

ARTICLE

Walking-with/worlding-with in a global pandemic: A story of mothering in motion

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Abstract

This paper addresses how walking-with an infant makes mothering worlds legible. Employing the active verb ‘worlding’, it illustrates how walking-with contributes to the emergent, embodied and relational nature of mothering as a story in motion and how we make sense of becoming a mother. The walking in this study takes place in and through (sub)urban landscapes, and how we negotiate our maternal bodies through these spaces, at a very particular moment in time (COVID-19 lockdowns), is imbricated in our worldings. Walking-with is used to not only explain the interembodiment of mother and child but also the wider milieu of ‘withs’ to demonstrate the corporeal and relational experience of walking. Walking-with a baby, particularly with a postpartum body, is hard work, messy and unpredictable, yet that is not to say the analysis leads to a negative perspective. When walking-with a baby is understood as ‘worlding-with’ we can develop a more affirmative understanding of mothering. By using creative analytical practice a walking-with story was developed drawing on data collected from walking mothers and autoethnography of my own walking-with experiences. The story makes it possible to develop a legibility that captures the contradictory experiences of mothering in motion. Creative analytical practice highlights that storying, walking and mothering is never a complete.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, creative analytical practice, mothering, walking, worlding

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I demonstrate the relationship between (sub)urban walking and worlding by employing creative analytical practice (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). Auto-ethnographic accounts and qualitative data are woven into a single story to represent ‘personal and social meanings rather than simplifying and reducing to generalise’ (Parry & Johnson, 2007, p. 120). Walking is often associated with storying (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Solnit, 2001), and specifically, I employ ‘worlding’ to illustrate how walking-with contributes to the emergent, embodied and relational nature of mothering as a more-than-human story in motion. I address how mothering worlds are made legible (Stewart, 2015) through walking-with a

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baby and other mothers. Even during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, our everyday affective and embodied encounters shape the worlds we inhabit. Haraway (2016) suggests worlding is not an individual experience, but is relational, always collective. Indeed, Ingold and Vergunst (2008, p. 2) argue that walking is social, and 'lives are paced out in their mutual relations'. Fundamentally, walking-with a baby (in a pram or wearing in a sling or wrap) is an entanglement of bodies, a negotiated practice where bodies intra-act. Walking-with is always a multiplicity of 'withs'—mother-child-pram/sling-othermothers-landscapes-covid-rules-restrictions and so forth. Springgay and Truman (2022) states that the with is merely not additive, it is a milieu of relations.

Middleton (2022) highlights that urban walking has been characterised as a positive and romantic experience which limits the possibility of critically understanding everyday walking practices of diverse users. The walking in this paper is far from romanticised; it is women's everyday walking-with their babies. It takes place in and through (sub)urban landscapes, and how we negotiate our maternal bodies through these spaces, at a very particular moment in time (COVID-19 lockdowns), is imbricated in our worldings. Weaving autoethnographic diaries written during my maternity leave with 12 semi-structured interviews with, and 16 emailed reflections from new mothers (with babies under one or born during the UK lockdowns, March 2020–July 2021), it addresses walking-with during COVID-19 through creative analytical practice to create a hopeful collective story of walking-with to render a world, which, as a researcher I am embedded in, visible (Denzin, 2000).

Whilst walking has been much written about in geography, the following briefly outlines the relationship between walking and worlding through two specific, yet related, notions: corporeality and relations. I proceed this way as mothers' worldings are shaped in response to not only their own postpartum bodies but the bodies of their child; and the relations with others they walk with (babies and other mothers) but also the wider relations with the material and natural world through which they walk.

2 | WALKING AND WORLDING

Walking is an everyday embodied practice (Middleton, 2010; Springgay & Truman, 2017a). It takes our whole body. For Ingold and Vergunst (2008, p. 2), 'walking is not just what a body *does*; it is what a body *is*'. It is not the intention of this paper to cover this ground in detail, but to consider the corporality of walking in relation to worlding. When we consider how walking is a bodily and (literally) grounded practice—as Haraway says, 'I am a creature of the mud not the sky' (Haraway, 2008, p. 3)—it is surprising that this line has not been so explicitly drawn. Hunter (2015) explains that worlding is an active and 'whole person' act which is immersive and corporeal.

