disappointment, thereby staging an ongoing encounter with Sebald that echoes the investigative methods of Benjamin.

As Arendt describes, Benjamin's critical commentary revolved around a type of thinking that "delves into the depths of the past...not in order to resuscitate it the way it

was” or to “contribute to the renewal of extinct ages.”³ Instead, Benjamin’s work “consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh” often without comment or explanation as to “causal or systematic connection.”⁴ Likening his method to surrealist montage and modernist mosaic, Arendt acknowledges Benjamin’s desire to activate the “rich and strange,” a method critic Leon Wieseltier envisioned as “min[ing] the most commonplace objects and events for explosive meanings” and looking upon critical interpretation not as a process through which meaning is “discovered” but “released.”⁵ Though Gee’s melancholy visual and aural aesthetic initially communicates a desire to resurrect the past, his film ultimately suggests that Sebald – his life, work, and ghost – can only be approached obliquely, through the experimental juxtaposition of textual fragments, poetic allusions, photographs, and personal memories. To Gee, the contemporary finds meaning when he finally yields control of his quest for revelation or discovery in favor of a practice of “patient” following, wandering through his own riveted and unique train of Sebald-inspired thoughts and associations to see what will inevitably appear next.

*

Our next poet-walker, Iain Sinclair, combines Gee’s innovative literary-critical genre – sometimes referred to as the “footsteps genre” or “second journey” – with

³ Arendt, 51.

⁴ Arendt, 48.

⁵ Arendt, 51; Wieseltier, Leon, Preface. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, by Walter Benjamin (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 2007) viii-ix.

Benjamin's commitment to both modernist literary techniques and "explosive meanings" in order to explore how the walker can stage encounters with the past by tracing the footsteps of his literary predecessors.⁶ Like Sebald, whom Sinclair openly acknowledges as an influence and ghostly interlocutor, Sinclair probes the past by pounding the pavement, searching the landscape for entryway into a past that begins to speak as the walker becomes overwhelmed by both the embodied action of putting one foot in front of the other and remembering the walk through writing.⁷ Also like Sebald, Sinclair's compulsion to wander hovers on the edge of neurosis, where the desire to "release" the ghostly relationships between text, topography, and psyche lead him to obsessively experiment with infinitely digressive walking and writing practices designed to both prompt and record the "chorus of oracular whispers" and "mangled information" that accompany him on his journeys (*Orison*, 6). Unlike Sebald, however,

⁶ Within the larger genre of the travel narrative, Maria Lindgren Leavenworth describes the process of re-walking (or following the paths of others) as the "second journey" or "footsteps genre," while Peter Hulme refers to it as an "ambulant gloss." See Leavenworth, Maria Lindgren, *The Second Journey: Travelling in Literary Footsteps* (Umea: Umea University Press, 2010), and Hulme, Peter, "In the Wake of Columbus: Frederick Ober's Ambulant Gloss," *Literature and History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Autumn 1997). Tim Youngs argues that both Leavenworth and Hulme consider literary re-walking as a genre of creative "renewal" rather than "exhaustion." Youngs, Tim, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10, 220.

⁷ Sinclair makes direct reference to Sebald in *Edge of the Orison*, citing poet, Michael Hamburger's comment that "memory," to Sebald "is a darkroom for the development of fiction." Sinclair, Iain, *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare's 'Journey out of Essex,'* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 169; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (*Orison*, Page Number). Importantly, Sinclair has also staged a set of walks in the traces of Sebald. Eager to challenge the reverence – or "quiet cult of cult of managed melancholy" – that quickly developed around Sebald's fiction and walks, Sinclair published the 28-page essay, *Austerlitz & After: Tracking Sebald*. Originally part of Sinclair's 2013 book *American Smoke: Journeys to the End of Light*, *Austerlitz & After* "recounts an East London walk in the late German author's footsteps...in the company of Sebald's friend, the poet Stephen Watts." See Sinclair, Iain, *Austerlitz & After: Tracking Sebald*, London: Test Centre, 2013.

whose hypnotic narratives seem designed to mask the intentionality of their method and abstract the reader from the hard work involved in crafting a narrative (the hours of archival research, the hundreds of pages of notes, the drafts and translations), Sinclair's prose invites readers into the process and progress of his walking projects and self-consciously acknowledges concrete personal and narrative goals for his walks. While Sebald's narrator claims (perhaps disingenuously) to walk in order to clear his head and only afterwards seems to realize the power of his perambulations and the necessity of setting them down in prose, Sinclair walks in order to make (or perhaps even force) something happen. He sets out with full knowledge that his walk will "mean" something and walks with the intention of being "transformed" (*Orison*, 11).

I. Psychogeographer Sinclair

Iain Sinclair is an ingeniously idiosyncratic writer. Born in Wales in 1943 but residing in Hackney, London, for the past "forty odd years," Sinclair's unique interactions with the landscape of his adopted home have earned him sustained critical attention and acclaim despite the eccentricity of his pursuits and prose.⁸ Alternatively called a visionary and a crackpot, a sentimentalist and a satirist, his writing bucks traditional generic boundaries and "reels from travel notes to social critique, from

⁸ According to fellow-British wanderer and writer Robert Macfarlane, "In a little under 15 years, Sinclair has gone from cult author to national treasure...I would guess him to be one of the most written about of contemporary British authors. Sinclair symposia, journal special issues...they just keep coming." Macfarlane, Robert. "Ian Sinclair's Struggles with the City of London," *The Guardian*, 15 July 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/15/ghost-milk-iain-sinclair-olympics>. Accessed 8 Jan 2018.

literary history to collegial caricature, lyrical reverie to satirical rant – sometimes in a single paragraph.”⁹ He has written poetry, novels, and nonfiction, collaborated on documentary films, and dabbled in photography, but what much of his work has in common is a fascination with the interweaving of geography, history, and psyche, an interest that leads him on frenzied journeys through the London streets and suburbs. Often classed as a modern day psychogeographer (both by himself and others), Sinclair’s most famous work explores this set of obsessions through deliberately staged walks designed to investigate those places that exist outside of guidebooks and remain obscure to the official narratives of the London “heritage industry,” which he insistently scorns.¹⁰

Gravitating towards the “edge lands,” margins, and peripheries of his Hackney home, Sinclair’s most famous work of non-fiction, is *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25*, a dense and labyrinthine account of his walks around London’s encircling M25 highway (*Orison*, 6). Channeling Benjamin’s Baudelairian flâneur and employing Michel de Certeau’s pedestrian ‘tactics’ and Guy Debord’s psychogeographic ‘drift,’ Sinclair sets out to ‘find’ London through a type of “mad walking” that he alternately considers

⁹ Kenneth Baker, “On a Highway to Bloody Hell,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 January 2003, www.sfgate.com/books/article/On-a-highway-to-bloody-hell-A-writer-s-walk-2638784.php, Accessed 8 Jan 2018.

¹⁰ Sinclair’s 2003 book, *Lights of for the Territory*, along with *London Orbital* have often been credited with reinvigorating contemporary interest in psychogeography and creative walking practices, especially in Britain. See also Barfield, Stephen, “Psychogeography: Will Self and Iain Sinclair in Conversation with Stephen Jackson,” Edited by Steven Barfield, Transcribed by Karian Schuitema, *The Literary London Journal*, March 2008 <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2008/sinclair-self.html>, Accessed 8 Jan 2018.

a mystical pilgrimage and a “hysterical fugue” (*Orison*, 6). Utilizing the eclectic and eccentric walking practices of his literary predecessors (and finding room for his own inventive pedestrian tactics), *London Orbital* becomes an occultish “deep map” of Greater London that probes the spatial and social layout of the city by directing “nervous attention” towards the interlinked stories of the people, places, and things Sinclair finds along the M25’s mesmerizing “one hundred and twenty miles of tarmac” (*Orison*, 6).

Though *London Orbital* might have proven an apt literary complement to Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* – especially given the uncannily doubled orbital metaphors that govern the formal structure of each text – this chapter will explore Sinclair’s companion walking narrative, *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare’s ‘Journey out of Essex.’* Looking to escape the “gravity of London” and vanquish the psychological hangover engendered by his M25 walks, *Edge of the Orison* charts Sinclair’s quest to complete the “unwritten chapter” of *London Orbital* via a four-day, eighty-mile walk in the footsteps of John Clare, England’s famous nineteenth-century “peasant poet” (*Orison*, 5). Admitting that the twelve walks around the M25 should have “cured” him of “the compulsion to be on the hoof,” Sinclair’s self-pathologized need to move forces him back out in search of “the traces of the mad poet John Clare,” who, in the summer of 1841, absconded from High Beach, a private mental asylum in Essex, and walked north for three-and-a-half delusional days to return to his home and family in Northborough (*Orison*, 5). According to Sinclair, Clare’s flight from High Beach, which Clare remembered and

recorded as “Recollections of the Journey out of Essex,” “launched one of the great English journeys.” Pulled by his wife’s ancestral connection to Clare’s Northamptonshire home, his fascination with Clare’s poetry and biography, and his insistent desire to wander, Sinclair “volunteers” to “transcribe and interpret” John Clare’s “shamanic journey” by following in his footsteps and writing about it (*Orison*, 123, 7).¹¹

*

Sinclair’s *Edge of the Orison* offers another means through which we can explore the project of critical contemporaneity outlined in the first chapter. Sebald engaged with the past by using the walk – as both embodied action and formal literary structure – as a catalyst for a form of historical consciousness characterized by intricate patterns of connection that revealed, however indistinctly, the dynamic ways in which the past and present are persistently interlinked. Importantly, however, Sebald’s narrative casts the solitary walker as a (generally) passive receiver of revelatory moments of Benjaminian historical surprise, rather than an insistent creator of the type of associative historical consciousness upon which his fiction, as a whole, insists. In other words, Sebald’s narrator does not set off on his walks with a hypothesis about what he will find; in fact, the narrator does not even seem to know, at least at the outset, that his walks will incite

¹¹ This ancestral connection includes his wife’s father’s claim to have somehow been related to the Clare family.

the type of creative, connection-driven thinking that Sebald, the author, self-consciously crafts through his prose. This gap between author and semi-autobiographical narrator exists, at least in part, because, to Sebald, being a contemporary with the past relies on the invention and activation of *fictions* and the careful creation of prose narratives that exist within the generic orbit of the novel, rather than autobiography or non-fiction. As was stated previously, fiction, guided formally by the walk, is the key to Sebald's unique mode of critical encounter with the history, and it is through the portal of fiction that Sebald re-temporalizes the present and opens the door to the past.

If Sebald's narrator walks patiently through the Suffolk countryside waiting for an entryway to history to reveal itself through the fog and mist, Sinclair sets out on a walk with the intent of finding the door and banging on it with both fists. (Let me in! I know you're there!) Unlike Sebald, Sinclair's walks approach and probe his historical, literary, geographic, and autobiographic subjects not through passive encounters that only reveal themselves through the structures of fiction but through active *interventions* represented through keenly-observed and passionate, but also frenetic, perplexing, and occasionally-impenetrable, non-fiction prose. While Sebald and Sinclair share a desire to be "overwhelmed by the walk" and often lose themselves within the stories of those they follow (or invent), Sinclair is distinctly aware of his walks as "projects" through which he must find and become part of "stories that are waiting" in the landscape (*Orison*, 35). Unlike Sebald, whose walks eschew the structure and objectives of the quest

narrative, Sinclair casts himself as an eccentric epic hero: he must bravely rescue landscape and history from obscurity and savagely fight the staid and sterile stories of the heritage industry in order to bring home meaning, narrative, and personal transformation as his much-coveted prizes.

Though this cursory characterization of Sinclair's intentions and affect makes him sound brash and insensitive in the face of Sebald's quiet, almost reverent contemplative style, to Sinclair, the radical process of intervening in the past is not destructive or heartless. Instead, intervention is a sensitive, even compassionate (albeit occasionally frenzied and cheeky) redirection of attention towards those places, people, and objects we are not accustomed to seeing – those things that exist outside our daily routines and at the margins of our consciousness such as ruined buildings, discarded photographs, hidden gravestones, forgotten ancestors, misremembered poems and isolated street signs, among other material and psychic scraps and debris. In order to discover how these objects interact with and influence our moods and movement through a place, acts of intervention are achieved by the simple act of "noticing" the details of the places through which one walks and, importantly, "inventing" responses to them (*Orison*, 147).

Writing in a unique style that blends documentary reportage with surrealist reverie and biting satirical wit, Sinclair's quest to rediscover John Clare represents a unique form of historical witnessing at walking pace. Moving through the landscape in

search of Clare's ghost, Sinclair walks to discover and describe how words and world endlessly interact and how intervening in the past consists of inquisitive practices of looking (or redirecting attention) and an ongoing openness to the ways in which the landscape and its occupants – dead or alive – speak. Importantly, intervention, in Sinclair's formulation, also consists of an ethical imperative to trespass – to walk, literally and figuratively, on forbidden ground. Not only does Sinclair climb fences, disregard street signs, and forge new pedestrian paths in pursuit of his subject, his prose, which is littered with inexhaustible lists and obscure literary and geographic references, is often intentionally arcane and generically baffling, holding readers, critics, and publishers at arm's length, thereby refusing interpretive capture within the literary-critical establishment or the industrial publishing juggernaut of the travel guide.

Channeling the elegiac spirit of John Clare's poetic lament against the enclosure of the English commons in the nineteenth century and railing against the modern state's continued drive to privatize, corporatize, and capitalize on the landscape and its history, *Edge of the Orison* represents a playful, yet insistent, political call to reinvent our relationship to the places in which we live and walk. To Sinclair, walking becomes a fundamentally "radical" act – a "disobedient" and "impulsive" opportunity to enliven our relationship to place and its immanent forgotten histories.¹² Although personal

¹² Kobek, Jarrett, "Walking is a Radical Act: An Interview with Iain Sinclair," *Solar Luxuriance*, 10 September 2013, solarluxuriance.com/walking.html, Accessed 8 Jan 2018.

transformation is perhaps still the holy grail of Sinclair's quest, the ever-shifting pathways of non-fiction narrative offer readers an imaginative, revelatory, and ethical intervention into the ghostly stores of both place and past.

