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Abstract

This article draws on Lefebvre's notion of rhythm to contribute to the theorization of embodied space and urban experience. Through gestures (learned and patterned movements), the body gathers together material and social relations in the street and produces rhythms that the ethnographer can listen to and take part in. In the article, the temporality of walking, combining past, present and future, is used to incorporate the history of a particular street in Aberdeen, Scotland, into an analysis of the walking practices of those who use it. Temporal "presence" is suggested as a mode of ethnography appropriate to shared walking, and by which both the familiar and the hidden or mysterious aspects of urban walking can be described. By engaging both with ordinary walking and more distinctive practices, the article shows how the ways that people walk in the street become part of local politics and social relations.

Keywords

walking, rhythms, history, presence, Aberdeen

Introduction

One mode of fieldwork I am interested in is to do with the immediacy of experience and the event of the here and now, reflected in phenomenological anthropology that takes as its starting point the experiencing subject emplaced within its environment (Jackson, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). To that end, I would like to start this article by presenting the sounds of Union Street, the main street of the city of Aberdeen in northeast Scotland. For me, the sounds evoke the presence of the street quite well, and perhaps they are also a way to forget familiarity. I am listening to a sound recording I made while walking along, and typing as I listen.

I am coming out of the Bon Accord shopping centre.

A gust of wind is picked up by the microphone. The sounds are flatter here, without the echo and enclosure of the shopping centre. A rattle of a charity worker's collection box in a rhythm, shick shick shick shick. Four shakes and a pause. Footsteps. Traffic lights beep, for about five seconds. "How are you doin min?" "Are you alright, how's your leg?" A lorry accelerates. A bus goes past, two. "I didn't have time." Conversation overlaps with the traffic. "Thanks John." More deep clumps of footsteps and higher pitched clicks. Talking in

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Figure 1. Union Street, Aberdeen

close quarters. Some dance music, from a car stereo, with a thudding beat. The scrape of a stiletto heel on the pavement.

Union Street is encompassed and enacted by rhythms. On starting to listen, some distinctive experiences of the street—the sounds, the movements, the sense of presence—began to emerge. Consider, for example, the footstep. Neither the pavement nor the shoe have any intrinsic sound or movement within them, but by their interaction, their coming together in a corporal and rhythmical flow, the footstep is felt by the walker and heard and seen by others. Crosscurrents of other rhythms swell around them. The traffic lights pulse regularly, and with them, the sounds of the street change from the footsteps and chatter of people to the rising and falling roars and swooshes of traffic. Other rhythms remain indifferent to the traffic and the footsteps: the shaking of the collection box, the looping siren of an emergency vehicle that barely pauses for a traffic light on red.

Familiarity is also partly key part of the scene. The rhythms in Union Street are practiced both in the sense of being lived out through the body, and learned (if not perfected) through the degrees of prior engagement that all those present have had here, or in similar places. In the city, moreover, walking practices are intertwined with the histories of planning and architecture, but they may have also resisted expectations as much as conforming to them, responding to traditions and repertoires of bodily practice as much as to the structures the city. A key aspect of walking rhythm, as with all rhythms, is that it unfolds over time—both within a walk and across different walks (see Figure 1).

Rhythm, Gesture, and the Street

A walker entering the street becomes immersed in the movement and the sounds of the time of the day, week, and year and in the changing patterns of activity as the street and the city develop. The street itself is a place of rhythms and interactions. From this perspective, it is the sensing of rhythms in the street (be they coherent or chaotic) that enables it to be understood as a place and indeed form it as place. This is the essence of Henri Lefebvre's concept of rhythm as evident in *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991) and extended in *Rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre, 2004). Rhythm contributes to Lefebvre's analysis of everyday life particularly in the conceptualization of time. In *The Production of Space*, time is configured as the result of capitalist control over space: "As for time, dominated by repetition and circularity, overwhelmed by the establishment of an immobile space which is the locus and environment of realized Reason, it loses all meaning" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 21). In his subsequent critique and rebuttal of such a state of affairs, Lefebvre locates space firmly back within the realm of time—or rather, refuses their Cartesian separation from the start: "time is known and actualized in space" whereas "space is known only in and through time" (p. 219). Analysis of the body is central in the buildup to these assertions, especially in regard to patterns of gesture continuing through time. In reference at first to ritualized or codified gesture, he writes the following:

Bodies themselves generate spaces, which are produced by and for their gestures. The linking of gestures corresponds to the articulation and linking of well-defined spatial segments, segments which repeat, but whose repetition gives rise to novelty. . . . Many such social spaces are given rhythm by the gestures which are produced within them, and which produce them (and they are accordingly often measured in paces, cubits, feet, palms or thumbs). The everyday microgestural realm generates its own spaces (for example, footways, corridors, places for eating), and so does the most highly formalized macrogestural realm (for instance, the ambulatories of Christian churches, or podia). (p. 216)

In making these links between gesture, body and space, Lefebvre spatializes Leroi-Gourhan's (1993) notion of rhythm as "the creator of form." Leroi-Gourhan described human evolution as a process of developing "technical intelligence," of which rhythmical hammering, flaking, or weaving are examples (Ingold, 1999; Leroi-Gourhan, 1993). In *Rhythmanalysis*, the idea is similarly not so much to study rhythms for their own sake but to listen to what patterns of gesture, space, and time can tell about the forms they produce. Lefebvre makes an important distinction between rhythm and repetition or copying: "While mechanical repetition works by reproducing the instant that precedes it, rhythm preserves both the measure that initiates the process and the re-commencement of this process with modifications, therefore its multiplicity and plurality" (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 79). Making a rhythm is an inherently creative activity, and a contrast with the repetitive impositions of the typical working day in capitalism is implied here.

The Familiar and the Hidden

Accounts of walking in the city have in fact often turned on a tension between a sense of familiarity and the hidden or mysterious qualities of pedestrian activity. Describing William Wordsworth's sense of bewilderment in going "forwards with the crowd" of unknown faces in London, for example, Raymond Williams (1973) identifies the strangeness and loss of connection in city life experienced on foot. At the same time, one can uncover the potential for "new kinds of possible order, new kinds of human unity, in the transforming experience of the city" (pp. 186-187). The street as a shifting scene of social change and even revolution is far from the street as ordinary

dwelling place. In Charles Dickens's London, Williams notes the "usual uproar" in the street, a constant eruption of change that Dickens conveyed through dramatizing the social and moral world in physical terms (p. 198). Dickens's mid-19th-century London is filled with the paradox of unknown crowds and a chance meeting with someone familiar: an endless labyrinth of streets on one hand and the knowledge of a route along them and a meaningful corner within them on the other. As Solnit (2001) notes, Dickens himself was an inveterate walker of the streets.

A series of other studies in anthropology take a more grounded approach in trying to understand the development of specific urban forms and the ordinary habits of those who live in them. Robert Rotenberg (1995) describes the mirroring of social relations in the urban landscape of Vienna, where gardens and green spaces have provided the common symbols of metropolitanism, such as liberty, and at the same time realizing configurations of social hierarchy and power. In Brasília, meanwhile, the street as a site of sociality—the "public sphere of civic life"—was all but removed from the city in favor of a utopian ideal of transit and efficiency (Holston, 1989, p. 103). The lesson in the end however is that the "familiarization" of Brasília cannot be held at bay for long, as vernacular styles of architecture with their own embodied spaces of movement develop around the edges. The tension between civic control and cultural expression in urban space is also apparent in Low's (2000) study of the Latin American plaza in political culture and social life. The circulation of social groupings in spaces with which they are mostly intimately familiar (two plazas in San José, Costa Rica) comes to play out the cultural relations of urbanism and the nation state and links also to international flows of labor, capital, and cultural form. Gender relations are significant in all of these and will also be relevant in the case described here.