'Body-worlding' (Manning, 2012) is generative in thinking about walking and worlding. Rather than walking per se, Manning is addressing movement more broadly when she states that, 'Movement is one with the world, not body/world, but body-worlding. We move not to populate space, not to extend it or embody it, but to create it' (Manning, 2012, p. 13). Likewise, Wylie (2005) explains how walking through landscapes is more than passing through spaces. Landscapes are 'with which' we see and whilst he does not use the word worlding specifically it is implied in his conclusion that, 'an incessant movement of enfolding and unfolding, openness and enclosing, in which the two [self and landscape] implicate (fold with) and include each other' (Wylie, 2006, p. 531). Returning to Ingold (2000, p. 230), 'we know as we go, not *before* we go'.

Despite this, Edensor (2008) highlights walking through urban spaces encompasses bodily performance conventions to ensure the success of such walking—we might 'not know before we go' but we possess certain movement skills. Movement is, after all, our 'mother tongue' (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). However, when a woman walks with a baby her walking 'skills' must adapt. Whilst what it means to be a woman walking has received some considerable attention (for example, Elkin, 2016; Heddon & Turner, 2012; Keinänen & Beck, 2017; Middleton, 2022 and Rose, 2017), walking-with a postpartum body is rarely considered beyond health and wellbeing. There are some exceptions (Boyer & Spinney, 2016; Clement & Waitt, 2017, 2018; Hallenbeck, 2018) where mothering mobilities are explored. The vulnerable and leaky natures of both the postpartum body and that of the baby are often overlooked (references to breastfeeding excepting). How these bodies negotiate each other and spaces to create 'successful' everyday walking warrants further attention as walking-with is about such complex and emergent relations.

For Haraway (2016), worlding refers to more-than-human or multispecies worlding, and indeed, when we walk, we do so with and through the more-than-human world (Fullagar, 2021). We do not walk our world alone. This has been hinted at above—our bodies move through spaces and are 'emplaced' in wider ecologies (Pink, 2011). Haraway uses 'sympoiesis' to demonstrate her philosophy of worlding-with. Sympoiesis means 'making-with' and we are always 'worlding-with, in

company' (Haraway, 2016, p. 57). Hereby, walking-with, 'challenges individualism and humanist notions of intentionality, destabilizes conventional notions of space as a void, and directs our attention to the highly distributed nature of collectivity and relationality' (Springgay & Truman, 2017b, p. 7). The land through which we walk is not a blank canvas. When we step out on a walk we bring with us our own pasts, present and potential futures (Wylie, 2006). In the case of this paper, for example, walking-with a baby is inextricably tied into the gendered experiences of the global health and social crisis that is/was COVID-19.

A collective and relational process of worlding through walking is complicated by the addition of a walking companion(s). The negotiated complexities of walking with companion animals, most notably dogs, have become prominent in the geography literature in recent years. For example, Fletcher and Platt (2018) argue that there is an ongoing negotiation on the walk between 'owner' and dog which shapes the bond between human and animal. Walking with other humans has been identified as therapeutic (Doughty, 2013). Specifically relevant here, attention has been paid to experiences of mothers with infants (Clement & Waitt, 2018; Middleton & Samanani, 2021; Qualmann, 2016), pre-schoolers (Ergler, Freeman, & Guiney, 2021) and older children (Horton, Christensen, Kraftl, & Hadfield-Hill, 2014).

Walking with a baby is a negotiated practice. Their agency is often constructed by the caregiver, particularly whilst still unable to walk themselves. There is an 'interembodiment' where autonomous bodies are intertwined and 'lived alongside and in response to' (Lupton, 2013, p. 39) each other. Walking with a baby also includes other 'stuff' that is necessary in caregiving. Clement and Waitt (2017, 2018) examine the mother-baby(-pram) assemblage. They argue that walking with the pram is not only how mothering is done, but is about becoming-mother, complicated through our negotiations with the material world. Similarly invoking assemblage, Boyer and Spinney (2016) argue that journeying as a mother reveals the affective and vibrancy of the more-than-human world and how this produces maternal subjectivities. Whilst this work does not address worlding explicitly, this emergence of mothering through affective engagements with the material world aligns with ideas of worlding.