II. Bad Backs Revisited

If there is a quick and effective means by which we can move from the melancholy, abstracted walks of Sebald into the more concrete, footsore narratives of Sinclair, it is through again looking backwards towards Benjamin's "Angel of History." In the last chapter, Benjamin's angel became the representative image through which we conceptualized the Sebaldian contemporary. Staring wide-eyed, the angel faces resolutely backward and watches in horror as the ruins of history gather at his feet, a posture that we saw uncannily doubled by Timothy Bewes' exasperated literary critic, who turns his head backward in a losing effort to freeze contemporary fiction in place, and Agamben's century-beast, whose back breaks as he looks over his shoulder to examine his own tracks. Sebald's solitary walker, then, became the melancholy figure charged with repairing these symbolic fractured backs (thereby breaking his own) through the courageous act of setting different times in relation to each other through the weaving together of poetic fictions. His walks became the practical and formal means through which the ethical act of re-temporalizing the present could be achieved.

Sinclair, on the other hand, just has a bad back. "The prospect of repeating Clare's walk alarmed me," he confides as he reflects, mid-narrative, on his decision to

follow the poet's route from Essex to Northamptonshire (*Orison*, 125). Though Sinclair acknowledges that Clare's journey was "admirably straightforward: a vertical line dangled between Northborough and Enfield with a kink snagged on High Beach," he dutifully admits the notable "flaw" in his walking plan: "a temperamental spine" (*Orison*, 124-5). Scoliosis, in fact: "[a] lateral deviation of the backbone caused by congenital or acquired abnormalities of the vertebrae. One leg shorter than the other. With inevitable compensations: muscle strain, skewings of tissue. Enough miles on the clock, over the last half-century, to do real damage" (*Orison*, 124-5).

In addition to being laugh-out-loud funny in comparison to the hushed solemnity of Benjamin's angel and his Sebaldian walking counterpart, Sinclair's reference to his bad back (and to the physical ailments of everybody accompanying him along his journey) can be read as another notable doubling of our representative image as well as a jarring reminder of the physical nature of the walk itself. The aching quest for metaphysical meaning is more than just symbolically painful. It literally hurts, as Sinclair's poet-walker's fragile human body attests. "Backs, at my age, are a given; bad ones," he reiterates, adding that his aging, walker's body is "wearing out" "piece by piece" (*Orison*, 125). Even the map of Clare's route – the "vertical line...with a kink" – comes to resemble Sinclair's crooked back as he remembers his nagging worry about his latest attempt to walk himself into relation with the past. And, as he re-inspects the

“crabby journal” he kept during the walk, “old hurts return” to remind him of the physical “toll” of his many years on the move (*Orison*, 124-5).

It is important to dwell on Sinclair’s “temperamental spine,” for a moment, as this admission to human fragility and the “serious” physical nature of a “long-distance walk” complements rather than overshadows (or completely obscures) the intellectual and spiritual intensity of his journey (*Orison*, 127). Unlike Sebald, whose poet-walker is frequently overwhelmed by the incredible emotional drain of his encounters with the landscape and its histories, Sinclair’s walker is also keen to note the more straightforward facts of an aching back, sore knees, and blistered heels and takes delight in details that seem comparatively minor only for being related to the grounded body rather than the transcendent mind or spirit. “Feet gone” and “sunburnt,” Sinclair’s record of his walks leaves room for the visceral remembering of the ongoing narratives of the speaking body, a presence that makes its voice heard even through the “1,000-mile-guaranteed-no-blister” “double layered” socks bought to ease its passage (*Orison*, 162-3).

On the other hand (or foot), however, literal bad backs are also meant to communicate symbolic connection, as the pained figure of Iain Sinclair walking the “vertical line” between High Beach and Northborough eerily begins to resemble the “foot foundered and broken down” image of his subject, John Clare (*Orison*, 5).

Quoting directly from Clare’s “Recollections of the Journey out of Essex,” Sinclair self-

consciously writes his own hunched body into Clare's "hobbled footsteps," a narrative strategy that is replicated (with a kink) when he imagines Clare's route along the Great North Road via vertebral metaphor (*Orison*, 213). "The road was his spine," writes Sinclair, as he imagines the axis of Clare's geographic orbit as his metaphorical backbone, a doubling that maps Clare's body and route onto Sinclair's own and invites readers to consider the uncannily mirrored images as an avenue of bodily, spiritual, and textual communication and communion between the seeker and his subject. Unable to resist, Sinclair then couples this image with another recycled metaphor. Describing Clare's deviation east and west off the old Roman road as a mode of movement undertaken in "crab fashion," Sinclair gestures back toward the "crabby" handwriting in his own walking journal. Spines, streets, and script become one as Sinclair cannily creates connections between bodies, routes, and writing by mapping Clare's ailing body and addled memories onto his own, positioning himself as Clare's topographic and textual double, a representation that suggestively elevates the seemingly unexceptional fact of a bad back to the singular status of symbolic or spiritual connection.

III. The Plurality of the Fixed Position

Sinclair's insistent method of offering readers catalogues of concrete detail in order to eventually locate psychic routes to uncanny connection or spiritual relationship characterizes much of *Edge of the Orison*, including his ongoing attempts to orient himself in physical and narrative space and understand and interrogate the goals of his

project. "Informed walkers fix their position," Sinclair confidently declares, while at the same time admitting to the "difficulty in setting an orientation" as he remembers the initial planning for his walk (*Orison*, 139, 133). "It was decided, and rapidly undecided," he explains, "to follow Clare as closely...up the Great North Road" as possible. Initially believing physical proximity, or an attempt to follow Clare's footsteps exactly (as remembered through his "Journey out of Essex"), would represent the most effective means by which to approach his subject, Sinclair envisions his journey as a nearly identical repetition of Clare's "rough" walk homeward (*Orison*, 132).

Almost immediately, however, remembering his age and the tricks of his crooked spine, Sinclair rejects the original plan to sleep in ditches ("no ditch bivouacs, too old for that") and loiter in barns ("no trespassed barns") as Clare did on his walk, and instead decides his journey will "be an approximation, in the spirit of [Clare's] original 1841 walk, with several fixed points: a private hotel booked at Stevenage, a pub in St Neots, the Bell Inn at Stilton" (*Orison*, 132). Demonstrating his wry sense of humor and an ongoing willingness to joke at his own expense, Sinclair's spiritual journey in the traces of John Clare immediately gets downgraded to "an approximation" of Clare's laborious walk, a loose reproduction that actually leaves out many of its key details. Not only will Sinclair alter Clare's geographic route and bypass several of his noted landmarks, he will not replicate Clare's wretched sleeping conditions (he is "booked" at "private" hotels and inns) nor his excruciating hunger (he has plans to stop at local pubs

along the way). Importantly, Sinclair also will not replicate Clare's abject poverty, as he admits to "breaking faith with Clare" through the distinctly non-mystical aspect practice of "discover[ing] lodgings through the Internet and secur[ing] them with credit cards" (*Orison*, 132).

Though Sinclair's journey deviates from his initial expectations, his willingness to admit to the flaws in his lofty plans and his subsequent recalibration of his original route asks readers to consider the merits of a walking project achieved via "approximation" rather than replication. Rather than concerning himself with the purity of his quest or the exactitude of his route or walking conditions, Sinclair decides to pursue the "spirit" of John Clare's walk by channeling Clare's erratic rhythms and hallucinogenic desires – his fits and starts, his digressions and delusions, and his relentless desire to relocate his physical and psychic home. Though Sinclair still has to stop "every twenty or so paces to wrestle with oversized maps," he resolves to stalk his subject through improvisation, testing out routes that approach the "spectral presences" of the former Great North Road through "retakes," "tangents," and even "discontinued" physical and psychic pathways (*Orison*, 115, 127, 134).

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Just as Sinclair willingly admits to the improvisational nature of his walks in search of Clare – moving from the concrete particulars of bad backs, private hotels, and credit cards to the abstract realm of spinal metaphors and spectral presences – he

quickly realizes that the objective details of the landscape through which he walks quickly give way to shifting identities of place that resist his attempts to fix them in physical or narrative space. Wandering routes are “dangerously plural,” he writes, describing the Great North Road, “London to York,” as having “so many earlier identities” – “cattle track, coach route, carriageway” – that “solid landscape” seems to fade in the midst of the plethora of physical and historical detail (*Orison*, 139). The plural identities of place that Sinclair discovers along his route do not represent a mode of Sebaldian epiphany, however, so much as a confirmation of a tried and true Sinclair walking “thesis” (*Orison*, 6). Remembering his walks along the M25, Sinclair describes his attempts to log “evidence” of place – rivers, concrete bridges, churches, bunkers, and buildings – as a documentary pursuit that continually gives way to ghostly transcriptions of “re-lived” histories, “records of simultaneity,” “oracular whispers, prompts, mangled information,” and “infected” “nightmares” (*Orison*, 6-7). As was stated earlier, Sinclair embarks on his walking projects with full knowledge that the journey will “mean,” and it will speak through shifting narratives of place (*Orison*, 6). “[I]n my conceit,” Sinclair recalls, “we were transformed. On a molecular level. Very gradually, and with considerable reluctance (on their part), forgotten ancestors acknowledged our feeble interventions” (*Orison*, 6).

The process of directing attention towards the view from the road, coupled with a willingness to transcribe what he sees, incites personal transformation that Sinclair

feels at both a spiritual and bodily (“molecular”) level – an emotional response that he is eager to regain as he pursues Clare. Recalling his earlier walking project Sinclair wills the landscape into his desired “plurality” through similar pathways from the particular to transcendent. “The bridge over the M25 is a moment worth celebrating,” he writes, “the point where our new walk breaks free from the old one” (*Orison*, 137). Recording the “chaos of stalled trucks, hurtling repmobiles, blue hoardings, white lines, lightning poles,” and “radio masts,” that one of his companion’s cameras collects into “Kodac-colour vorticism,” Sinclair begins reading the landscape through a catalogue of the shifting geographies and geometries of his present scene, a list that leads him to see and interpret the landscape through the metaphorical lens of photographic modern art (*Orison*, 137). Immediately casting aside this set of images, however, he next imagines the identity of the Great North Road (which he sees beyond the M25 bridge) through alternating allusions to mutating maps and myths. “Clare is directed to the Great North Road,” Sinclair writes as he contemplates his subject’s next steps, “[b]ut roads change: Ermine Street, Old North Road, Great North Road, A1, A1(M)” (*Orison*, 138). Observing that a century and a half of engineering interventions in the landscape will cause him to deviate from Clare’s route, Sinclair imagines the shifting identity of the Great North Road through a system of modified names that alludes to the road’s historical shift from a local “street” to a bustling interstate motorway.

Moving from motorway as modern art to motorway as historical map, Sinclair asks readers to evaluate the overlapping lenses through which we orient ourselves in space and consider the relationship between the spatial geometries of vorticist art and cartographic historical record. Where the gesture towards vorticism communicates the visceral chaos, energy, and hard angles of their highway location, it also abstracts the scene from its geographic particulars, making it two-dimensional and displacing it in time. The catalogue of “official” names of the Great North Road relocates Sinclair in specific mapped space but also flattens the view to a map’s two dimensions and leaves readers with an arc of shifting road names that lack topographical context or the intimacies of personal relationship.

Narrative, therefore, is where Sinclair’s text moves next in order to fill the gaps between mapped landscape and meaning. Though readers can already see how the landscape’s identity shifts as Sinclair tries to document what he sees through different visual and conceptual analogies, Sinclair eagerly supplements his portrait with additional layers of story and personal memory. “The Great North Road...was an English myth, serviced by Dick Turpin,” he muses, summoning the legendary presences of the eighteenth-century English highwayman, whose exploits along the Great North Road turn Sinclair’s strikingly modernist account into a traditional folk tale (*Orison*, 138). Recalling Turpin’s exaggerated exploits, which have been pulped and mythologized for centuries since his death, Sinclair weaves the tales of Turpin’s life and criminal history

into his examination of the landscape, projecting Turpin's mythical presence onto the road in order to unsettle his modernist, mapped portrait and interrogate Turpin's and his own seemingly disparate places in history. Identifying Turpin as "an Essex boy who drifted north," Sinclair locates a possible origin for the Turpin myth in Defoe, whose (never quite nonfictional) reportage of the escape of the real-life Richard Dudley ("former royalist officer...turn[ed] highwayman") across the Thames and up the Great North Road to York might have unconsciously lent its shape to the later Turpin myth (*Orison*, 126).¹³

Already, Turpin becomes problematically plural – part "royalist officer," part "Essex boy" on the run, a doubling Sinclair repeats by then identifying links between Turpin's mythologized escape and that of Harry Roberts, "the 1966 police killer," both of whom were "supposed to have" eluded capture by hunkering down in a cave in Epping Forest (*Orison*, 126). To Sinclair, the hypothetical "supposed to have," or the prospect of historical and geographic common ground, represents just as important an entryway into landscape, myth, and history, as proven historical facts. Like Sebald, Sinclair postulates connection through an examination of the "probable" in order to explore new avenues into the plural histories of place rather than to discover its official narrative.

¹³ Sinclair credits this theory of the Defoe-ian origins of the Dick Turpin myth to James Sharpe's *Dick Turpin, The Myth of the English Highwayman* (*Orison*, 126). Historians seem to universally agree that Dick Turpin never made the ride up the Great North Road that was attributed to him in nineteenth-century romance fiction, but there are many theories as to who this ride might have been based on. Again, this just supports Sinclair's suggestion that Dick Turpin and the road on which he rode has "plural" and shifting identities.

Turpin, Dudley, and Roberts come to represent “phantoms” of Sinclair’s version of the Great North Road by being written into narrative connection, informing each other’s stories (whether factual or mythical) and populating the landscape with memories of travel up and down a route it remains possible none of them ever even took.

