



## **Walking in Urbana**

**Karen Tobias-Green**

The output is artefactual, a series of 20 intermedial images and written narratives taken during an international research trip to Urbana, Illinois (2016). Tobias-Green used a camera-phone to document an urban walk during an interstitial moment. The series of images is understood as an unfolding visual narrative.

### **Research Process**

In a research context, walking is associated with a freedom of thought which assumes the freedom of the walking subject (Paterson, 2016) but walking is not universally available and risk free (Heddon, 2016). Walking comes with choices (one path travelled is another less travelled). Walking becomes research by first making space for the sharing of intimate, active exchanges between the human and the non-human. The walk and photographs challenge what Judith Butler calls 'the subversion of an authority that grounds itself in what may not be questioned' (1997).

### **Research Insights**

Tobias-Green discovered how the process of walking can be a practice-led research inquiry, rebuilding, reviewing and replenishing lost histories, stories of the 'then', the 'now' and the 'possible'. The images show the walk across town, during which Tobias-Green's humanist sense of self gradually receded into a post humanist awareness of a vitally connected world out there, enhanced by what Jones and Hoskins call 'thingly power' (2016), the agency of the land, feet, the camera, the sun, the vastness of past and present. The narrative gives textual voice to this through the sometimes treacherous landscape of the sentence.

### **Dissemination**

These images and their accompanying narratives were exhibited at Leeds Arts University in 2017. The peer-review led to a more focused approach so that the exhibition became a walk itself. The project was exhibited at *Walking Women*, Somerset House, 2016.

Tobias-Green has subsequently used the project to explore lines of enquiry at both postgraduate and undergraduate level demonstrating impact on teaching.

## 1. Urbana



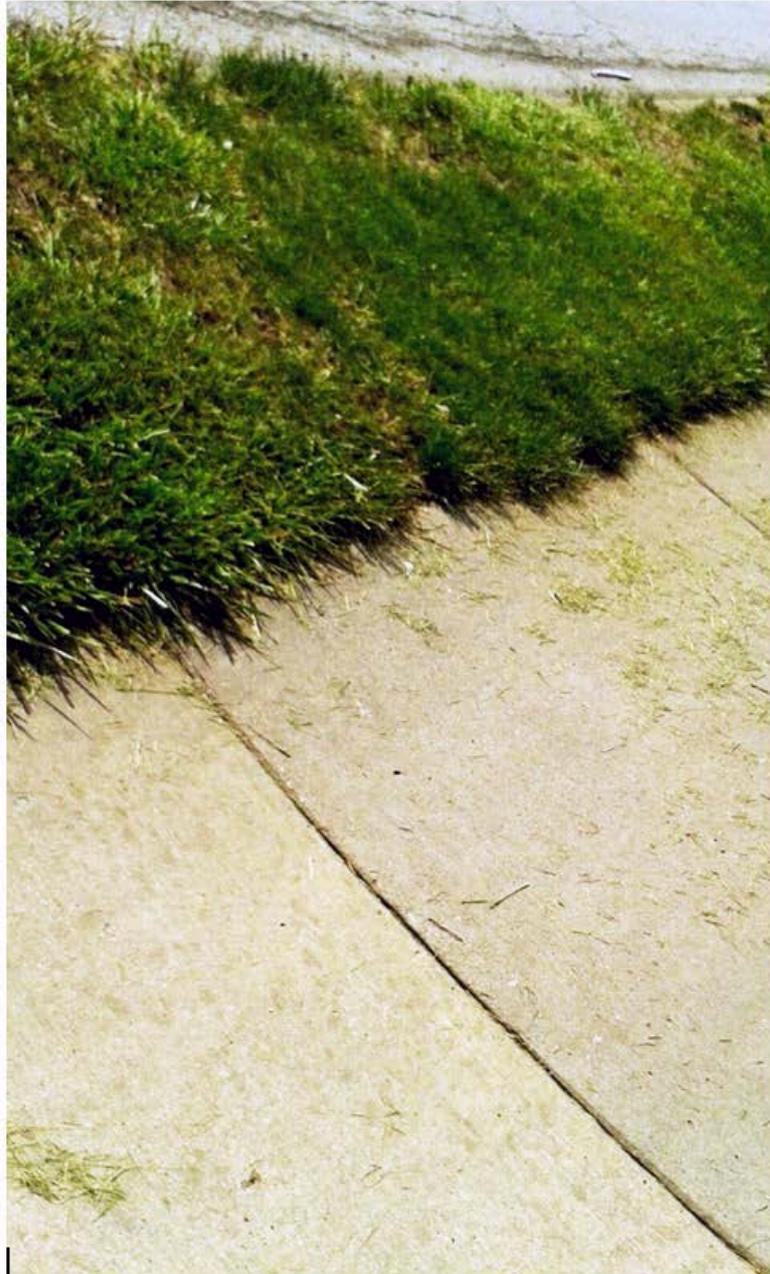
Urbana has sister cities. It has huge long wide roads all bisecting in straight lines. It has so much space. It is so much space. I am following the directions of the woman on hotel reception. She was distracted by another guest when she was talking to me and I often mix up my left and my right. But even so I know I'll find a way. My way comes to me through walking and looking with new eyes. I take out my camera phone.

