

Helen Billingham: Talk for *Walking Bodies*: Launch 23rd June 2021

When asked to talk very briefly at this online gathering about this book *Walking Bodies*, I revisited the initial call for papers and provocations, sent out over two years ago that began this collective journey. The call-out for Walking's New Movement (WMV) conference, held at the University of Plymouth in November 2019, invited people to join a discussion about 'what is happening in walking now'. Since then, the world has been to hell in a handcart, presenting us with rapid, at times frightening changes. Over the last year, I am sure that many of us have repeatedly asked the question 'what is happening now?', never mind 'what is happening *in walking* now?'. Yet as we retreated collectively into our separate worlds of professional disruption, personal despair and disembodied communication, 2020 was heralded by the popular press as 'the year of the walker'.

Despite all the inclusivity and connectivity, walking's dirty little secret is that it is not always available to all. Perhaps this is why this book picks up on prescient threads and themes that have sifted further to the surface of general discourse during the past tumultuous year. Class privilege, disability, skin colour, financial inequality, violence and colonial legacy are all part of the weave that obstructs access and impedes the ability to roam at large and at will. In *Walking Bodies* several contributors set out to unpick this weave by placing their own bodies in difficult and occasionally dangerous territory, offering on-the-ground insights, thoughtful critique, historical context and generous, pragmatic approaches to countering some of these impediments.

For me, helping to edit *Walking Bodies* was a chance to peek into some of the papers and provocations of Walking's New Movements' rich programme that I had not managed to catch during the event. It is gratifying to note how many of the contributors to *Walking Bodies* revised their original conference papers to acknowledge new perspectives, insights and shifts in thinking gleaned from other delegates at the Walking's New Movement conference.

Intending to keep the book as affordable as possible, we initially talked of making a book with black and white images. Flicking through the pages of *Walking Bodies* in recent weeks, I thought 'well that would never have worked', because this book is so bright and colourful. Fleeting moments, gathered fragments, plotted constellations, and the patterns, rhythms and codes of walking are expressed in the textworks, artworks, and performance documentation that punctuate these pages.

The book delivers accounts of (and strategies for) enhancement and expansion of the sensual spectrum through psychogeosonics and tentacular probing into entangled embodiment. Familial allegiance and hybridity are interrogated by walking with the unhuman corporeal: horse, crow, elephant, pigeon, tree, roadside wildflower. Perhaps portentously, (given what we know now) these bodily immersions are accompanied by walks with unbodied: the dead, the ancestors and the spirits of place.

I would like to add that these pages have plenty for those that have an ongoing love affair with the quotidian, like to connect over a bag of chips, move with the ridiculous and a feel for the absurd. And with that in mind, I also would like to flag up the comic irony of this gathering (and the excitement I feel) as we connect collectively in disembodied form to listen to the speakers and join in playful collaboration to discuss: what is happening in walking in this New Now, and celebrate this book *Walking Bodies*.