*

As if our understanding of the Great North Road were not crowded enough, Sinclair also explores Clare’s northward route through reference to personal memory. Importantly, however, personal memories are represented through a slippery narrative that shifts between recollections, impressions, and reveries that cannot always be attributed to Sinclair himself. “I know that road, the A1,” he dreamily writes, remembering how the act of “driving” and “re-driving” the former Great North Road became a process of “overlaying one journey with another” (*Orison*, 136). Echoing the perceptual and narrative layering of modern art, maps, and myths on top of one another, Sinclair suggests that as the “ghosts” of the road become more apparent (or as his perceptions and representations of the road multiply) “solid landscape fades,” an observation he carefully juxtaposes with a concrete memory of the young-adult version of his wife, Anna (*Orison*, 139). Though Anna is still alive and not at all a ghost (indeed, her voice and vision act as a gravitational point for Sinclair’s walk and narrative), Sinclair’s perceptions of the A1 are haunted by the ghostly recall of a younger, “smart-suited” Anna Hadman getting ready to visit London to meet “her father at the Great

Northern Hotel, near King's Cross" (*Orison*, 139). Speculating that she might have been in town for an interview, he remembers Anna's visit with her father and their fog-riddled journey back home up the A1 as if it were his own. Luxuriating in a catalogue of impressionistic details that do not seem to have originated through first-hand observation, Sinclair "remembers" London on the night of Anna's trip through a collection of poetic, rain-soaked metaphors:

The Great Northern Hotel...was a wet hulk...Belonging to the river, not the railway. London was grey skin, fouled lungs...hands slipping on clammy rails...a drowned valley. The A1 was a supposition, a blind guess. Road signs were there to be touched, not read" (*Orison*, 139-40).

Here, the literal London mists and the figurative mists of memory make the A1 into a "blind" and ghostly "supposition" that contrasts strikingly with the acute velocity of the previous vorticist imagery and the detailed precision of the evolving map. However, the remarkable attention to impressionistic detail suggests the road might be reconfigured again through poetic reference. The "wet hulk" of the hotel and the "grey skin" and "fouled lungs" of the London evening are striking not only for their sharpness of metaphorical vision but also for their ability to destabilize readers in literary genre and time. On the Great North Road, Sinclair suggests, our impressions may move from the abstraction and energy of photographic vorticism to the lyrical precision of poetic imagism, a shift that can be seamless or jarring, depending on the narrative context.

Following Anna and her father as they travel through the seemingly deserted mists of the motorway, Sinclair continues to narrate his wife's memory in gripping present-tense prose:

By Norman Cross visibility is, what, six feet? The car edges toward the presumption of a roundabout. [Anna] can barely see the kerb. She counts. Gets it wrong...Out of nowhere, full beams: blinding. Honks, shouts. They can't go any slower, they are already at walking pace. They hear the lorry apply its brakes. The driver gets out, comes over to them. He says something. The steam from his mouth, a little whiter than the mist, gives away his position. They are travelling, so it seems, the wrong way, up one of the fiercest roads in England (*Orison*, 140).

Writing in short, staccato sentences, and using free-indirect discourse to intensify our sense of unease, Sinclair presents readers with an additional impression of the moody and mercurial Great North Road through the animation of personal memory. In doing so, he reinforces his thesis that the landscapes through which we walk are resoundingly "plural" while also suggesting that personal memories are not actually personal (or private) at all. Instead, for Sinclair, memories, which are constantly shared, echoed, recycled, and reiterated, are both plural and porous, making the notion of ownership of one's self and past seem just as mythical as the legends of Dick Turpin. Memories slip across the borders of self, a movement inspired by the dual acts of walking and writing, and memories that are not always our own recurrently inform our sense of place, a conclusion that Sinclair arrives at by concluding Anna's memory with a reference to John Clare. "They can congratulate themselves," he writes of his future wife and father-

in-law, “when they stop shaking, on outperforming Clare: navigating [the A1] without benefit of mileposts and toll gates” (*Orison*, 140).

CHAPTER THREE

Walking and Cosmopolitanism in the Open City

At the beginning of the last chapter, I wrote that it was the ghost of Walter Benjamin that haunted this dissertation, shaping the associational aesthetics and uncanny critical methods of the walker-writers I have been seeking to explore. In one sense, this haunting can be understood as part of an ongoing conversation Sebald's and Sinclair's texts have maintained with Benjamin's thoughts on the figure of the walker, the philosophy of history, and the phenomenological textures of everyday life – a conversation that has since been taken up by Teju Cole, whose 2011 novel *Open City* directly engages with Benjamin's innovative critical methods in order to explore the history and social life of contemporary New York City. *Open City*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Edge of the Orison*, then, become literary convergence points where the paths of walker-writers metaphorically meet in order to think through shared questions of how one encounters and represents contemporary and historical events, personal memory, and perceptual experience beginning at ground level.

Through a different symbolic lens, however, Benjamin's haunting presence can also be viewed as an aesthetic map, or a set of haunting waymarkers, directing contemporary walker-writers towards particular modes of relation with place, history, personal identity, and text. That Sebald and Sinclair (and Cole) persistently orient their

wanderings around touchstone images, phenomena, affects, and ideas in Benjamin's work, becomes a testament to the evocative form of literary criticism and engaged-yet-enigmatic kinds of historical interrogation Benjamin relentlessly practiced as well as to the resonances of those key ideas across time and geographic space. Seeking to create a place for himself as a literary critic by re-creating the genre of criticism itself, Benjamin's work becomes a luminous orientation point for texts that strive to engage with his ambiguous, often mystifying material and associational, genre-defying methods, and, like pilgrims, contemporary walker-writers retrace the literary and philosophical routes of his thought and return to his work again and again to consider new ways of moving through space, encountering the past, and experimenting with a hybrid poetics that links personal and historical narrative, private and public memory, and literary and cultural criticism.¹

This constant returning to the literary and theoretical spaces opened up by Benjamin's thought is not limited to text, however; it wanders into the physical world through the kind of footsteps walking I have been tracking throughout this dissertation. Like Mandel, Gee, and Sinclair who returned to the paths of Keats, Sebald, and Clare to walk their way into contact with their literary predecessors, writers and critics have eagerly sought out Benjamin's biography to track the geographic routes and sights he encountered in his life (and recounted in his writings) as a means by which to better

¹ Arendt, 23-4.

know both the man and his work. Anthropologist Michael D. Jackson undertook one such literary pilgrimage, seeking the footsteps of Benjamin to consider whether “shadowing a writer through the landscape” might “enable one to know that writer’s frame of mind or translate his thoughts.”² Resolving to follow the path of Benjamin’s “fateful” September 1940 “journey” across the French Pyrenees towards Spain, Jackson sought the “parallels and echoes” of a shared (i.e. haunted) walking experience as a route by which to interrogate his intensely felt affinity for Benjamin as a writer and thinker who, he argues, “enlarged [man’s] capacity of seeing the world in new ways” (*Footsteps*, 10-11). Characterizing this broadening capacity of Benjamin’s thought through the Arendtian concept of “training one’s imagination to go visiting,” Jackson visited the literal sites of Benjamin’s mid-century flight from Nazi-occupied France thereby learning to understand his own walks as an ongoing conversation with Benjamin’s ghost – a transformational (and translational) mode of affective and intellectual exchange and (unpredictable) boundary crossing that made the borders between past and present – dead and living – flexible and porous (*Footsteps*, 20).

Although I have already characterized the walk and the writing that recounts it as a form of liminal or third space, Jackson hints at an alternative formulation of the walk as a kind of “border situation” in which the very identity of the walker and the

² Jackson, Michael D., “In the Footsteps of Walter Benjamin,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Vol. 34, No. 2, Spring 2006), 10; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (*Footsteps*, Page Number).

ordered coherence of his world are cast into doubt, sparking insight, connection, and perceptual – even existential – awareness that might not be possible otherwise (*Footsteps*, 20).³ Importantly, however, Jackson also identifies this experience of indeterminacy as potentially “nightmarish” or “farcical,” arguing that this was certainly the case for Benjamin, who walked through the Pyrenees as a refugee whose markers of political, ethnic, and religious identity were never under his own control (*Footsteps*, 20). In this way, Jackson understands he cannot truly replicate Benjamin’s walk but must try to act as a “witness” to it by acknowledging the precarity and horror of Benjamin’s forced migration to the Spanish border and memorializing that walk and its sites, stumbles, and revelations in essay form (*Footsteps*, 21).

Walking without the aid of a guide and “filled with trepidation about setting off into an unknown region” Jackson describes his walk as both exhilarating and paralyzing, beset by “paths that led nowhere, missed critical turnoffs...anxiety and doubt” (*Footsteps*, 16). However, he soon realizes that a fundamental part of his walking

³ Jackson derives “border situations” directly from Karl Jaspers’ “boundary” or “limit situations” – encounters in which the “human mind confronts the restrictions and pathological narrowness of its existing forms.” To Jaspers (and Jackson), these moments occur around experiences of anxiety, existential uncertainty, or dread and become opportunities through which the mind can recognize and transcend the “security” of its own limits, thereby opening the potential for new forms of being at both the personal and collective level. To Jaspers, these encounters yielding expanded self-consciousness are fundamentally relational and communicative, a quality Jackson implicitly explores by theorizing the walk as a potential starting point for contact or conversation between himself and Benjamin. Walking in Benjamin’s footsteps, Jackson argues, opens both the mind and the body to forms of relation guided not by knowledge or understanding but affinity and association that must then be explored, in his case, through text as a form of personal and historical witnessing. Thornhill, Chris, “Karl Jaspers,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Ed. Edward B. Zalta (Spring 2011), plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/jaspers/; Grieder, Alfons, “What are Boundary Situations? A Jasperian Notion Reconsidered,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* (Vol. 40, No. 3, October 2009), 335.

project consists in confronting the uncertainties of the walk's literal route and symbolic purpose. "There was...no more certainty that I had taken the same route Benjamin took than that my experiences bore any relationship with his, let alone any insights into his work," he writes (*Footsteps*, 16). "But perhaps such certainties are beside the point, since our relationship with even those closest to us are not necessarily founded on knowledge...but rather on a sense of a natural affinity or fellow-feeling that cannot be explained" (*Footsteps*, 16).

Simultaneously planned and improvised and seeking and eschewing 'true' knowledge, the motives and methods of Jackson's walk demonstrate the deep ambiguities and fundamental paradoxes embedded within his walking project. Crucially, however, these reflections also represent the uncanny way in which paradox can transform into poetics. Though his movement is strictly guided by the path of Benjamin's footsteps, Jackson ultimately understands his walking and writing as a process of being "set free" in both space and time to experience the landscape of place and memory through improvisation and creative association (*Footsteps*, 18). Similarly, though he argues that his relationship with, or deep-rooted "affinity" for, Benjamin "cannot be explained" in any systematic way, both his walk and the essay that documents it become texts that strive to articulate how this affinity becomes physically and psychically manifest and how embodied interaction with landscape, history, and memory opens up new routes for encountering and representing a world peopled by

ghosts and littered with the remains of the historical past. "How strange it is," he writes, "the way one's thoughts are set free by walking. I felt that I was writing a poem with my body, not my mind, by moving rather than using words. The poem was myself on the road. The *terroir* of a piece of writing, I said to myself – the way words soak up the earth and the lights" (*Footsteps*, 18).

Blending memoir, reverie, historical narrative, literary theory, and phenomenological ruminations on place and perceptual experience, Jackson seeks Benjamin through shared footsteps and a distinctive kind of textual poetics that should, by now, be intimately familiar. Though he never states as much, Jackson's essay is engaged in a thematic and stylistic dialogue not only with Benjamin but with Sebald, whose solitary walkers are simultaneously perpetual pilgrims on quasi-mystical journeys that yield both moments of existential horror and transcendent enlightenment, flâneurs who observe and document the world as an aesthetic project, wandering exiles who encounter the world but never truly belong in it, and tourists desperately seeking routes through the landscape that verify the continued possibility of authentic, meaningful experience. Jackson's walk in the footsteps of Benjamin unsurprisingly brings him into Sebald's massively influential literary orbit and demonstrates just how intimately Sebald's ideas, words, and moods permeate and haunt the contemporary walker-writer's geographic, aesthetic, and textual landscapes.

Though Jackson is literally following in the footsteps of Benjamin as he sets out

along the French Catalonian coast, the literary routes he follows also gesture uncannily towards Sebald, whose walks through Suffolk are, as we have seen, recounted through a unique blend of documentary reportage, historical narrative, dreamy memory, weary melancholy, and curiously flat affect that critics have come to understand as distinctly “Sebaldian.”⁴ Jackson’s essay clearly emulates Sebald by echoing this distinct aesthetic and revolving around the kinds of geographic environments, literary symbols, patterns of memory, and historical events that Sebald’s texts resolutely detail. One need not look further than the first few sentences of Jackson’s essay to feel thrust into a Sebaldian world. Jackson begins:

It was late in the evening when I arrived, and the town was being buffeted by a stiff wind off the sea and squalls of rain. After checking into my hotel, I had dinner in the hotel restaurant and then turned in early, halyards slapping against aluminum masts in the harbor, and a lighthouse flashing in the darkness. My last thoughts before falling asleep were of a photograph I had seen that morning in a Danish newspaper of a listing wooden boat...on whose cramped foredeck huddled 30 or 40 bewildered African asylum-seekers, and of a report in another paper of a proposal...to create ‘holding centers’...for these clandestine immigrants who every night risked their lives...” (*Footsteps*, 10).