## 2. Water meter



I can't resist the water meter appearing between the green grass of the sidewalk. It is beautiful. And it's from Wabash Indiana. My father knows the 50 states and 50 state capitals. He used to recite them to me. He has never been to America and he never will.

### 3. Grass meets path



In Urbana everyone seems to be mowing the lawns that surround their one storey clapboard homes. Grass meets path. I ask the way and was treated with warmth and humour. "Walking? You're a long way from home, girl! Illinois was my old University. I was the first in my family to go to college. I loved it there." She is African American and maybe in her late 60s.

#### 4. School



The school I pass is empty, quiet, clean, waiting, poised.

## 5. Teamsters



Here is Teamsters Local Union 26. I've heard of teamsters. I know a bit about Jimmy Hoffa, president of the international brotherhood of teamsters, his alleged mafia links and his mysterious unsolved disappearance. But despite massive ideological opposition to unionised labour across the global economy, unions persist.

## 6. Pastoral



We can be at peace. If we agree with God. And if we need him, he's on the World Wide Web. But 'human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.' (Hitchens, 2007, 266). In the face of fundamentalism, Judith Butler calls for '1000 conflicts of interpretation [to] bloom ... possible interpretations may well lead to the subversion of an authority that grounds itself in what may not be questioned. In such a world, questions...remain intrinsic goods' (Butler, 2005, 289).

## 7. Bird



There's a bird on the shed. It's not a real bird. It's a renewable bird, a tin bird, a facsimile of a bird. Everywhere there are birds. The robins in Urbana are huge. And it's only May.

## 8. Railway crossing



The railway crossing is unmarked by signs. This may be because it seems hardly anyone crosses it on foot. Public transport is a class issue. The poor ride buses. The rest ride cars. I hold my breath as I cross. I am not myself now, thinking only of the physical crossing, the lack of other humans, the gritty grass, the glorious sun, this place that holds homes, transport, commerce, hearts, minds, concrete, steel and grass. It is not alien; it just is.

## 9. English Brothers



Settlers to the Americas often used their native homeland as their surname. English Brothers is a firm of builders. Their building is made of brick. Most of the houses on Carver Park are clapboard.

## 10. Attucks' Place



Memorial to Crispus Attucks. Memorials sustain memories. In 1770 Attucks, a former slave, became a sailor working out of Boston harbour. He was one of five men shot in a fight with British soldiers in an event dubbed the "Boston Massacre." 'Its victims became martyrs and symbols of liberty. Despite laws and customs regulating the burial of blacks, Attucks was buried in the, Park Street cemetery and became "the... honored dead' (PBS. org 1998).

## 11. Carver Park



Carver Park. 1950s: 'the 1st large scale residential development initiated with private capital entirely through black families. De-segregation of all-white areas was taking place.' 1968: the League of Women Voters report 'improvements in the status of local African Americans were largely illusory. The majority are confined to housing which is old, overpriced, overcrowded and often below minimal standards'. 1981: 'the majority of African Americans still live in what are euphemistically called the traditional neighbourhoods' (Sterne 1997, 86).

12. Plasma



My next landmark tells me I'm close to East Green Street where you can sell your plasma. I've heard extraction is painful and takes a while.

13. North Neil



North Neil Street caters for all comers: tattooing, piercing and excellence in life and ministry.

#### 14. Statue



The stone woman in the grounds of the University has stood since the 1800s getting wetter. In the Union I meet a writer I admire who compliments my work. I wait to be thrilled. Instead I am both humbled and energised by the experience of being out of myself, amongst the space, place, history, now-ness, then-ness, knowingness, not-knowingness, heat filled temporal landscape, filled with robins, inquirers, past heroes and villains, rage, justice, injustice, paper, pen, sword and silence.

## 15. Newspapers



On the day of the downing of the Egyptian airlines flight, we read that newspapers are for students only. These things we have made and which consume our resources, our energies, our compassion, come back to haunt us.

## 16. Clocks



Clocks fill the main hall. The time in Urbana Illinois is only relative to the time in other parts of our world.

17. Shoes



My doctoral supervisor Carol's golden Converse catch light and defy time as she walks ahead of me into a lift in the University Union that evening.

18. Fannie May Candies



Leaving the conference, I'm compelled to walk into Champaign, the other half of the urban sandwich that holds the University in place. Fannie May candies are made in this building. They sell for 20 dollars for a box of four at Chicago O'Hare airport.

19. Family Dollar



Family Dollar supermarket unites us in our basic needs: to eat to survive, to save to progress-  
to sustain our bodies

## 20. Hide and Seek



I cannot hide. 'Some undocumented or un-archived history of oppression emerges within our contemporary life and makes us rethink the histories we have told'. This produces 'converging temporalities in the present, which allow us to reorient ourselves in non-identitarian ways so that we're not just looking out for our own history or our own people, but our history turns out to be interrupted fundamentally by an effaced history' (Butler, 2009).|