3 | WALKING WITH BABIES DURING COVID-19

Walking is the subject of this paper, but also contributed to the methods (for work on walking methods, see Badwan & Hall, 2020; Kowalewski & Bartłomiejski, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2020; Warren, 2017). Walking practices during the pandemic have also received notable attention, in particular how walking during this time unearthed everyday creative practices in communities (Heddon et al., 2022). Finding myself at home with a newborn during the first UK National lockdown in 2020, I started a walking group as a way to connect safely with other new mums. I posted in a local mums Facebook group asking if anyone wanted to meet me and my 5-week-old son for a 'socially distanced' walk. One other mum turned up with her 9-week-old baby in a sling and we walked through a local nature reserve. On this walk we realised that this route was not pram-friendly (having only ever walked here with my dog previously it never occurred to me!) so we decided the local large municipal park with transport access and parking was a better choice. Two mums turned to 12 (numbers fluctuating each week) and over the course of six months we met every Tuesday morning come rain or shine. The park was open during the lockdowns, but benches were removed, the café was closed, and all the toilets were locked. In Greater Manchester (where these walks took place) lockdowns were stricter than other areas of the UK and the 'rule of six' (where you could not meet in groups larger than six) included babies in England, which meant we had to walk in smaller groups and led to me creating a booking system to manage demand safely.

I had made haphazard notes on my phone whilst my child slept, an accidental research diary, to record my experiences of my walks with these mums and the daily walks I undertook with my son. I formalised the research on my return to work and undertook semi-structured interviews with 12 new mums who had a child born, or was under one, during the UK lockdowns (March 2020 and July 2021), eight of whom were first time mums. Six mums interviewed had walked alongside me and my child, three took part in a similar group and a further three simply walked in their own locale with family/friends or alone. These participants were white, able-bodied (although some women reflected on temporary impairment caused by C-sections and perineal tearing etc.) women in heterosexual relationships. I collected a further 16 reflections from a more ethnically diverse range of walking mums from the UK and Ireland via email, sharing stories of walks in their own locality. These stories were of (sub)urban walks, pacing the streets in their neighbourhoods and local public parks.

The autoethnographic elements of the research were pivotal in appreciating the voices of the other participants. The embodied, non-representational nature of the 'data' cannot be written down—these are bodily (leaky, tired, bruised and sore bodies) and sensuous, produced in the moment of doing but also in the sharing of common experiences with the participants.

Whether in the interviews, emailed reflections, or my own notes, what emerged were stories of walks. These stories were contradictory—joyful *and* painful. Parenting is like that. Creative analytical practice (CAP), therefore, felt like a natural choice as it works to ‘emphas[ing] nuance, contradictions and the complexity of social entanglements’ (Bruce, 2019, p. 63): I was embedded in these stories as both a researcher (Parry & Johnson, 2007) *and* as a walking mother myself. After all, walking is a form of storytelling, and storytelling is a method of worlding—making sense of lives (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008).

As researchers, we rely on interpretations and representations when writing our findings in papers (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005). Richardson (2002) stresses, we make choices about that writing in traditional social science writing. Through more creative forms of writing we ‘invite people in and open spaces for thinking about the social that elude us now’ (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, p. 962). In the case of the research presented in this paper, there is so much that is ‘unsayable’ (Bruce, 2019, p. 66) and voices that cannot be heard. The child, for example here, is an absent presence. I wrote this story in third person to allow space for the child and to acknowledge that this is my story but not my story at the same time.

4 | WALKING-WITH KATE AND SAM

A few days after bringing Sam home from hospital, Kate took a few steps outside the house. Only into the back garden. The pain from the stitches in her perineum was intense. She just stood there and cried with Sam in her arms. Kate’s body was telling her it wasn’t ready yet. Sam just gazed up at the sky feeling the gentle breeze. The isolation was awful, being in the house all day. All Kate ever wanted was to go out for a walk, push that expensive pram down the street. Why couldn’t her body do it? Sam knew nothing of Kate’s pain.