⁴ Kavenna, Joanna, “A Trick of the Eye,” *The Telegraph* (August 22, 2004) www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3623825/A-trick-of-the-eye.html. Web. 8 Jan 2018. Kavenna writes, “The novels of W. G. Sebald have spawned a stylistic adjective – Sebaldian. Sebaldian suggests the mournful travel notes of narrators stumbling across Suffolk sands or through European cities, remembered meetings, fragments from books and plays, photographs and paintings; a cut and paste of cultural and personal memory.” Helpfully, Kavenna also acknowledges that Sebald’s formal innovations were, of course, not completely unique to Sebald, but came from the influences of “Thomas Bernhard, Sir Thomas Browne, Marcel Proust, and Thomas De Quincey among others.” However, by acknowledging Sebald’s influences, she is participating in a Sebaldian critical project in that his texts are in constant, intentional conversation with their sources of influence. This is something that Teju Cole’s texts will echo. In Cole’s case, however, that list of influences obviously includes Sebald.

Opening his lonely narrative in an old harbor under the watchful eye of a lighthouse amidst the darkness of his own thoughts and melancholy of contemporary events, Jackson seems to channel Sebald in both form and mood. Setting himself up as both pilgrim and tourist amidst the backdrop of interminable human migration, Jackson turns his purposeful wandering into a kind of search for knowledge, meaning, and likeness amidst the precarious and long history of other forms of journeying – specifically that of immigrants and refugees (of which Benjamin becomes the representative example) whose movements are beset by risk and entangled with difficult questions of what constitutes home and political belonging.

Compressing Sebald's long walk in *The Rings of Saturn* into several touchstone moments and images – dusk and darkness, the sea, lighthouses, the last images and thoughts before sleep, and the lingering effects/affects of photographs, newspapers, and archival documents on waking and sleeping consciousness – Jackson makes it immediately clear just how closely he has followed Sebald's literary lead. For example, in Lowestoft, Sebald's narrator recalls, "The rain clouds had dispersed when, after dinner, I took my first walk around the street and lanes of the town. Darkness was falling, and only the lighthouse with its shining glass cabin still caught the last luminous rays that came in from the western horizon" (*Rings*, 75). Then, in Southwold, Sebald's narrator falls asleep to a documentary film replete with archival footage and photographs relating to the life and death of British civil servant and humanitarian

Roger Casement and writes, "As my waking consciousness ebbed away, I could still hear every word of the narrator's account" (*Rings*, 103). This memory of waning consciousness also links to an earlier moment in which the narrator recalls a "grey shadow" of clouds being cast down "upon the earth," "darkening" the sky – an image which prompts Sebald's narrator to recall a newspaper article he had clipped from the paper whose images and text have woven their way into seemingly disconnected (but ultimately eerily linked) instances of wakefulness and dreaming (*Rings*, 59).

Echoing the associational atmosphere of Sebald's walks, Jackson also characterizes his relationship with Benjamin in Sebaldian terms – as a mixture of "natural affinity or fellow-feeling" that gets examined through surprising juxtapositions of historical events and networks of uncanny connection between the living and the dead (*Footsteps*, 16). In *The Rings of Saturn* this kind of relationship, which is always described in terms of its inability to be fully articulated or understood, is explored through Sebald's ongoing interest in the ghostly conversations select literary writers profess to have with their fellows across time and space. In one of Sebald's many episodes of embedded storytelling, for instance, his narrator considers how the English poet Edward Fitzgerald insistently described the "curiously close affinity" he felt towards Persian poet Omar Khayyam "across a distance of eight centuries" (*Rings*, 200). By translating Khayyam's work, Sebald's narrator suggests that Fitzgerald sought "a colloquy with the dead man" in an "attempt to bring to us tidings of him" and link his

own and Khayyam's historically disparate worlds "together in a way never allowed them by the calamitous course of history" (*Rings*, 200). For Jackson, as for Sebald, these inexplicable relationships spark novel (and ethically urgent) ways of reconceptualizing community and history, textualizing place and memory, and conversing with the dead. Walking, therefore, acts as a kinetic, aesthetic, and historical method through which the writer can begin to approach, experience, and describe the intricacies of these haunting relationships in order to "translate" them or make them intelligible through the medium of literary writing. The walk becomes an attempt to "lift the veil" – another metaphor Jackson borrows from Sebald – on these curious, shared affinities with the hope that history might be opened up through them (*Footsteps*, 13).

Considering the many points of stylistic and thematic likeness between Jackson's pilgrimage in Benjamin's footsteps and Sebald's pilgrimage through Suffolk, we *cannot help but* read Jackson's essay in Sebaldian terms. Though Jackson does not directly acknowledge Sebald's work or literary influence, the ambulatory structure of Sebald's prose and his mode of associational and accretive recall weave their way into Jackson's walking and haunting text and catalyze the linking of events or scenes that, in another literary form, would not be connected. Just as Sebald's walks and the writing that follows enable him to stumble upon likenesses that he "could not help thinking," Jackson's walk and the narrative he creates to recall and represent that walk cause him to consider the correspondences among people, events, and objects that he admits,

echoing Sebald, he “could not help but compare” (*Footsteps*, 18). Recounting uncanny affinities and linking disparate biographies and diverse places, histories, and ideas across time, Jackson pays homage in his walk to both Benjamin *and* Sebald, making it meaningful as a historical pilgrimage in search of the footsteps of Benjamin, an aesthetic pilgrimage in the literary footsteps of Sebald, and an uncanny conversation between writer-walkers across geographic and temporal space.

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By returning to Benjamin – this time through Jackson’s essay – I am again aiming to approach my subject through the digressive routes of the walker. As was stated earlier, Ammons referred to this technique as “clarification or intensification by distraction,” and regarded the process of looking away and rerouting as integral to any critical project. Jackson’s text works as another illustrative example of footsteps walking, but, perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates just how deeply indebted contemporary walker-writers are to Sebald in their exploration of the connections among walking, narrative form, historical interrogation, and aesthetics. That one cannot read Jackson’s essay without thinking it “Sebaldian” suggests a naturalization of Sebald’s particular kind of walking, seeing, thinking, and writing that mark his texts as an emergent form, center point, or, in Sebald’s terms, gravitational mass around which contemporary walking texts orbit. As we saw in the case of Gee’s documentary, this even holds true when Sebald himself is the subject or focal point of a creative, critical walking text. Gee’s

attempt to track Sebald through the physical and textual spaces of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and his desire to engage with Sebald's ideas and work by echoing their method and mood yields a hauntingly Sebaldian documentary product, demonstrating the increasingly commonplace interchangeability of man, method, and textual poetics and the fascinating way in which the "stylistic adjective" "Sebaldian" has come to refer to or represent an entire category of literary writing.⁵

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There is perhaps no contemporary writer who has acknowledged and embraced the Sebaldian label more than Nigerian-American novelist, photographer, and cultural critic Teju Cole.⁶ Celebrated for his range of literary and historical knowledge, his unblinking insight into the postcolonial human condition, and the eerie originality of his prose, Cole burst onto the literary scene in 2011 with *Open City*, a genre-defying novel organized around the solitary walks, aesthetic ruminations, and connected memories of Julius, a Nigerian-American psychiatry resident in New York City.⁷ Marketed towards readers of Sebald and critically lauded for its elegant imagery and incisive, historically- and ethically-engaged ideas, *Open City* was immediately cast as a new and exciting addition to Sebald's enigmatic oeuvre, and Cole was instantly celebrated as one of

⁵ See, for example, O'Connell, Mark, "Why You Should Read W. G. Sebald," *New Yorker* December 14, 2011.

⁶ Cole has never been subtle or shy about acknowledging Sebald as a literary influence and has often talked and written about his relationship with Sebald's work in interviews and essays. Several of these texts will be explored later in this chapter.

⁷ Cole, Teju, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2011); hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as (OC, Page Number).

Sebald's most lyrical and astute literary heirs.⁸ Not only does *Open City* adopt a series of protracted walks as its digressive organizing principle, its narrative is also structured around a decidedly Sebaldian inquiry into the patterns and occlusions of personal and public memory. Digging deeply into the connections among modernity, globalization, natural history, and political violence and considering how these histories become intellectually and emotionally manifest in individual and collective life (as well as in the built environments throughout which people conduct their everyday lives), *Open City* represents Cole's unflinching attempt to follow Sebald's literary lead in examining what it means to be human in a global, interconnected world; what it means to be a contemporary of the past in a world beset by (willed acts of) personal and political forgetting; and what it means to access history and memory through ongoing interactions among the feet, the mind, and the pen.

Like Sebald's prose narratives, Cole's writing aspires to enter a conversation with literary walkers of the past in order to experiment with ways of being in and seeing the world, working to create psychic, geographic, and textual space for new constellations of stories that actively resist any unifying perspective on historical events. As we saw in the first chapter, Sebald's walker moved through the world on a pilgrimage inspired by the question of how one might become a critical contemporary with the past – a

⁸ See, for example, Syjuco, Migue, "These Crowded Streets," *The New York Times* (February 25, 2011); Wood, James, "The Arrival of Enigmas," *The New Yorker* (February 28, 2011); "Bird's Eye View," *The Economist* (July 30, 2011); and Messud, Claire, "The Secret Sharer," *The New York Review of Books* (July 14, 2011).

geographic, philosophical, and phenomenological inquiry that became intimately tied to a particular form of pedestrian movement through the physical world and associational, juxtapositional, and episodic movement through the literary text. Cole revisits both figure and form in *Open City*, experimenting with ways of walking in and reading the landscape of New York City in order to engage in the (Sebaldian *and* Benjaminian) critical project of excavating the past not in order to explain or understand it (i.e. digest it and forget it), but to become aware of how particular ways of seeing and storytelling (i.e. perspectives and discourses) become forms of ongoing violence, masking historical entanglements and marginalized points of view and perpetuating forms of domination and injustice.

Literary critic Alexander Greer Hartwiger considers Cole's walker, Julius, as an updated form of the nineteenth-century flâneur and argues that *Open City* is engaged in a project of "contrapuntal reading" that allows Cole to explore the "histories, lives, and deaths of marginalized and disenfranchised populations alongside dominant narratives."⁹ Adapting the theory of contrapuntal reading from postcolonial theorist Edward Said, Hartwiger argues that Julius's "meandering strolls" through the New York (and later, Brussels) streets produce a "polyphonic" rendering of the city and its inhabitants, allowing previously unconsidered stories to emerge and mingle in ways

⁹ Hartwiger, Alexander Greer, "The Postcolonial Flâneur: Open City and the Urban Palimpsest" *Postcolonial Text* (Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016), 2.

that reveal how the “legacies of colonialism, oppression, and exploitation” are intimately connected to the “economic, social, and political frameworks that shape the global city.”¹⁰ For Hartwiger, as for Said, contrapuntal reading acts as “a way to expose ‘intertwined and overlapping histories’” and discover “points of intersection” between cultural views that seem “closed to each other” and “attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences.”¹¹ Julius’s walks, then, become a means through which to probe how non-dominant populations “exist as spectral inhabitants in the global city,” simultaneously “occluded from view but essential to daily operations,” and consider how to represent these stories formally in ways that interrogate histories of violence and injustice rather than perpetuate them.¹² To Hartwiger, Julius becomes a model for a new kind of ethical global citizenship: the postcolonial flâneur is “simultaneously a chronicler of history, a keen observer of the present, and an augur of the future” – a witness to and reclaimer of many “buried pasts” and a unique observer and writer of both place and the histories of the oppressed.¹³

While Hartwiger celebrates Cole’s protagonist as an astute reader of both landscape and history and sees Cole’s work as an intervention in how we understand the past and its entanglement with the present, *Open City* has also been read with a more critical eye, alert to the performative and overtly literary aspects of Julius’s postcolonial

¹⁰ Hartwiger, 4, 7.

¹¹ Hartwiger, 4.

¹² Hartwiger, 7.

¹³ Hartwiger, 5, 7.

cosmopolitanism and the “profound estrangement” from his fellow beings that Julius’s walks and reveries ultimately reveal.¹⁴ Literary critic Madhu Krishnan, for example, argues that although *Open City* “self-consciously presents a celebration of cosmopolitan diversity,” Julius’s “performance” of “postcolonial spatiality” ultimately reinforces rather than disrupts the global city’s dominant narratives of “diversity, exoticism and cosmopolitan mobility” that “mask” the “destructive operations” and injustices inherent to the “world of flows” of global capitalism.¹⁵ Fundamental to Krishnan’s critique of Cole’s novel is a suspicion of just the kinds of walking, wandering, and wondering that this dissertation has, until now, critically celebrated. To Krishnan, Julius’s “aimless wandering” “appears,” at first, to be a “subversion of the ordering method of abstract, colonial space,” and walking “seems” to “create a counter-discourse” to the strictures of state and commercial power, yielding imaginative forms of being, moving, and thinking that defy the regulatory logic of the city.¹⁶ However, she argues that “this vision of walking as a tactical destabilization of order degenerates” and “transforms from an act of defiance to an act of occlusion” that ultimately represents a form of neoliberal mystification rather than postcolonial possibility.¹⁷ While Cole’s New York City seems a heterotopic space, “transform[ing] from a monolith into a city of diversions and

¹⁴ Krishnan, Madhu, “Postcoloniality, spatiality and cosmopolitanism in the *Open City*,” *Textual Practice* (Vol. 29, No. 4, 2015), 675.

¹⁵ Krishnan, 680.

¹⁶ Krishnan, 682-3.

¹⁷ Krishnan, 685.

diversity," Krishnan argues that the "dynamic," "polyphonic" history Julius strives to represent collapses underneath ossified literary tropes and spatial metaphors that problematically suggest the past can be uncovered and revealed in its entirety if one just digs deep enough, and walking becomes a "mode" of passive "avoidance" of connection rather than "communion" or "transgressive belonging."¹⁸

Literary critic Peter Vermeulen similarly takes aim at celebratory interpretations of Cole's novel, arguing, like Krishnan, that a closer look at Julius's forms of engagement with the world as well as the form of the novel as a whole demonstrate Cole's interrogation rather than affirmation of the contemporary walker-writer's critical project. Reading Cole's novel as an engagement with dueling questions of political and aesthetic cosmopolitanism, Vermeulen argues that although Julius's position as a "cosmopolitan flâneur," comfortable with "(re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance" to the places he calls home and possessing a "high-cultural frame of reference," are typically praised as capable of approaching "multifarious realities, stories, and memories" and allowing "multiple resonances and interconnections to emerge," *Open City* ultimately catalogues a list of "failed" rather than successful "attempts to forge intercultural connection."¹⁹ To Vermeulen, then, Cole's novel becomes a dark interrogation of the "limits of cosmopolitan imagination,"

¹⁸ Krishnan, 685-6.