In connecting space and time—or more specifically, connecting the development of the street with the experience of walking through them—it is important to see that a walk should not be thought of as simply a transient act compared with the long-term engagements of city authorities or other macro-level processes. All spatial practices should also be seen as temporal, Lefebvre argued. De Certeau (1984) described the varying temporalities of "strategies" and "tactics" in everyday life (as well as the fact that they are spatial practices) and, as is well known, using walking as an example of the latter. More recently, Massey (2005), Lorimer (2005), and other human geographers have helped carve out a notion of space beyond the representational. Massey argues (2005) that representation otherwise flattens out space and renders it liable to be depoliticized—a statement of how things are, rather than an equally temporal collection of "stories-so-far" (p. 130). Moreover, we should be aware not merely of the fact of temporality (e.g., the historical embeddedness of walking) but of how particular kinds of temporality create particular embodied forms and spaces.

In summary, although not denying its often mysterious and imaginative character, I would like to hang on to the fundamental familiarity of walking and use that to trace some of its interwoven temporalities. I suggest that walking can be approached through the purposefully mundane descriptions of embodied rhythms and gestures, but it can open out onto wider debates on urban form, social relations, and power that, in the end, play on both the familiar and the mysterious.

Opening Union Street, and the small skills needed to walk along it

The building of Union Street, or, as it was described at the time, its "opening," completely remade the town of Aberdeen in physical, social, and cultural terms and aligned it to the ideals of "improvement" that were changing urban areas and the countryside in Scotland and elsewhere at the end of the 18th century (Adams, 1977). Growth in the town's population and a desire for more substantial road links for trade led the County Road Trustees in 1794 to commission proposals from a Glaswegian surveyor, Charles Abercrombie, for making new roads leading from the south and to

the north of the town (Macaulay, 2002; MacInnes, 1994). His recommendation was for a “direct, straight street” entering the heart of Aberdeen, with “a large addition to the town by a regular plan divided into building lots” (Abercrombie, 1794). A road leading north from the east end of the new street would provide access to the bridge at the River Don, north of the town, and although the two streets would not quite form a right angle, Abercrombie suggested they would nonetheless “in a manner form the town with a great square.” The centerpiece of the new street, Union Bridge, opened on June 5, 1805. The new street was raised above the old town, and there would be direct views and access between the old and new. It was also clearly a social class hierarchy, in which the new straight street embodied taste, elegance, and improvement. The old twisty and uneven streets were now vaults, tunnels, and backstreets, affecting the pedestrians through the gestures of their walking.

I would like to bring this brief historical and architectural perspective on Union into dialogue with an ethnographic rendering. Sharing walks with people was in particular a rich way of understanding perspectives on their familiar places, as others have noted (Anderson, 2004; Bendiner-Viani, 2005). It is worth noting that almost all contacts for this research were made initially away from the street itself, through people I had heard might be interested in talking about walking or sharing a walk (and later, their friends or other acquaintances). Approaching strangers on the street itself for anything other than a short functional conversation will almost always lead to suspicion or alarm, such being the distinctive maintenance of privacy despite the public setting of the street. This means that Union Street is usually a place where one meets people one already knows, rather than new people. In the absence of spoken contact, it also means that people’s bodily gestures become even more important for the creation of sociality. What I am primarily concerned with here is how actual experience of the street is formed through rhythms of movement that do not correlate neatly to the structuring historical influences of its architecture and ultimately raise rather different questions of temporality.

Walking along Union Street brings the street into a relationship with other streets and parts of the city around it. People walk into the street and out of it again, crossing it, weaving through it, and incorporating it into a larger journey. It is nonetheless often a distinctive part of the journey, during which some of the issues that came up during the construction of the street are still pertinent. A pattern emerged in many of the shared walks I had that involved Union Street, whereby the busyness of the street became obvious and whatever conversation we had elsewhere cut down. One person I walked to work with along Union Street reflected on this: “Cos I never walk with anybody else, you notice the difference, the volume of sound. Down there, you can talk pretty easily. You start coming up here, it’s difficult.” We moved between the shop fronts, bus stops, waste bins, and the multitude of other pedestrians. Occasionally we separated momentarily to move round people or other objects that became obstacles to us.