Kate knew she had to get out, even just to the end of the road—‘cross the threshold’ her own mother was telling her. Eventually, as the wounds began healing, Kate was able to bundle Sam into the pram. Too many layers, too few? Nappies, wipes ... what else? ‘What if I need to feed? I can’t do this outside. I’ll express, take a bottle. Best pop some breast pads on just in case! Or I could just come back—so don’t go too far’. She gazed down at Sam, this tiny ticking time bomb who might explode (in more ways than one) at any moment.

Stepping out of that door and bumping the pram down the steps to the street, her legs already feeling heavy. Sam’s little hand popping out the side, feeling the warm air as spring was making way for summer. This spurred Kate on. Of course, everyone was at home. A neighbour gave a friendly wave through the window on seeing this new mum and her baby emerge from the house. Kate had never spoken to this man before. She felt gregarious and gave an enthusiastic wave back. ‘Right’, she thought, ‘I am off to be an outside mum’.

The following week, buoyed by her success of that initial (very slow) stroll round the block, Kate decided to join a meet-up of local mums in the park. She had seen the post on Facebook and a ‘socially distanced’ walk was just what she needed. She had wanted to join baby classes. This would have to do. Sam was getting more alert and would marvel at the leaves rustling in the trees and follow the rays of light as they moved through the branches. As Sam got older, Kate would move her to a more upright forward-facing position and the outside world opened up for Sam. ‘What is that!’ A small grey creature with a long fluffy tail hopping along a wall and scurrying up a tree! Kate would chuckle to herself at Sam’s delightful squeal at spotting the squirrel.

Walking with other mums was awkward at first. Kate had been so used to banana-ing round other pedestrians to avoid close contact, but she wanted to walk more closely to these other women and their children so she could hear their stories—to learn from Jill, whose son was a month older than Sam. Walking and talking was a revelation. Six months later when restrictions were lifted slightly, Kate would excitedly attend her first baby sensory class. She wouldn’t really make any friends in the class—they were all masked up and had to leave as soon as the class ended. With Sam in the pram or buggy, Kate found she could focus her attention on talking with another adult! Strolling side by side, there was no pressure—it was easy to chat freely. The walk was for her. *She* needed it.

Walking with a pram gave Kate a new perspective on the ground beneath her. She found herself knowing instinctively where all the dropped kerbs were. Some days Kate drove into the city centre to escape the hordes of people filing through her local woodland (trying to find outdoor activities to do with families they hadn’t been able to meet up with inside). It was a ghost town; all the shops and offices were shut. The smooth pavements around the university campus were great for whizzing the buggy over. She wanted Sam to see the city. Sam’s eyes looked up at the tall buildings and darted around following pigeons dancing across the pathways.

Kate’s confidence grew with each walk. She even started to feel able to put Sam in the carrier so Snoop (the ageing spaniel who was suspicious of this new person in the house) could join them too without his lead getting tangled in

buggy wheels. Sam popped her little face out above the top seam of the carrier to watch Snoop limping alongside them. Giggling. Kate thought it was a good bonding experience for them and gave Snoop some extra attention he was dearly lacking at home.

Today didn't come so easy. Kate was tired. Sam was red cheeked, drooling. 'Poonamies'¹ were a real issue and public toilets were locked. She was having to change nappies in the boot of her car. Sam was teething and being a 'Velcro baby'.² Kate was using the fabric carrier increasingly, so she decided that Sam might prefer it today. Bad idea, the carrier got tangled in Kate's blouse and tugged against her body. Sam's legs straightened and stiffened out, body leaning uncooperatively. A button ripped. Kate's already lopsided boobs were shoved in opposite directions. 'Oh, the glamour' she thought.

Kate was meeting Steph and her 9-month-old, Mina. Mina was in her buggy. They met by a bench in the local woodland but decided to grab a coffee as the children were both asleep (success!). A local café had opened a hatch so they could still trade despite the COVID restrictions. Usually, the seating set up outside annoyed Kate as this impeded her from getting the buggy down the street (sometimes forcing her into the road), but today she was just grateful for the hot, strong coffee.