¹⁹ Vermeulen, Pieter, "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Modern Literature* (Vol. 37, No. 1, Fall 2013), 40-42.

and Julius's walks ultimately fall flat as a viable form of relation to city, self, and global community, because they represent a means through which Julius actively detaches from rather than enters the messy social relations and politics of the global city.²⁰ Though Julius's virtuosic readings of world literature and culture make him seem engaged with the world in which he walks, Vermeulen argues that Cole's novel does not celebrate Julius's literary cosmopolitanism as an aesthetic or political achievement but demonstrates how Julius ultimately "privileges a rarified set of high-cultural gestures at the expense of a more inclusive approach" and leads him to continually mistake cultural reference for "worldly" action.²¹

Importantly, however, Vermeulen's critique rests on a specific interpretation of what constitutes "action" in the contemporary world. If Julius's walking intervention is to be judged through the lens of traditional forms of political action, his contemplative, demurring, ambulatory manner, which resists the insistent call to pick sides and speak up, clearly fails the test of "active" engagement. However, this simple reading of Julius's walks and ruminations as (in-)action overlooks the ways in which *Open City*, as a whole, challenges one-dimensional interpretations of what constitutes being an actor in the world, in the first place, and instead perhaps positions alternative forms of being, seeing, thinking, and doing as forms of acting and intervening, in themselves.

²⁰ Vermeulen, 42.

²¹ Vermeulen, 43-4.

Following Sebald, Cole is guided in *Open City* by forms of being that are often read as passive or nonparticipatory, and both writers catalogue and explore moments of suspended animation, reverie, awe, and solitude amidst scenes of vitality, exuberance, or togetherness to interrogate the ethics of different kinds of engagement with the world. For Julius, walking works as a means by which to activate “a heightened receptivity” or openness to people, place, and history, which catalyzes a forgetting of the self and a “disorientation in space and time” that allows him, like Sebald’s walker, to forge geographic and aesthetic connections and open up his (and readers’) “comparative imagination” to the polyphonic voices of history.²² However, as Vermeulen suggests, Cole’s novel, while “coding” Julius’s walks and musings as cosmopolitan “aesthetic achievements” also asks readers to consider whether its “main figures of transport – walking, memory, art” actually provide moments of ethical cosmopolitan contact or are “at best” “experiences of retreat or shared isolation.”²³

In this reading, critics are forced to consider two sets of linked questions that become crucial to thinking through Cole’s novel and the claims of this dissertation as a whole: First, does walking actually represent a radical form of being in the world, opening humans up to new ways of conceptualizing and enacting personal identity, community, memory, and history? And does the seemingly passive process of being

²² Vermeulen, 45-6; Keltner, Dacher, and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion,” *Cognition and Emotion* (Vol. 17, No. 2, 2003), 302.

²³ Vermeulen, 46-7.

“opened up” to new forms of being, seeing, and doing in the world represent an active, ethical intervention in a world beset by very real acts of violence and injustice? Or, is walking simply a way of shrinking from political engagement and forms of speaking and acting that might lead to larger patterns of cultural awareness and political change? And, second, does literary walking challenge the ways ethics and action and aesthetics and politics have been traditionally conceptualized and politically (de-)linked, in the first place?

Cole approaches these questions by positioning *Open City* as a vexed limit case of Sebaldian walking. By echoing Sebald’s narrative form, Cole stretches the literary walk to its ethical breaking point, simultaneously celebrating the contemporary walker as an engaged and insightful reader of and contributor to world culture and questioning whether the walker’s mode of moving through the world might more appropriately be read as an ethically irresponsible detachment from human engagement – a form of withdrawal and aesthetic solipsism masked in cosmopolitan political feeling and worldly literary community. By shifting the walker’s location to the global city (rather than the Sebaldian countryside) and orienting his contemplations around postcolonial questions of imperialism, migration, exile, and hybridity, Cole’s *Open City* considers how the walk can both create and close down forms of cosmopolitan connectedness. Through Cole, critics are asked to consider whether Sebald’s pioneering aesthetic form viewed through an alternative lens might simultaneously catalyze the recovery of the

unspoken histories and erasures of the global city while paradoxically eschewing vital forms of human contact and cultural exchange that take place in the present.

I. Cosmopolitan Cole

In order to think through the relationship between walking and aesthetic cosmopolitanism in *Open City*, it is important to understand how cosmopolitanism, originally an Enlightenment philosophical and political term, has been linked to culture, aesthetics, and literary form as well as how Cole has, through his attachment to celebrated (often uncategorizable) “high culture” figures such as Sebald, positioned himself as a cosmopolitan man of letters in his own right. Tellingly, literary critic Rebecca Walkowitz begins her investigation of literary and “critical” cosmopolitanism by considering how writers like Sebald and Cole, whose lives and work defy traditional forms of literary classification reliant on national citizenship, language, and even racial and ethnic identity, signal the need for new conceptualizations of culture and politics in an age of globalization.²⁴ Using Sebald as a model and beginning her analysis by running through numerous examples of how his many literary accolades consistently defy national and generic borders, Walkowitz considers how Sebald intentionally situated his writing around a resistance to national categories and ordered his narratives around local and global entanglements and perspectives that link the domestic and

²⁴ Walkowitz, Rebecca L., *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1.

international spheres. She writes:

[S]huttling among several nations and among memories of several nations, Sebald's narrators draw "connections" among experiences separated by time, place, and tone. He is willing, even eager, to assemble cultural and ethical points of view that seem inconsistent or incommensurate. Sebald does not transcend the categories of British, English, foreign, German, and Jewish writing. But he unsettles the differences among them...[He] thus enhances and also destabilizes local points of view: enhances, because he shows the global networks in which even the most local experiences participate, and disables, because he suggests that those networks change what local experiences are.²⁵

To Walkowitz, Sebald's style, governed by what she considers to be modernist tropes of "wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage, and portmanteau language," participates in the development of a critical cosmopolitanism that thinks "beyond the nation," informed by an "attitude, stance, posture, and consciousness" that structures and transcends literary writing.²⁶ In other words, aesthetics – conceptualized here through the particulars of style – informs and has the potential to shape both our understanding of literary writing and politics, creating forms through which to compare "versions of transnational thought; [test] moral and political norms, including the norms of critical thinking; and valu[e] informal as well as transient models of community."²⁷

Following an ethic of inclusivity and openness as well as an awareness of networks of connection, likeness, and difference, Walkowitz's critical cosmopolitanism

²⁵ Walkowitz, 2.

²⁶ Walkowitz, 2.

²⁷ Walkowitz, 2.

looks to (modernist) literary aesthetics for the kinds of attitudes, subjectivities, forms of political being and community that philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah articulates as the ideals of political cosmopolitanism. Tracing the term back to its Greek roots, through its elaborations in Roman and Christian traditions, onto its idealist forms in Kantian Enlightenment political philosophy, and into its present iterations in the age of globalization, Appiah argues for two deeply-rooted, intertwining strands of thought that define historical and contemporary cosmopolitanism. First, he notes, “[H]umans have obligations to others...that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the normal ties of a shared citizenship.” Second, both “human life,” as a whole, and “particular human lives,” in the intricacies of their individual and communal being, have “value” that must be taken seriously.²⁸ For Appiah, it is at the crossroads of this “universal concern” for all humanity and “respect for legitimate difference” of distinct human lives and diverse communal formations that cosmopolitanism becomes philosophically and politically challenging. However, it is also at this crossroads that literary writing, such as that of Sebald and Cole, works to explore and imagine the possibilities for “habits of coexistence” that Appiah believes are central to living in a global, interdependent world.²⁹ Appiah understands these habits as rooted in “conversation,” a term he deploys to its fullest meaning, defined both in its

²⁸ Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), xv.

²⁹ Appiah, xix.

pre-modern form as “living together” and “associating” and in its modern form as exchanging words and ideas through different kinds of speech.³⁰ Appiah turns to conversation as a model for cosmopolitan interaction throughout his writing, arguing for the necessity of “conversations across boundaries” and “between people from different ways of life” as a moral imperative and ethical good in a world that is only “getting more crowded.”³¹

Appiah’s cosmopolitan “conversations” can also be understood more broadly, however, if we consider what conversation might mean (and what forms it might take) to a critic like Walkowitz. Walkowitz argues for the power of literary style, or aesthetics, as a means through which to experiment with creative forms of cosmopolitanism. As I’ve argued previously, part of Sebald’s resonant aesthetic project lies in the ways in which walks become the formal means through which walker-writers initiate physical and textual *conversations* that transcend the borders of self and other and past and present, and this dissertation has participated in the effort to extend Sebald’s method in order to consider how texts converse through haunting forms of literary walking and writing that communicate aesthetically across time and space. Sebald’s walking and writing represents an ongoing search for critical contemporaneity that can now also be understood, through Cole, as part of a larger project of critical cosmopolitanism that

³⁰ Appiah, xix.

³¹ Appiah, xxi.

broadens Appiah's initial formulation of what it means to "develop habits of coexistence," speak "across boundaries," "live together," and "associate" by adding a temporal and aesthetic dimension to his spatial and political concept. In *Open City*, Appiah's cosmopolitanism, interpreted through Walkowitz's theorization of style, takes a Sebaldian (and Benjaminian) turn as Cole uses the marginal figure of the solitary walker to interrogate a cosmopolitanism where the past is alive and speaks to and through the present and where ambulatory forms of movement, thinking, and writing become habits of (uncanny) coexistence with diverse sets of people, places, and historical times.

*

The question remains, however: Is Cole's cosmopolitan version of the solitary walker so marginal, and are the kinds of "conversations" *Open City* enacts really conversations at all? As I stated earlier, Julius, *Open City*'s highly-educated, well-read, multilingual, white-collar narrator, has been criticized for seeming to retreat from human contact and communion in favor of a "rarified set" of high culture references, "styles and attitudes" that reveal his position of privilege as part of a global elite.³² According to this reading, Julius's "aestheticist cosmopolitanism" overlooks "material change" in its eagerness to forge connections between the "customs, culture, and beliefs"

³² Vermeulen, 43.

of others in ways that become “pseudo-solutions for worldly engagement.”³³ So, while Julius’s walks catalyze expansive intellectual journeys that wind their way through incredible swaths of literature, music, art, philosophy, history, and landscape, sparking new constellations of aesthetic association, patterns of recognition of historical trauma and injustice, and alternative modes of relating to place, his tendency towards aesthetic reference rather than intimate human connection solidifies rather than breaks down the barriers that mark him as a bearer of social and economic privilege. In this reading, his cosmopolitan conversations are brilliant but one-sided, and his curious forms of ambulatory engagement make him marginal but unable to truly connect with or represent the marginalized. To critics like Vermeulen, then, Julius’s walks represent a parodic form of mass tourism masquerading as cosmopolitanism, allowing Julius to delude himself into thinking his “imaginative transports” might “stand in for real global change.”³⁴

Again, however, this critique runs the risk of normalizing particular versions of moving, thinking, and acting in the world as capable of “real global change,” blocking the unique aesthetic dimensions of Cole’s cosmopolitan project from this narrow conceptual category and begging the questions of what constitutes “reality” and “change.” By criticizing Julius for his detachment, read here as a product of his elitism

³³ Vermeulen, 43.

³⁴ Vermeulen, 42.

(which is read, in turn, as a product of his deep interest in the realm of the aesthetic), and resolute refusal to speak in forms that are recognizable as politically “real” (read here as centered around “action”), we summarily dismiss the aesthetic as a space of cosmopolitan connection and belonging. We also wrongly assume non-“elites” (read here as those not in possession of a particular kind of cultural capital) incapable of eliciting and/or participating in cosmopolitan conversation (in both Cole’s and Appiah’s models) centered around literature, art, and the imagination. It is only from a position of privilege that the critic can judge what counts as cosmopolitan conversation and exclude certain kinds of people from connections that reroute, exceed, resist, or defy the narrow boundaries of traditional forms of political engagement.

*

While Julius does indeed engage in purposefully isolating acts of solitary walking and aesthetic reverie, Cole’s writing, both within and beyond *Open City*, demonstrates how cosmopolitan conversation takes on a remarkable array of forms that have the power to link many kinds of people through transient, yet shared moments of boundary-crossing aesthetic connection. Cole explores these kinds of cosmopolitan conversations in “Always Returning,” a short essay in *Known and Strange Things*, a 2016 compilation that brings together Cole’s writing on a wide range of subjects from literature, poetry, and art history, to travel, photography, and international politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, “Always Returning” is situated around a story of literary

pilgrimage – specifically, Cole’s subdued account of “play[ing] truant” from a conference in Norwich, England, to take a short pilgrimage to Sebald’s grave.³⁵ Beginning his essay with an evocation of place and mood rather than motive or goal, the first few pages of Cole’s essay intentionally withhold Sebald’s name in favor of communicating with readers through the subtleties of aesthetic form and thematic reference. “It was a gray morning, and visibility was poor,” Cole writes of the June day he decides to call a taxi to take him “out to the countryside,” but after “some confusion” with the driver, he finally sets off through the persistent fog, watching the “the city beg[i]n to thin out” behind him (“Always Returning,” 45). Echoing Sebald’s description of the “gray” East Anglian mists, Cole contemplatively watches the “landscape slip by” outside his window until his taxi driver breaks the silence and becomes talkative, “flitting from one subject to another in a laconic but unceasing way” (“Always Returning,” 45). Though the driver “breaks” the silence, Cole, like Sebald, eschews the traditional grammatical markers of dialogue – quotation marks and paragraph breaks – and allows the taxi driver’s ambling ruminations on the Norfolk countryside to meander along the page largely unbroken, a strategy that initially renders the driver’s words as simple background noise. However, the driver’s musings quickly become more distinct as readers familiar with both Cole’s literary influences and Sebald’s work begin to notice

³⁵ Cole, Teju. “Always Returning,” *Known and Strange Things* (New York: Random House, 2016), 45; hereafter cited parenthetically in text as (“Always Returning,” Page Number).

how closely the driver's knowledge and interests resemble those of Sebald, himself.