Some walkers take a kind of pride in the small skills, the gestures, of negotiating the busy street in a smooth manner, without needing to vary their pace too much or being made to stop. The fast-moving walker may “see the gap and go for it,” as one said, moving diagonally across the pavement. Often small partings and meetings take place between pairs or small groups of walkers. There can indeed be a pleasure in making one’s way through a busy street, which my informants often put to me in terms of rhythm. “When you’re walking, like, first of all when you’re not crossing roads all the time, it is very much ‘I’m just in a rhythm,’ and I’m walking,” another pedestrian commuter said. The walking and the rhythm take over the body. It is not necessarily a rhythm of perfectly even beats in time, corresponding to evenly spaced footsteps (which would be Lefebvre’s “repetition,” or, in other words, a march) but includes creative variations that allow for the steady continuation of the walk. Crossing roads, on the other hand, normally means an unwelcome break in the rhythm. Many people spoke of how attaining a rhythm was an important part of the pleasure of walking in all kinds of places, for some virtually

the very purpose of walking, and equating rhythm in the end with a sense of well-being that has to do, I think, with being at ease or confident in one's environment.

The gestures required to walk or move on a busy street do of course vary according to the situation of the person. Those using wheelchairs or crutches, the visually impaired, or anyone who is less stable or mobile than the majority of walkers may experience the obstacles and hindrances on the street more strongly. The walking environment in general is often "set" at a certain requirement of pace and mobility, deviations from which can cause problems for the person and indeed people moving around them. This is as true for a person attempting to run in a busy street as it is for a person moving slower than the norm. I made a number of trips on Union Street with Caroline and Ben, a mother and her 2-year-old son being pushed in a buggy. Even in fairly quiet periods, I saw how having the buggy made us stop regularly on the street for a few seconds and wait for a path to clear. The entrance to a baby care shop, ironically, is particularly tricky because of a large and busy bus stop blocking part of the pavement directly outside it. If a person ahead of us stopped, we too would come to a halt. Once I said to Caroline that there was not much chance for talking or social interaction with Ben on these trips. "No, it's just about getting there," she replied. The rhythm within these walks was rather disjointed, indeed barely present in the positive sense that most of my informants described. Caroline instead speaks of a transfer across space, the attempt to attain a specific end point, rather than any sense of time passing during the walk itself. This resonates with Lefebvre's description of the loss of time within capitalist spaces. Caroline's feelings tended toward frustration despite the fact that she otherwise enjoyed living right in the city center.

From the perspective of the walker, Union Street comprises a set of lines and rhythms much more complex than its apparent straightness suggests. The orderly street has given way to a multitude of interweaving routes and improvisational lines. The basic architecture is largely the same as in the early 19th century when it was built, although the addition of two shopping centers south and north of the street alters somewhat its dominant east–west axis. The pavement now also has a wide range of street furniture, including direction signs, rubbish bins, and, recently, large flower boxes (planters), and each walker has to track around and through these objects and the encompassing crowd. The movements of the walkers serve to animate the rigid horizontal linearity of the street through the varying rhythms and directions of their routes. The street as thoroughfare dominates the city, in which the desire to move "freely" through space collides with the reality of having to spend time doing so. Even in a capitalist modernity, as Lefebvre noted, the control of space ultimately does not remove experiential time. Those who *feel* in control now are the mobile, usually the young, the unburdened, and the skilful, who can cross the space in a minimum of time. For others, those laden with literal or metaphorical baggage, the street is a place of struggle, of time spent and lost.

The Time of Ethnographic Presence

The "ethnographic" data here are primarily located in the present, in contrast to the archival reading that deals first and foremost with the past. I think a tension appears between this contrast and the temporalities of walking itself. In most walking, past, present, and future seem more blended and indistinct—we do not have a "moment," as such, as we walk. This relates to the English verb form of the continuous present: "I am walking," English-speakers say or think to themselves as they actually do it, not the merely general "I walk." Walking as an activity implies a continuity rather than a moment. To fully appreciate the temporality of walking, we need to consider more carefully the kinds of time that ethnographic fieldwork and writing tends to invoke.