Typical Manchester. It started throwing down. Steph threw the rain cover over Mina's buggy and Kate wrapped her coat around Sam in the carrier. They stood in the middle of the decidedly depressing shopping precinct. In the rain. With their babies. They didn't say this aloud but they both knew rain was better than being at home alone.

As the pandemic progressed and the restrictions in Manchester tightened, the walking group became more difficult to manage. Kate heard people in the park remark 'well that's more than six' as the small group of mums pushed their buggies down the path. It made Kate squirm—she was usually so outspoken, but she felt vulnerable and uncertain so didn't respond. In her head she was shouting 'how dare you judge a group of new mums! We are hardly holding hands walking along sneezing over each other'. But she just wanted to walk. Be in the presence of other mums and their babies. Feeding on random park benches had become second nature. She was now the mum able to share advice to newer mums.

Autumn drew in and Manchester entered 'Tier 3'.³ Kate knew she might have to walk alone. Alone with Sam. Sam knew nothing different.

5 | MOTHERING IN MOTION

Walking with others is 'more than taking a step' (Manning, 2012, p. 30). Kate's walking-with Sam contributes to her worlding as a mother—her ability to make sense of her mothering through her relations with human and more-than-human others. By using 'walking-with' specifically, I acknowledge that walking is never solitary, but 'emerges as a multifaceted, multi-sensorial stimulation located within a particular lived landscape' (Malone & Bozalek, 2021, p. 142). The walks are ordinary in one sense but also purposeful. During COVID a walk happened for the sake of a walk, or an opportunity to connect with someone safely outdoors. The walking in this work was undertaken by mothers as primary carers during maternity leave. There were some instances in the data that partners or family members were mentioned as walking companions, but predominantly the long days of maternity leave during a global pandemic were lonely and isolating for mothers and a walk was a way of escaping that sense of cabin fever and to 'cross the threshold'.

Walking is a movement of refrain (Powell, 2020)—a pattern of repetition but with openings, possibilities. A story is likewise—just one possibility among many. The story of Kate and Sam is a depiction of the stories told to me and I hope others will see their walks in it too. It is worth acknowledging, however, that access to walking spaces is unequal and for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds pathways are less accessible (Chapman, Prabhu, & Scott, 2023). The women in this study are maybe also not entirely representative of all mothers and there are organisations working to engage a more diverse range of parents (Blaze Trails & Platt, 2022).

The unruly bodies of both mother and child are central to walking-with. As the story begins, Kate is longing for a walk but is physically unable to do so. Thus, the walk becomes even more yearned for. Ingold and Vergunst (2008, p. 2) express that walking is 'not just what a body does, it is what a body is'. But there is often little to account for the shifting nature of the bodies of mother *and* child. Not just as separate entities but as inter-embodied walking companions. Walking-with a baby, with a postpartum body, is hard work, messy and unpredictable, that is not to say the analysis leads to a negative perspective. When walking-with a baby is understood as worlding-with we can develop a more affirmative understanding of mothering. To learn to 'world' is to learn to flourish, and we do this by 'grappling with ... the ordinary' (Haraway, 2008, p. 3). Walking-with in Kate's story is a grappling with her body, the body of the child, the COVID restrictions, as well as the 'usual' parenting labours—but worth the reward. Those rewards being mutual flourishing.

Using CAP to represent the walking-with of myself and fellow walking mothers, it is possible to develop a legibility that captures the contradictory experiences of mothering in motion. Using creative approaches might also be useful in ethical engagement with the absent presence of the child in walking stories. A pre-verbal baby can be neglected in stories of walking but it is sympoietic (Haraway, 2016). By using CAP, I want to highlight that storying, walking and mothering is never a complete—making-with, rather than made. Whilst walking-with an infant can be challenging, it is usually mundane (even during a pandemic), and it is in this story of our mundane walking that we might understand our affective embodied and relational encounters and how they contribute to mothering journeys.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The colloquial name for a dirty nappy/diaper that has leaked all over the child and their clothing.

² A baby that is being clingy with the caregiver and cannot be put down.

³ The Government in England put regions into tiers, which was guided by the level of infection in the area. Tier 3 was the highest tier with the tightest restrictions (i.e., not mix indoors or outdoors with those who were not in your household).

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