Recounting the driver's monologue, which details the connections between the landscape and the history of twentieth-century warfare, Cole writes:

I like the area and I like traveling in it, [the driver] said. There are many airfields around here...It's just something I do. I have a spare bit of time, yeah, I go down to an airfield, see an air show, or just visit a disused field, go down there, remember what it was like. Places like Greenham Common, down in Berkshire. You know about that, yeah? I said I didn't, but he could see now that I was making some notes, that he captured my interest. He forged ahead...Greenham Common's a major one. That's where your CND camp was, yeah, the women's peace camp, all that. Used to be cruise missiles and all sorts there through the eighties, until the nineties. I went down there, bit of runway left, but otherwise it's all gone... ("Always Returning," 46).

The driver's words dominate the next few pages of the text, inviting readers to see and interpret the landscape through a local perspective that uncannily channels Sebald.

Readers of Cole and Sebald cannot help but compare the taxi driver's interest in the geography of the fens and the history of its airfields to Sebald's in *The Rings of Saturn* and to the eerie ways in which the legacies of the Second World War and, later, the Cold War resonate through them. Before Cole has even stated the reason for his excursion to the countryside, then, readers already understand his essay as linked to Sebald's literary writing – part of a conversation that connects the geography and history of the airfields to an entire network of linked temporalities, people, places, and texts and makes Sebald a ghostly third party in a conversation being held in a taxi headed towards his grave.

But who is really part of this uncanny conversation? Does Cole's allusive recounting of his time spent listening to the taxi driver actually exclude the seemingly

anonymous driver from participation in this border-crossing literary conversation? And if the driver is not a full participant in this eerie colloquy, what does that say about the possibility of cosmopolitan conversation or connection that takes shape around aesthetic and literary reference? Clearly Cole positions himself, his readers, and Sebald as initiates in the intertextual world of literary high culture, poised to realize the uncanny links between the driver's ruminations and those that have been immortalized by Sebald's own writing. It is also likely that there are assumptions made about the literary limits of the taxi driver's knowledge, as Cole recounts his initial response to the driver as lukewarm and withdrawn, seemingly preferring the solitude of his own literary association and grief (which readers share through his text) over a mutual experience of revelatory connection or shared mourning with his working class acquaintance.

However, as Cole becomes more entranced by the taxi driver's elegiac account of the English countryside, the driver becomes more than just an empty conduit to connect Cole to Sebald. Recounting his initial muted response to the driver, Cole writes, "There is someone who would have loved to talk to you about this, I said, perhaps not loud enough for [the driver] to hear, and, as I said it, there was a sudden catch in my throat" ("Always Returning," 46). Though the driver seems an outsider to this world of literary reference, this moment of acknowledgment of Sebald, the "someone" that the driver presumably does not know, also represents the point at which the driver, previously identified simply as the 'someone' driving Cole's taxi, begins to shed his anonymity.

Cole recounts, "Only then did the driver introduce himself, turning back for a moment with his hand on the wheel...My name's Jason, he said. And, with the same laconic urgency as before, he continued talking" ("Always Returning," 46-7). From this point in the text onward, Cole's formerly unidentified taxi driver becomes Jason, a man with "blue eyes a little bulbous, but the palest and most guileless of blues, tending almost towards gray;" a man no longer simply defined by the service he provides but warmly characterized by Cole as "a sort of local historian" who shares a set of overlapping character traits, sensitivities, and historical interests with Cole's literary hero ("Always Returning," 51). Seeing in Jason both "a merriment and a melancholy" that resembles Sebald's, Cole reflects, "thinking of Jason's eyes and the slight mischief in his serious mien, I was faintly aware of others traveling the same circuits, pulled by an unidentifiable gravitational force into certain habits of mind and psyche" ("Always Returning," 51).

Connection is no longer reserved for elite carriers of literary knowledge but is possible across distances and times that become linked through shared experiences of historical memory and place as well as through the exchange of different forms of knowing and remembering among different sorts of people. Quoting Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, Cole asks, "Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor?" ("Always Returning," 51). Here Cole

wonders how to conceptualize or describe the “uncanny feelings” his conversations with Jason elicit, realizing just how intimately two people can be linked who initially seem to have nothing in common beyond shared routes through physical space.

As Cole continues narrating their encounter, Jason’s monologue and Sebald’s writing begin to intermingle in Cole’s mind such that they start to anticipate and prompt one another. For example, Jason remembers the particulars of an old “Spitfire” airplane that was “flown over Normandy on the morning of the D-Day landings” and Cole, “in flickering photographic recall, as though someone had just switched on a slide projector” remembers Sebald’s account of a man whose thoughts “constantly revolved around the bombing raids then being launched on Germany from the sixty-seven airfields that were established in East Anglia after 1940” (“Always Returning,” 47-8). Similarly, Jason remembers noticing a “small memorial” at a local airfield that he eventually discovers was for a young airman “flying in an air show...when his engines stalled and he went down,” which prompts Cole to recall one of Sebald’s “micropoems” memorializing two fallen pilots, who “took off from Le Bourge / & after that / were never / seen again” (“Always Returning,” 49). Conventional terms of intimacy and shared experience revolving around kinship and proximity become inadequate to describe Cole’s encounters with Jason in “Always Returning,” as Jason’s resemblances to Sebald are complemented by his strange abilities to anticipate Cole’s inner thoughts. Most startlingly, Jason’s musings seem to even preempt Cole’s own intertextual reveries

“as though he were commenting directly” on Cole’s “own silent thoughts” and directing him memories back towards his first experiences of reading Sebald’s writing (“Always Returning,” 49). Anticipating Cole’s reflections on the importance of personal memory to the telling of history and the experience of place in everyday life, Jason unseats Cole from his own inner monologue by (unconsciously) echoing Sebald, stating “These people are worth remembering. It’s nice to think that people will want to remember the past, because it shapes who we are, at the end of the day. I try to remember, you know” (“Always Returning,” 49-50).

Importantly, Cole’s essay becomes a way to “try to remember” a moment of cosmopolitan connection that takes shape around similar aesthetic routes through (and shared affinities for) the past. Though Cole’s encounter with Jason must eventually come to an end, it does so through a mutual exchange of information and memories that, for each person, represents a widening and linking of his particular interests to stories or texts he would not otherwise know. Jason, who has offered Cole an intimate look into his own experiences of and interactions with the East Anglian countryside, finally inquires as to Cole’s reasons for visiting the area, wondering about Cole’s interest in finding the small church in Framingham Earl and meandering through its graveyard. Jason states, “Just to satisfy my curiosity, this grave you came to see, he’s a writer, yeah? What’s his name, maybe I can find out more about him” (“Always Returning,” 51). After giving Jason the specifics of Sebald’s name and status as a writer and teacher of

literature “up at the university,” Cole complements Jason by articulating his likeness to Sebald in their shared and insistent desire to remember the past. “Like you,” Cole tells Jason, “[Sebald] didn’t want the past to be forgotten, especially the small and neglected stories,” and he departs as Jason writes down Sebald’s name to reference later.

“Traveling the same circuits” as the driver and Sebald, Cole ultimately understands this fleeting encounter as a moment of uncanny “return,” a significant instance of cosmopolitan connection routed through affinity, likeness, and shared routes through space that cannot but be recounted in Sebaldian literary form.

II. Pedestrian Perspectives

Though cosmopolitan connection appears possible when considered through the lens of Cole’s serendipitous meeting with the taxi driver en route to Sebald’s grave, the opportunities for shared experience in Cole’s *Open City* seem more tenuous, fraught with questions of political belonging, freedom of movement, and access to high culture. Importantly, this divergence may be partially explained through a closer look at the modes of movement and types of encounter each text explores. While “Always Returning” is not a walking text, per se, Cole’s route to cosmopolitan connection lies in the form of a literary pilgrimage, a type of journey primed for meaning making, metaphor, and symbolic – even spiritual – significance. That Cole’s pilgrimage to Sebald’s grave yields a text that celebrates the possibility of uncanny chance encounters and the haunting “return” of its literary subject is perhaps ultimately unsurprising given

the Sebaldian aesthetic parameters Cole's writing resolutely follows. *Open City*, on the other hand, focuses on a different type of solitary walking – that of the observant yet aloof flâneur – which presents readers with a different kind of investment in the possibilities of communion in the global city as well as with an alternative perspective through which to understand physical, psychic, and textual space.

As was stated previously, *Open City* is narrated through the point of view of Julius, a young, Nigerian-American psychiatrist who, in the last year of his fellowship at a prestigious New York City hospital, begins taking long evening walks as a “counterpoint” to his busy days at work (OC, 3). Originally conceiving of his new habit as a kind of “therapy” or “release from the tightly regulated mental environment” of his fellowship, Julius describes his walking as a “welcome opposite” to the “regimen of perfection and competence” demanded during his time at the hospital (OC, 7). “The walks met a need,” Julius states, for “improvisation” and the possibility of “mistakes,” and he revels in their “aimless,” “inconsequential” “progress,” musing that “every decision – where to turn...how long to remain lost...whether to watch the sun set...or to lope in the shadows” becomes a “reminder of freedom” (OC, 7).

Though Julius describes his wandering as resolutely improvisational, governed by a need to let his overworked mind and exhausted body drift, his nightly walks also become a means through which to learn the geographic and psychic textures of the city. Steadily increasing the length of his walks and finding himself “farther and farther

afield” each evening, Julius relentlessly recounts and catalogues his routes through the city, experimenting with different ways to name, categorize, and remember the details of the places through which he wanders (*OC*, 3). “I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city,” he writes, beginning the process of narrative recall by orienting his memory around the neighborhood he considers home (*OC*, 3). “The path that drops down from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and crosses Morningside Park is only fifteen minutes from Central Park. In the other direction, going west, it is some ten minutes to Sakura Park, and walking northward from there brings you towards Harlem, along the Hudson...” (*OC*, 3). Combining references to direction, street names, public landmarks, and walking distances and times, Julius considers different ways to describe and connect city spaces, weaving together objective and experiential knowledge in an effort to understand how “New York City worked itself into [his] life at walking pace” (*OC*, 3).

After orienting readers to Julius’ place on the map, however, Cole moves Julius’s account into a more subjective, sensual register, highlighting how Julius perceives the city around him. Julius recalls:

At first, I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness, a shock after the day’s focus and relative tranquility, as though someone had shattered the calm of a silent private chapel with the blare of a TV set. I wove my way through crowds of shoppers and workers, through road constructions and the horns of taxicabs. Walking through busy parts of town meant I laid eyes on more people, hundreds more, thousands even, than I was accustomed to seeing in the course of a day, but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation: if anything, it intensified them (*OC*, 6).

Combining nineteenth-century allusions to shock as the defining experience of city life with postmodern references to blaring TV sets, crowds of shoppers, and taxi horns, Julius identifies the challenges of entering city life at street level as both psychically overwhelming and socially isolating. The acoustic oppressiveness of the street constitutes a harsh interruption to the (seemingly sacred) tranquility of the hospital, and the rush of “countless faces” represents an intense contrast to the private spaces of work so much so that Julius’s wandering is not immediately rejuvenating but actually distressing and emotionally exhausting. Often finding himself in a state “of disorienting fatigue” at the end of the night, Julius’s walks turn into a relentless practice of submitting himself to the noisy spaces and shifting moods of the street – a search for “freedom” that get paradoxically coupled with his near-maniacal need to mentally catalogue the encounters, incidents, and sights of his walks in the hope he might give the mysterious city some semblance of structure, order, or coherence. Julius recounts:

I lay in bed...and I rehearsed in the dark the numerous incidents and sights I had encountered while roaming, sorting each encounter like a child playing with wooden blocks, trying to figure out which belonged where, which responded to which. Each neighborhood of the city appeared to be made of a different substance, each seemed to have a different air pressure, a difference psychic weight...My futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did my hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself... (OC, 7).

Likening his efforts to organize, classify, and arrange his perceptions of the city with a child’s beginner attempts to manipulate objects and control spaces with building blocks,

Julius is simultaneously mesmerized by the patterns and connections he can make between the places he has encountered but confounded by his inability to effectively sort his impressions and recount or define the “real city” in its totality. Instead of solidifying into a clear mental landscape that can be overlaid on top of a map of the city, Julius’s impressions refuse to stay in order or adhere to stable forms, and any meaning he might glean from his walks dissolves or morphs into abstraction.

Though Julius ultimately understands the task of mentally recounting his walks as a futile attempt to order the city and make it into an intelligible whole, Cole uses Julius’s intimate (and inundated) perspective from street level as an important symbolic counterpoint to the view from above, which Julius explores from the rooms, balconies, and windows of city buildings. Recounting his daily routines before walking came to dominate his physical and emotional life, Julius initially associates his high-rise retreat in Morningside Heights with nostalgic memories of evenings spent watching out his window for birds. “I used to look out the window like someone taking auspices,” he wistfully recalls, remembering his eagerness to see the “miracle of natural immigration” beyond his apartment (*OC*, 4). Wondering retrospectively whether his relentless wandering and his eager attention to the movement of birds outside his windows might be somehow related, he admits to “searching the sky” to catch a glimpse of “sparrows, wrens, orioles, tanagers, and swifts,” becoming increasingly “amazed” and mesmerized by the “tiny,” often “solitary” “specks” outside his building (*OC*, 4).