The temporal trope of the "ethnographic present" is important here. This is a feature of writing where the practices being described are situated in the generalized now—what the *x* people

“do”—without a strong sense of historical development or emergence or of the particular time at which the ethnographer was present to witness them (Augé, 1999; Fabian, 1983). For me, this contrasts with the complexities of temporality in walking that actually invokes, and in fact gathers together, senses of past, present, and future. This would be a temporality closer to Bergson’s (1910) “duration” in that walking can *only* be said to occur in a flow of time and space, in which the fixity of the ethnographic present would be far too reductive. Haili You (1994) also makes this link with duration in thinking about situations where rhythmical action is to the fore. She writes,

Rather than equivalent to simple frequency or periodicity, the time factor in such cases would involve a living tempo defined in terms of duration. . . . The definition of rhythm should be based more on duration as lived time than on frequency or periodicity as in a mechanical clock. (p. 362)

Drawing on Bateson’s relational ecology, McCormack (2002) notes that “the moving, feeling and thinking of an interest in rhythm become mutually implicated in a relation of connectivity rather than causality” (p. 474). I feel the notion of rhythm as connection, or the continual gathering of relations, is indeed closer to phenomenal experience than that of causality. This should in no way preclude an analysis of power relations but does mitigate simple chains of cause and effect.

My informants were keen to speak of change, variety, and development both within individual walks and in their walking lives overall, as I have described elsewhere (Lee & Ingold, 2006). In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre offers “presence” as a temporal mode of engaging with such experiences. Presence is time limited only by the fuzzy boundaries of experience, itself shaded by memory and anticipation. The ethnographic encounter as a kind of presence might be understood as formed by its temporality but not closed off by it. The encounter is conceived of as being able to continue, turn back on itself, or return again in the future, according to the twists of ethnographic practice. For Lefebvre, the “present” often turns out to be a parody of presence, an image of a moment disassociated from time and space. Ultimately rhythmanalysis “transforms everything into presences” (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 23) through, I would suggest, being attentive to the rhythmical configurations of gesture, body, and space. Perhaps the more open-ended “presence” also relates better to the verb form of the continuous present. It certainly encourages attentiveness toward embodied experience, as Csordas (1994) has noted, and like rhythm, presence must involve a flow of both time and space.

Can we then approach a notion of ethnographic presence in an expanded temporality of past–present–future? Specifically, we might look for ways of walking that do not fit neatly into the regimented modernity of administrative control, as read through the archive, or into the freedoms or constraints of individual paths along the street that seem so fixed in the generalized present of “how people walk.” In so doing, a more culturally nuanced understanding of walking might emerge as a habitus or set of techniques of the body that are *learned* in more specific social and physical contexts—rather than a relation of causality in which patterns of gesture are determined by the shape of the environment. If we have a concern for modes of presence, the ethnography of walking cannot always be categorized into the temporalities or causalities of either “archival history” or “current practice.”

“Walking the Mat”

To this end, I would like to explore a type of walking that used to happen in Aberdeen, known as “walking the mat.” Although delimited in time both cyclically (only at a certain time of the week) and in overall duration (it faded out during the 1970s), it was located not in any particular

moment but, rather, in the kind of presence—a patterned, gendered movement—that it created. On March 12, 1834, the *Aberdeen Journal* carried a report of a meeting of the Police Commissioners of Aberdeen that gave details of a discussion about walking in the streets:

Mr Bothwell having called the attention of the Board to the interruptions arising, especially to old and infirm persons, from the present promiscuous way of walking the streets, particularly on Sundays, and suggested that some regulation thereanent should be put in force, a conversation ensued on the subject, when on the motion of Mr Elmslie, it was agreed that a recommendation should be issued to the public, that persons, in proceeding along the pavement, should, as in other large towns, invariably keep the right hand to the wall, and thus obviate the inconvenience of any jostling or other interruption; also, that no person should be allowed to stand and obstruct the passage along the streets.

Back in 1809, Union Street had been described as deserving of a foot pavement at each side (there were none originally) because it had already “become one of the most crowded and frequented public streets in town” (Aberdeen City Archives, New Street Trustees NSSt/1/1). The street was at the very least a success in terms of getting people to use it, and here we must bear in mind the horse-drawn carriages and wagons that made up the vehicular traffic and from which the public were barely protected. When foot pavements were laid, they quickly became full of pedestrians and were soon another concern to the authorities, perennially worried about the breakdown of order on the street. We get the sense of an attempt to control and coerce the increasing multitudes of people on the streets of the city. The Aberdeen Police Acts of 1795 and 1829 had already banned a huge range of obstructive practices (selling things, moving loads, playing with hoops, etc.) on the foot pavement, and now, the way of walking on the pavements had itself become a concern.