While Cole uses Julius's seemingly oracular interest in the movements of birds as a way to introduce larger themes of movement and migration – a subject he comes to understand as fundamental to both natural and human history – he also uses the birds as a means through which to experiment with contrasting points of view. Julius recalls, “Each time I caught sight of geese swooping in formation across the sky, I wondered how our life below might look from their perspective, and imagined that, were they ever to indulge in such speculation, the high-rises might seem to them like firs massed in a grove.” (OC, 4). Removed from the frantic life of the streets, Julius's apartment windows give him an elevated point of view from which to consider his place in and perspective on the city as well as an alternative, imaginary position – a birds-eye-view – from which to conceptualize his (and others') knowledge of the city's landscape and history.

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Juxtaposing the lofty, disembodied point of view from the high-rise to the more immediate view from the ground, Cole's text channels the opening paragraphs of Michel de Certeau's popular essay, “Walking in the City,” which famously considered competing visions of New York City from above and below. Opening the essay by contrasting the panoramic views available from the tops of Manhattan sky scrapers with the fragmentary, intimate perspectives available on city streets, Certeau compares conceptual and practical forms of spatial awareness and knowledge in order to explore the ways in which people experience the city as both abstract and lived space. Beginning

his essay with an account of “seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center,” Certeau describes the city from above as “a giant rhetoric of both expenditure and production,” an island characterized by a “wave of verticals,” a “stage of concrete, steel and glass” “composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs.”³⁶ While Certeau admits to taking “voluptuous” pleasure in this practice of “looking down on” New York as a “whole,” he ultimately argues that the view from above actually creates a “fiction of knowledge” (governed by metaphor) that masquerades as reality but really divorces the viewer from the phenomenological, lived experience of the city.³⁷ To Certeau, this lust for the perspective from above originates in a voyeuristic desire to “be a viewpoint and nothing more,” to look down on earth “like a god” in order to “see the city” and interpret it from a distance.³⁸ Crediting Medieval and Renaissance painters’ obsession with perspective as the originating moment of this “scopic drive,” Certeau argues that the “all-seeing power” of the “celestial eye” actually yields a visual simulacrum, or a theoretical picture of the city “whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices” that take place on the ground.³⁹ While the view from the World Trade Center seems to generate a perspective from which the city can be made into a “transparent text,” Certeau argues that this point of view misses the vibrant complexities and “murky” entanglements of the “daily behaviors” of the city’s

³⁶ Certeau, 91.

³⁷ Certeau, 92.

³⁸ Certeau, 92.

³⁹ Certeau, 92-3.

inhabitants and immobilizes the city as a lifeless optical artifact.⁴⁰

Casting aside this desire for a view from which the city can be rendered effortlessly intelligible, Certeau counters the fiction of the “voyeur god” by arguing for an exploration of city life “below the thresholds at which visibility begins.”⁴¹ “[T]he ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’” he writes, identifying “walkers” as “writers” of the city whose bodies constantly “follow the thicks and thins” of the city’s streets in order to craft an improvisational urban text that “elude[s] legibility.”⁴² Likening walkers to poets, Certeau argues for a conceptualization of spatiality that recognizes the plurality of ways in which people occupy, use, and experience space, and contrasts the static “geometrical” spatial constructions of the urban planner and cartographer with the dynamic, embodied practices of the urban pedestrian.⁴³ To Certeau, walking, as both grounded practice and point of view, complicates the abstract “clear text of the planned and readable city,” making it both strategically meaningful as a mode of resistance to surveillance and centralized power and metaphorically meaningful as a point of view that resists the myth of perfect knowledge.⁴⁴

III. Claiming (and) Cosmopolitanism

While Cole’s text begins with an echo of Certeau, shifting between the view from

⁴⁰ Certeau, 93.

⁴¹ Certeau, 93.

⁴² Certeau, 93.

⁴³ Certeau, 93.

⁴⁴ Certeau, 93.

Julius's towering apartment building to his experiences at street level, *Open City* does not simply dismiss Julius's birds-eye-view, nor does it disregard solitary spaces as fundamentally divorced from the creative routines of the global city. Instead, Cole experiments with his main character's spatial positions and practices to complicate any simple dichotomies of abstract and concrete (fictional and real) perspectives, weaving together viewpoints, places, and habits from above and below to consider different forms of participation in contemporary city life.

Embedding Julius's fixation with the birds outside his window within the avian imagery he uses to recall his everyday habits, Julius remembers his pre-walking life through a mixture of local, embodied detail and dreamy, detached reverie. "[N]estled" in the comforting murmur of classical radio from internet stations across the globe, Julius recalls spending his waking hours "flit[ing]" "from book to book: Barthes *Camera Lucida*, Peter Altenberg's *Telegrams of the Soul*, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Last Friend*, among others," habits that suggest his literary sophistication and worldliness alongside his desire for migrations of the mind that both parallel and invert the physical migrations of his beloved birds (OC, 5). From his "sparse apartment" in Upper Manhattan, Julius listens to the "disembodied" sounds of world radio and marvels at the aural intermingling of the "French, German, or Dutch" speech with the silent voices he reads in his books, which he notes "had likely been translated out of" one of the same European languages. (OC, 5). Julius's books and music simultaneously represent means

of temporal grounding and imaginative transport, serving to mark a particular time in Julius's life alongside formative routes of literary reference that take him beyond the solitary confines of his New York apartment and into the space of the global aesthetic.

Importantly, to Julius, the aesthetic represents a vital social space that he enters through the solitary reveries created by complementary practices of walking, listening, and reading. Remembering his tendency to lend his own voice to those on the radio and in his books, Julius recalls speaking the words in his books out loud to himself, noting the "odd way" in which his voice "mingled" with the others to create a "sonic fugue" that Julius interprets as a form of "eccentric" connection and global companionship (*OC*, 5). In this fugue state, Julius's intertextual aesthetic reveries, which migrate from music to philosophy to novels to critical theory, become a means through which he can explore and give "voice to another's words," allowing him to reflect on the nature of reading as an invitation to intellectual "exchange" or "conversation" through which "one person," regardless of his isolation in space or position in time, "is speaking to another" (*OC*, 5).

Although Julius enthusiastically seeks the stimulating "transport" of music and literature and eagerly recounts his entrance into sophisticated "conversations" that prompt him to make revelatory connections between subjects as diverse as fine art, political philosophy, psychiatry, and urban planning, Julius's aesthetic reveries represent both a bridge to cosmopolitan connection and a sophisticated defense system that allows Julius to avoid or withdraw from entanglement in the outside world. While

Julius's apartment represents a space that he uses to view the restless migrations of the natural world and incite soaring migrations of the mind, he jealously guards this sanctified space from inconvenient outside encroachments that might interrupt his thoughts or unearth subjects or feelings that he has long attempted to bury. For example, one evening as Julius talks on the phone with his estranged girlfriend Nadege, his concentration is broken by "noises from far off" that he eventually identifies as drums, whistles, and a crowd of "female voices" chanting in rhythm. Noting the way in which the marchers' whistles "pierced the air," he recalls:

The voices leading the crowd became even louder...Then, as the crowd, all of them young women, passed under the streetlamps, their chanting became clearer. *We have the power, we have the night*, the solitary voice called. The answer came: *The streets are ours, take back the night*...From several floors above, I watched them, as their faces came in and out of the spotlights of the streetlamps. *Women's bodies, women's lives, we will not be terrorized*. I shut the window (OC, 22-3).

While Julius's experience of watching the women march under his window is recounted dispassionately, his subtle distaste for the "Take Back the Night" marchers is communicated through the manner in which he repeatedly notes the marchers' gender and "martial tone" and dismissively closes his apartment window, sealing himself off from their collective chants and claims to public space. Offering no further comment on the marchers or the movement that brought them to the streets, Julius then juxtaposes this account of interruption with a memory of a walk from earlier that evening, in which his reveries are happily suspended by an unexpected meeting with an old (male) friend. Describing his friend as a "young professor in the Earth Sciences Department" whose

“interests were broader than his professional specialty suggested,” ranging from French philosophy to chess to the history of jazz, Julius notes that it is his friend’s “strong opinions about books and films” that represent the center point of their brotherly bond and the axis around which their friendship orbits. Sophisticated and passionate, Julius’s friend presents a welcome interruption to his solitude and prompts a new course for Julius’s own reflections on art and music, leaving Julius mentally invigorated and regretful that he does not see and converse with his urbane friend more frequently.

This affectionately-recounted meeting of men of like minds stands in stark contrast to Julius’s earlier dismissal of the group of young women marchers whose voices (and demands) invade the private spaces of his apartment, demonstrating Julius’s preference for particular forms of encounter, movement, and connection over others. Although Julius’s solitary reveries, whether a product of seeking diverse routes through his books or the city streets, inspire imaginative forms of aesthetic transport, spatial awareness, and cosmopolitan (literary) conversation, his descriptions of these experiences often stand in stark counterpoint to his accounts of alternative kinds of community participation, friendship, or spatial practice that Julius dismisses as disruptive or oddly unsettling. This is particularly true of his accounts of group activities or events that seem to thwart his quest for solitude and space(s) in which his body and mind can move freely as well as situations which challenge his freedom from entanglements with others and carefully cultivated control over who he counts as a

friend.

While Julius is quick to affirm intellectual kinship and intimacy with the artists and authors whose ideas he actively engages, he is equally quick to resist claims of kinship that threaten his personal and political autonomy. Julius's ambivalence towards assertions of likeness, consanguinity, or group consciousness becomes especially apparent in his equivocal use of and reaction to claims of racial, ethnic, or (pan-)national "brotherhood." For example, after spending hours wandering through the American Folk Life Museum and losing "all track of time" amidst an exhibit of paintings by early-American artist John Brewster, Julius emerges into the rainy city streets "with the feeling of someone who had returned to the earth from a great distance" (OC, 39). Having fallen "deep" into the "world" of the museum's images, objects and history, Julius slowly remembers where (and who) he is, hails a cab, and distractedly gives his address to the cabdriver, off-handedly adding, "So how are you doing, my brother?" (OC, 40). Expecting a simple response, Julius is instead greeted with anger. "[N]ot good, not good at all," protests the driver, offended by Julius's preoccupied entrance into the cab, and he berates Julius for coming into his space "without saying hello" (OC, 40). "Hey, I am African just like you, why do you do this?" the driver rhetorically asks, and then, refusing to entertain Julius's apology, drives in stubborn, wounded silence for the remainder of the trip (OC, 40).

Rebuffed, Julius recalls, "I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who

tried to lay claims on me,” and he blames the driver for “unhinging” him, leaving him with the “anger of a shattered repose” (OC, 41). Upset that his eagerly sought equanimity – produced through a coveted experience of aesthetic reverie – has been broken, Julius bristles at the driver’s strong assumption of kinship and refuses any social claims that might control his personal actions or dictate the appropriateness of his behavior. While the driver sees Julius’s initial coldness as a lack of adherence to unspoken social norms of brotherhood, civility, and shared history (based on his and Julius’s shared African ancestry, status as immigrants, and race in the global city), Julius regards the driver’s anger as a brusque social overstep – a violation of his individuality and an unwanted assertion of attachment or familiarity (OC, 55).

Julius’s hesitation to acknowledge similar claims of brotherhood takes a more troubling turn later in the novel, when his simple exasperation transforms into more obvious aversion that appears to be rooted in deeper feelings of arrogance and intellectual elitism. Stopping at the post office to mail a copy of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism* to his international friend Farouq in Brussels, Julius approaches the postal clerk and is immediately greeted with a call to brotherhood. “Say brother, where are you from?” the clerk asks, “‘Cause, see, I could tell you were from the Motherland” (OC, 186). Identifying Julius as African, the clerk then “recognizes” Julius as both kin and kindred spirit, someone with whom he shares the bonds of blood, history, and poetry:

[O]kay, Brother Julius, the thing is, you're a visionary. It's the truth. I can see that in you. You're someone who has traveled far. You're what we call a journeyer. So let me share something with you, because I think you'll get it. He placed his hands on the metal scale in front of him...and lowering his voice to just above a whisper, began a recitation: We are the ones who received the boot. We, who are used for loot, trampled underfoot. Unconquered. We, who carry the crosses. Yes, see? Our kith and our kin used like packhorses. We of the countless horrific losses, assailed by the forces, robbed of choices, silenced voices. And still unconquered. You feel me? For four hundred and fifty years. Five centuries of tears, aeons of fears. Yet still we remain, we remain, we remain unconquered (OC, 186-7).

Though Julius politely listens to the postal clerk's impromptu performance, he subtly mocks the clerk by depicting him to readers as overly confident and earnest to the point of ridiculousness. After listening to the clerk's first spoken word poem, Julius recounts, "[The clerk] held the last line in a meaningful pause. Then he said, You know it?...It's one of mine...I'm a poet, see. I call that one "The Unconquered." I write these things down, and sometimes I go down to the poetry cafés. That's my gift, you see, poetry" (OC, 187). Then, knowing he has a captive audience, the clerk launches into another poem that again leaves him "moved" to "silence" "by his own words" (OC, 187).

"I made a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future," Julius quips dismissively, recalling how his encounter with the clerk ends with the unsolicited gift of the clerk's personal card ("Terrence McKinney, Writer/Performance Poet/Activist") and an invitation to "drop [him] a line sometime" so they can "go to the Nuyorican Poets Café" (OC, 187-8). Unlike his uncomfortable interaction with the cab driver, which leaves Julius frustrated by the social expectations of a community that he

has not chosen to fully embrace, Julius's one-sided encounter with the postal clerk reveals him as unwelcoming to the approach of those who do not share his intellectual sophistication or social class. Though the clerk's interests clearly overlap with Julius's and range from poetry to history to the stories of the oppressed, Julius depicts the clerk as a buffoon – a desperately sincere man who seeks attention and solidarity in the wrong places and cannot identify high from low art. Intentionally juxtaposed with Julius's cosmopolitan friend Farouq, a multilingual, well-read Moroccan exile living in Brussels (to whom Julius is corresponding about philosophy and political theory), the clerk becomes little more than a caricature, exposing the snobbish underside of Julius's worldliness and self-isolating interest in the enclosed world of high art and culture.

Tellingly, Julius's most cherished friends are never those with whom he claims bonds of blood or nation. Instead, Julius's selective friendships are most often governed by intersections of cosmopolitan literary taste, similarities in temperament, and corresponding histories of detachment, exile, and political and racial oppression. Farouq, for example, a passionate but disillusioned student of postcolonialism and critical theory, quickly becomes Julius's friend when they bond over conflicting ideas about political philosophy, international relations, and the poetics of postcolonial literature. Described by Julius as "seething with intelligence," Farouq attracts Julius with his strong opinions and obvious erudition (transitioning seamlessly between French, English, and Arabic and between Marx, Deleuze, and Benjamin), and the two men

immediately begin to greet each other with salutations of “my brother” and “my friend” (OC, 101, 111, 129). Though Julius initially wonders at the “aggressive familiarity” of these greetings, he revels in the ability to create and sustain feelings of brotherhood and friendship through ties that originate in the carefully cultivated world of ideas rather than through the predetermined particulars of blood.

Julius’s relationship with his elderly Japanese-American college mentor, Professor Saito, is similarly based on Julius’s intellectual attraction to men of worldly aesthetic tastes and wide-ranging life experiences. Viewing Professor Saito as “a grandfatherly figure” with whom he has “more in common” than his own relations, Julius fondly remembers the days he spent as an undergraduate talking with Professor Saito “about interpretations of Beowulf, and then later on about the classics, the endless labor of scholarship, the various consolations of academia, and of his studies just before the Second World War” (OC, 9-10). Although Julius’s attention often drifts towards the aesthetic, it is this last topic – Professor Saito’s early life – that captivates Julius’s interest most deeply for its sheer “distance” from his own “experience,” and he remembers listening rapt to Professor Saito recount (bit by bit) his story of leaving his studies in England at the war’s outbreak to return to his family in the Pacific Northwest only to be “taken to internment in the Minidoka Camp in Idaho” (OC, 9).

While Julius’s relationship with Professor Saito represents a bright spot of sociality in Julius’s often-solitary life, their friendship is also a vehicle through which

Julius seeks the more ambivalent achievement of self-broadening through interpolating the experience of others. Read cynically, Julius's interests in others represents a miserly desire to become a collector of life stories and experiences that vicariously expand the boundaries of his mind. These experiences then get cached as intellectual fodder for Julius's virtuosic expositions on the entanglements between literature, history, and contemporary life rather than translated into action or engagement in the world that extends beyond the confines of his own mind.

In this interpretation, Julius's attraction to Professor Saito, Farouq, and his other worldly friends is not based on a desire for cosmopolitan conversation or exchange, at all, but rather on a solipsistic need to accumulate points of view that seem most "different" from his own in order to fulfill a vision of himself as a man of cosmopolitan tastes and corresponding political, social, and cultural sensitivity. On the other hand, however, Julius's constant seeking of "friends" that expand the boundaries of his mind can be read more generously as the intentionally cultivated practices of a man who virtuously tries to enter the world first and foremost as a listener rather than a speaker. While Julius's reveries are certainly a prominent way in which he "speaks" throughout the novel, they also represent a passionate embrace of the "learned art of listening," an observational manner of being in the world that allows others' experiences to exist in all their complexity alongside his own (*OC*, 9).

IV. Listening (to) and Walking (in) History

That Julius's life revolves around practices of listening is actually obvious when readers consider the professional routines of his work as a clinical psychiatrist. Trained in the procedures and intimacies of psychotherapy, Julius's professional and personal listening complement each other through their shared grounding in the literature and theory of memory and mourning, which Julius explores extensively through his readings of Freud. "I read Freud only for literary truths," Julius matter-of-factly states, adding that his interest in Freud's discovery and illumination of psychoanalysis acts as a "counterweight to the pharmacological bias of modern [psychiatric] practice" (OC, 208). "I read him, not as a professional seeking professional insights, but as I would read a novel or a poem" (OC, 208). Arguing for an attentiveness to Freud's aesthetics, or the form, language, and "historical aura" of his writing, rather than his clinical methods, Julius recounts Freud's "writings on grief and loss" as pivotal in shaping his understanding of the relationship between memory and trauma and crucial for his broader philosophy of professional and personal listening (OC, 208). Recounting Freud's theories of mourning and melancholia, Julius explains:

Freud suggested that in normal mourning, one internalizes the dead...In mourning that does not proceed normally, mourning in which something has gone wrong, this benign internalization does not happen. Instead there's an incorporation. The dead occupy only a part of the one who has survived: they are sectioned off, hidden in a crypt and from this place of encryption they haunt the living (OC, 208-9).

Although Freud identifies the "incorporation" of the dead in the living as representative

of an incomplete process of mourning, throughout *Open City*, Julius seeks attentiveness to the ways in which the dead “haunt” the living through myriad forms of listening that allow people, places, and objects to speak in ways that are often overlooked, dismissed, or rendered excessive (or even mad). In terms of his clinical practice, this resolution to attend to alternative forms of (haunted) speech requires Julius to confront the often “cold” environment of patient care at the hospital with a commitment to approach psychiatry as it “really ought to be” – “provisional, hesitant, and as kind as possible” (OC, 208). “I viewed each patient as a dark room,” Julius states, describing his sessions with patients as intentionally “slow and deliberate” (OC, 238). “Doing no harm, the most ancient of medical tenets, was on my mind all the time,” he adds and remarks that unlike most of his fellows whose “carefully calibrated knowledge” favored “potent neurotransmitters, the analytical trick, the surgical intervention,” he worried “incessantly of the soul” and “its place” in modern medical practice (OC, 206). “Instinctually” drawn to the “doubts and questions,” or the “blind spots,” of the study of the human mind, Julius takes seriously the mind’s “opacity” to itself, arguing that “what we knew...was so much less than what remained in darkness” (OC, 206, 238-9).

Julius’s sensitivity to the omnipresent scientific gaps in the medical practice of psychiatry makes him less likely than his professors and peers to “distrust” philosophy as a complementary conceptual lens through which to understand what he sees as an “epidemic of sorrow” in the contemporary world (OC, 208). This is especially true in

terms of his unsettled understanding of personal identity, memory, and the role of history in his patients' lives. Increasingly identifying humans' experience of history or "sense of the past" as "irruptive" rather than empty or benignly continuous, Julius greets "secure" or resolved "versions" of the past with wariness, heedful of the ways in which the past leaks into the present, shaping the landscape of the self and entangling people, places, and things in complex webs of historical and personal relation (*OC*, 156).

Julius's patient, V., "an assistant professor at New York University and a member of the Delaware tribe," becomes one of Julius's most theoretically compelling and emotionally distressing cases primarily because V.'s impressions of the intense intermingling between the past and present confirms Julius's sense of the haunting dynamism of history. A scholar of seventeenth-century America who has just written a best-selling study of Cornelis Van Tienhoven, a brutally violent Dutch colonial official responsible for the mass murder of hundreds of American Indians in New Amsterdam, V. comes to Julius seeking treatment for depression, which she says is "partly due to the emotional toll of these studies" (*OC*, 26). Though Julius describes V.'s book, which he picks up at a local bookshop during one of his walks, as appropriately "scholarly" – "with much of the emotional distance typical of an academic study" – he quickly realizes from talking with V. that "the horrors Native Americans had had to endure at the hands of the white settlers, the horrors, in her view, that they continued to suffer, affected her on a profound personal level" (*OC*, 27). Describing her initial sense of not

being able to “be sure” whether the encounters she read and wrote about “had anything to do with her,” she finally admits:

I can't pretend it isn't about my life...it is my life. It's a difficult thing to live in a country that has erased your past...There are almost no Native Americans in New York City, and very few in all of the Northeast. It isn't right that people are not terrified by this because this is a terrifying thing that happened to a vast population. And it's not in the past, it is still with us today; at least, it's still with me (*OC*, 26-7).

Deeply affected by the history of atrocity that links her to the past, V. feels personally responsible for the project of “honoring” the “spirits” of the “forgotten” dead through a form of scholarly witnessing that sheds light on the omissions at the heart of America's historical consciousness (*OC*, 27). Unable to process (or replicate) her peers' easy dismissal of the ongoing violence against native populations (which she argues extends from the colonial era into the present), V. lives in a world where the past is not passive or silent but hauntingly vital and pressing to be acknowledged and heard.

While Julius does not strive to replicate the intensity of V.'s (ultimately tragic) relationship with history, he sympathizes with her worry that the past is not present for most people and considers V.'s horror at the overlooked and (deliberately) forgotten atrocities of modernity to be fundamental to the underlying collective consciousness of the global city. To Julius, New York City's buildings, streets, parks, monuments, and subways vibrate with neglected and ignored histories that “echo across centuries,” forming not just a one-dimensional backdrop against which contemporary life unfolds, but shaping the fundamental roots/routes of existence around which the city's economic,

political, social, and architectural existence revolve (*OC*, 220). It is as a seeker of routes to the past (and ways to live in the present) that Julius sets off into the streets of the open city, and it is as a listener that he opens himself up to the ways in which the past speaks to the present.

*

Toward the end of *Open City*, in the midst of recovering from a mugging that has left him sore, isolated, and wary, Julius decides to venture back out into the city, soon finding himself in a “trance” in front of the AT&T Long Lines building on Church Street in Lower Manhattan (*OC*, 218). Describing the building as an imposing “windowless tower, a giant concrete slab rising into the sky,” Julius marvels at its immensity, and comments that it “seemed like nothing so much as a monument or a stele” looming watchfully over the activities of the city (*OC*, 218). Finally “drawn out of [his] thoughts” by a security officer who tells him to “move along,” Julius wanders past a “snaking queue” in front of a nearby federal building that he assumes must be an “immigration crowd,” and stops to gaze at “a patch of grass” and “a curious shape” that catches his eye across the street (*OC*, 219-220). Ultimately recognizing the small structure as a monument, Julius identifies the “tiny plot” as “a memorial for the site of an African burial ground,” which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “had been large, some six acres” but was now mostly hidden underneath “office buildings, shops, street, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government” (*OC*,

220). "Into this earth," Julius muses somberly (echoing his conversations with V.), "had been interred the bodies of some fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves, but then the land had been built over and the people of the city had forgotten that it was a burial ground" (OC, 220).

Standing "on that warm morning" in "the green grass and bright sun, in the shadow of government and the marketplace," Julius realizes he has "no purchase" on the depths of trauma and buried truths that rest beneath the grounds of the global city (OC, 220). However, his melancholically-recounted history of the "Negro Burial Ground," which tracks the passage of the land "as far north as present-day Duane Street, and as far south as City Hall Park" from the 1690s to the present, calls readers to consider how pathways through lower Manhattan are charged with the memory of "slavery in New York," and how the city's bustling present interlocks with a past that insistently unsettles his experience of the now (OC, 221). The dead always "return," Julius reflects, recalling that "in 1991, construction of a building on Broadway and Duane brought human remains to the surface," revealing "no mass grave" but "each body" "buried singly, according to whichever rite it was that, outside the city walls, the blacks had been at liberty to practice" (OC, 221-2). Musing on the difficulty, "from the point of view of the twenty-first century," to fully grasp the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the dead, Julius lifts a stone from the "grassy plot" to leave on the monument remembering that "in some of the palls were found shells, beads, and

polished stones,” hints of African religions and “rites” transported and “retained” across the Atlantic (*OC*, 221-2).

Julius’s quiet tribute to the dead, which manifests through memories of a walk and an elegiac rumination on the history of a place and its people, demonstrates his commitment to an ethic of walking and listening that ensures the past is never sealed off from the present, regardless of how deeply it gets buried under the structures and routines of modern life. By wandering and watching the global city and resolutely cataloguing its characteristics and eccentricities, Julius bears witness to both past and present, combining grounded observation and soaring aesthetic reverie to locate spectral “kinks in time” – folds, returns, and feedback loops that make the past speak, peopling the world with ghosts (*OC*, 191). Through Julius, whom Teju Cole offers not as a perfect model for cosmopolitan brotherhood or friendship, but as a deeply reflective man seeking (Sebaldian) routes to contemporaneity with the past, Cole asks readers to consider what it might mean to search for cosmopolitan connections through a process of perpetually “incomplete” mourning – a restless engagement with literature, history, and landscape that can only begin with footsteps.

CONCLUSION

The Other Walk

“This morning, going against all convention, I turned right instead of left and took my circuit... in reverse. Why hadn't I thought of this before...?”¹

Rebecca Solnit ends her history of walking by invoking a Benjaminian metaphor that lies at the heart of this dissertation's critical method and interpretive ethics.

“Walking has been one of the constellations in the starry sky of human culture... whose three stars are the body, the imagination, and the wide-open world,” she writes. “This constellation called walking has a history... but whether it has a future depends on whether those connecting paths are traveled still.”² Elegiac in tone, Solnit's final words acknowledge the deep cultural roots of walking as a poetic and historical practice, but they also represent a call to action. Keep walking, she urges her readers, lest the intimate links between the body, mind, world, and history be lost.

The contemporary walking narratives explored throughout this dissertation answer Solnit's call by serving as textual testing grounds for practices of wandering and wondering that (re)animate the histories embedded in landscape and allow the ghosts of the past to speak in ethically urgent ways. Through the linked practices of walking and writing, Sebald, Sinclair, and Cole open new routes through which to encounter

¹ Birkerts, Sven. *The Other Walk* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2011), 3.

² Solnit, 290-91.

literature and landscape and inspire spectral conversations designed to illuminate new points of entry into past and present, world and word. By situating these texts in restless conversation, this dissertation has charted a constellation of linked literal and literary walking practices that converse and interact, advance and retreat, and, ultimately, endure.

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Biography

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