That Sundays were picked out in the original discussions is also interesting. The practice of walking in the city on Sunday, or “street-parading” as it was called in the *Bon Accord* popular Aberdeen magazine in 1913 (as cited in Maver, 2002, p. 427), was underway by the 19th century, and in the 20th century, it became associated with young people on Union Street. According to Wyness (1965), a particular walk took place along the old Fittie-gait, which led from the center of Aberdeen to its fishing community of Fittie. Because the original road was grassy and not made of stones, the route along it was called “the carpet walk,” and a summer evening perambulation along it was “walking the carpet” (Wyness, 1965, p. 201). It then became transferred to Union Street when that became the preferred location for fashionable promenading. The practice continued until the 1970s as “walking the mat.” In its more recent form, it involved a walk down Union Street in a small single-sex group, and during the walk, it was acceptable to meet up with another group of the opposite sex. Many Aberdonians today in their 50s and older remember such walks with affection. One couple explained to me by linking it to a distinctive sense of community:

Betty: It was a very safe, because we were usually four girls. Well, if you saw four boys—there was no way you could just see two boys—if you saw four boys, four boys who you would like, and then you would meet up and become eight.

Charles: Aye, and a social function for meeting . . . You would be sure they would be Aberdonians.

Betty: Probably at the same school . . . It's very tribal, Aberdeen.

Charles: And, Aberdeen was a very er, very much a village feeling. The oil industry would've changed that, but it was very “villagey” so that you could go home and say you'd met somebody, and . . . it's quite likely there would be some kind of knowledge of them.

Some people remember walking the mat in the 1950s and 60s as a walk down Union Street to the Beach Ballroom on the seafront on Sunday afternoon in order to buy tickets for the Sunday evening dance and then paying a visit to one or other of the cafés there. Others tell how the focus was on Union Street itself, in which paired-up walkers would stop into the Italian coffee and ice-cream parlors that had opened in the years following the First World War. One veteran of the practice explained that the young people would walk “down the mat” on the right-hand side of the street going down toward the east of Union Street and then walk “up the carpet” on the other side of the road, toward the west. The idea was that one met one’s partner on the walk down, and a walk back up with them on the other side would simulate the walk up the carpeted aisle of a church in a wedding ceremony. All these descriptions resonate with rhythms in the patterns of teenagers, or young men and women, coming together and their movement down the street and up.

The Aberdeen Police Commissioner who described what we can imagine to be a similar kind of walking as “promiscuous” in 1834 was not necessarily using the word as a criticism of the romantic or flirtatious edge that was present in later walking the mat. Especially in the 19th century, promiscuity also referred to an irregular mixing of parts, or confusion (Oxford English Dictionary; “promiscuous”). The concern is more toward the impeding of an uninterrupted walk for others, caused by groups of people meeting and stopping on the street. The street, for the Police Commissioners and the New Street Trustees, was to be a place for smooth passage and straight lines. Walking the mat, by contrast, was a way of using the street to socialize, a particular manner of engaging in social relations, rather than a way of getting from one place to another. Here, the street allows people to mix and provides the opportunity for a kind of public surveillance of the results and so emerges again the paradox of freedom and control associated with the street. As Solnit (2001) writes in relation to the more widely known forms of street courtship in Latin America and southern Europe, such walking “allows people to remain visually in public but verbally in private” (p. 66). In the Italian *passeggiata*, Pitkin (1993) notes the importance of making an impression: “the chance to offer a presentation of self and perform an assessment of the presentation of others” (p. 98). In Aberdeen, walking the mat was a way of using the broad street and pavements in perhaps a more playful and youthful kind of sociability and indeed a very regular “mixing of parts”—equal numbers of boys and girls. It is, as noted earlier, much easier to see who is coming the other way on Union Street than elsewhere in the city center, and in this, it shares the characteristics of the piazzas and plazas described by Pitkin (1993) and Low (2000).

People who used to walk the mat are interested in why it disappeared, and their thoughts are also commentaries on how the city has changed. Betty and Charles linked walking the mat to a quality of social relations that they suggest is no longer apparent in Aberdeen, that of the “village feeling” of either knowing or knowing *of* most people whom one would meet. With the onset of the North Sea oil industry in the early 1970s—Aberdeen is “Europe’s oil capital”—not only did the population increase but so did numbers of people from far away in the United Kingdom and abroad, especially the United States. Large capital investments by the oil companies dramatically affected the local economy, in terms of jobs, incomes, and housing (Tiesdell & Allmendinger, 2004), and Aberdeen is seen by many to have become more cosmopolitan, more riven with vehicle traffic, and, ultimately, more “modern” at this point. One Aberdeen historian notes that televisions became much more widespread at this time and encouraged more entertainment based in the home (Maver, 2002). Another argues that the loosening of Sunday drinking laws in the 1970s provided something else to do on a day previously given over by some at least to walking the mat (McGregor, 1990). Overall, the demise of walking the mat is linked to a time, now lost, of easy street sociability, of safe and pleasurable walking among people who could be trusted.

We could indeed make a general case that the degradation of the street as a walking environment has affected the kinds of social behavior practiced in it. For most people, most of the time, the street is now a place to be negotiated, a place of diving for gaps and “getting there” rather

than “being there” where something actually happens. The types of movement involved in the two are qualitatively different in the physical techniques used, the meanings given to them, and the temporalities invoked. Where one attempts, but cannot help but fail, to erase time in the crossing of space, the other revels in the opportunity for social presence, by turns friendly and sociable, into which could be slipped moments of privacy. But neither fit with the model of walking on Union Street set out by the New Street Trustees and Police Commissioners of Aberdeen: theirs was an ideal that involved free passage without the physical hindrances of street furniture or traffic or the social distraction of romantic dalliances.

Walking in the night-time economy

There are still times, however, when the pleasures of walking on Union Street are very apparent. Here we need to remember that the street is not a uniform environment and that how it is constituted is a result of who is there and what they are doing. The discussion of rhythm in this article has been intended to emphasize this variability through the patterns of gesture, sound, and action. So far, the rhythms have been those of daytime or, with walking the mat, early evening. But currently on Union Street, it is at night that some of the most expressive walking takes place.

The sounds of the street at night are rather different from those of the day. After about 11 p.m., traffic tends to lessen and comes in more distinct waves of six or eight cars instead of a near-constant rush. There are also far fewer lorries and buses, which means that the overall level of traffic noise is less than during the day. The sounds of talking and, in the main, young people socializing on the street come over instead. Particularly at weekends, Union Street is the main venue in the city for going out—visiting pubs, bars, and clubs—and being on the street is an important part of the night.

The walking style of groups late at night on Union Street is often characteristically loose limbed, and there is plenty of gesticulation with the arms and lateral movement around the pavement in relation to different members of the group. Occasionally a group of three or more women may link arms as they walk up the street, forcing those walking in the other direction to move around them. The alcohol is clearly an influence in loosening the more controlled and socially negotiated walking of the day time (where each walker gives way in part to the other). However, the street also provides for a freedom not dissimilar to that of walking the mat: to socialize with one’s friends in the particular manner that walking together allows, that of a shared rhythm of movement. Being within such a group of people on Union Street can definitely be a liberating experience. There is space to move in relation to one’s companions, to produce a social closeness or distance, for example, in the spacing between them, rather than just dodging around other walkers, the signposts, rubbish bins, or flower stands. The physical interactions with the street can express a way of being in the street rather than just a “getting there.”

There is a reminder of the “social function” of walking the mat (as Charles put it) among the current generation who walk on Union Street at night. It is the one time when attempts are made to meet people on the street, to strike up a conversation, or to involve others in whatever sociability is underway. While walking, in my observations, this usually takes the form of the simple greetings, the sharing of jokes, apologies for drunkenness, or suggestive comments or approaches (usually from men to women). This ease of conversation outside is also a contrast to within the bars and clubs, where loud music curtails almost everything apart from drinking and dancing.

Hi! How are you doing? Hiya.

Hi. How are you?

I’m very well. How are you?

I’m ok as well.

Hiya! How are you doing?!

Having the experience of a lifetime.

Greek.

Oooh! We smash the plates.

Yes we did! So you're Greek as well. No you're not.

Yeah! No, but my friend Dimitri, he was Greek and what a darling.

McDonagh (2003) writes in relation to Barcelona how bars construct their own symbolic space ranging from the traditional neighborhood to the gentrified spectacle, with associated codes of virtue and vice and insider and outsider, which are imposed on, constructed through, or resisted by people in the localities. In Aberdeen, it is at night that the bar/street boundary blurs, when the innocuous daytime street is transformed by people streaming in and out of the bars. They take over the street with exaggerated movements, loud voices, and sociability that sometimes overflows into aggression. The struggle identified by Tim Edensor (2008) between the movement of the walker and the constraint of the regulatory regime continues (Edensor, 2008), and yet it also needs to be seen through the relations between particular walkers who may be totally at odds with each other in their modes of presence and their rhythms in the street.

The street is, then, perhaps more than ever a site of contestation. The freedom to socialize for one group of people is seen as curtailing the freedom of safe and comfortable passage of others, and this is based in arguments about the kinds of movements that are most appropriate for the street. One person's desire for familiarity meets only another's desire to be hidden—expressed in gestures of straightness and uniformity. We hear an echo of the 1834 Police Commissioners' complaints of the "inconvenience of any jostling or other interruption" in the current debate. Such activities plainly disrupt the beauty, order, and, in a sense, straightness of the street. But the actual history of walking on Union Street shows the absurdity of the attempt to construct a walking environment that would be anything other than grounded in all kinds of physical and social interactions and would be constantly reworked by the pedestrians themselves. The "natural and simple" line of the straight street is a reality only in the architect's plan.

Conclusion

Setha Low (1993) has shown that, in the overall history of urban forms, it is actually the large irregular towns and cities that have historically and geographically been the rarity (only generally occurring in Islamic and medieval European contexts) rather the common grid plan of straight lines I have described here. I would not wish to partake of a metanarrative of urban development in which the organic routes of walking are gradually melded into the straight lines of modernity. Rather, the point has been to reconnect studies on urban experience to the actual embodied interactions of walkers with their environments on the street. One part of my argument is that thinking about the urban through body, gesture, and rhythm (following Lefebvre) allows us to get closer to the actual experiences of the walkers than metaphors of image and mind might do, or indeed than that which could be contained in a straightforward narrative urban history. Through this, the productive interplay between familiarity and the unfamiliar or mysterious qualities of walking resonates both with the experience of walkers in my research field and reflexively in the ethnographic encounter itself. Sharing a walk with someone involves a temporal and spatial copresence in the world, where the otherwise unique, mysterious, body falls into a rhythm with another and creates a common form that becomes familiar to both.

Noticing or listening to rhythms has also opened up possibilities for understanding everyday activity as a process of place making. In the distinctive ways of moving about Union Street, the street is recreated as a place of connection, consumption, or leisure and sociability. Each of these states is based in a certain way of treading and the sharing of them by groups of people over time.

In Union Street, the strongest rhythms are perhaps those of the day and of the week, and yet the walks also respond to the demands of the work day and the desires of cultures of consumption (along with, e.g., the amount of traffic) in rather similar ebbs and flows. Caught up in the politics of urban planning and authoritarian control, the street is where different kinds of sociability collide, where gender advantage and disadvantage is played out, and where public and private embodied spaces have to be negotiated. This article has argued that gesture, the learnt and patterned movements of the body, gathers together material and social relations in the street and produces rhythms that the ethnographer can listen to and take part in.

From the perspective of the walkers, then, the architecture of the street is only a reality in its very human relationships. The space is formed through the rhythms of those who use it, and these continue in past, present, and future time. The experience of walking is therefore a bodily one but firmly a body oriented within an environment. From this perspective, the city is a participant in the walk. Understanding the city in turn requires more than a focus on its physical structure or representation in the minds of inhabitants. For a walker, the environment changes according to every footstep along the route, and is known—has become known for me—through the activity of walking itself, with its combinations of the familiar and the mysterious.

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Bio

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