

Queer Walking Tours and the affective contours of place

cultural geographies

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cgj**Sarah E Truman** 

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Abstract

This article outlines a method we call *Queer Walking Tours* as site-specific research-creation events. It gives a brief overview of the *Queer Walking Tours* as method and then describes one specific tour that explored the concepts ‘Migration, Militarisms, and Speculative Geology’. *Queer Walking Tours* offer cultural geography and a range of other disciplines and fields a form of place-based research that draws on Indigenous, anti-racist, feminist, and queer frameworks to open up different conversations around the notion of place.

Keywords

affect, concepts and place, Queer Walking Tours, research-creation, walking

WalkingLab is an international queer-feminist art collective co-directed by Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman (walkinglab.org). The collective develops queer-feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial walking research-creation events including Queer Walking Tours, which we examine in this article.¹

Walking tours as a research method, a tourist event, and an everyday practice are a ubiquitous method of getting to know a place, including its hidden histories, obscure stories, and state-sanctioned narratives.² They typically take place on foot and are usually led by a guide with expertise or experienced knowledge of a place. Some tours have even become dramatic spectacles, with guides in costumes and theatrical performances, such as the Ecosexual walking tour by artists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens.³ What most walking tours have in common is the idea of place – that through a walking tour, participants uncover something new about a given place’s historical, political, social, or cultural context.

We contend, however, that conventional walking tours can reinforce dominant histories, memories, power relations, and normative or fixed understandings of place. This place-based knowledge can

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serve various forms of governance or ideology and maintain the status quo, including the ongoing violence of settler colonization and erasure of racialized, gendered, and disabled bodies.⁴ For example, Cindi Katz has argued that the metaphoric use of place terms (e.g. positionality, situatedness, and nomadism) often in fact lacks specificity and ‘fail[s] to grapple with how specific historical geographies embody, reproduce and fortify social relations of power and production’.⁵ According to Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, although ‘place’ appears across many disciplines and fields, in the social sciences it is often under-theorized or treated as a surface upon which research happens and as such is marked as distinct or separate from humans and non-humans.⁶ Furthermore, they contend that specific Indigenous conceptualizations and articulations of Land are typically absent from Euro-Western understandings of place. Heather Sykes similarly argues that terms like ‘taking place’ perpetuates the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories, by literally *taking* place.⁷

To counter dominant and normative walking tours that ‘take place’ in specific locations, we developed a method called ‘Queer Walking Tours’ to advocate for a critical consideration of place. This criticality not only recognizes place as socially, culturally, politically, geosocially, and relationally constructed but also considers ‘the place-based processes of colonization and settler colonization and works against their further erasure or neutralization through social science research’.⁸ Queer Walking Tours offer cultural geography and a range of other disciplines and fields a form of place-based research that seeks to attend more responsibly and ethically to issues of place. This article explicates our Queer Walking Tour practice and provides examples from *WalkingLab* events.⁹ First, we introduce research-creation. Following this, we explain our walking practice. To conclude, we discuss the implications of doing Queer Walking Tours as a form of place-based research.

Research-creation

Research-creation is the interrelated practices of art, theory, and research.¹⁰ While many arts-based approaches to qualitative research use the arts as a way of *representing* research findings, in research-creation the process of creative practice is understood as an empirical and theoretical practice itself.¹¹ In conducting research-creation projects with large publics or as individual artists, we prime our practices through propositional thought, speculative middles and (in)tensions.¹² *Propositions* are not intended as a set of directions or rules that contain and control movement but rather as proposals of what *could be*.¹³ As discussed below, the queer walking tours always start with the proposition to queer place by exploring a concept from many frictional and oblique perspectives. When conducting a research-creation project, we also charge ourselves to be open to *speculative middles*, following the idea that research begins in the middle. Our research-creation events ask participants and researchers to allow themselves to be present, situated, and responsive in the research event’s unfolding. Given that research-creation is a speculative and non-procedurally driven practice of doing research, we recognize the danger in describing how we enact our walking practice as it might sound as if we are taking an ‘anything goes’ approach. However, what we aim to exemplify is that while speculative, open, and indeterminate, the tours as artistic practices are rigorously curated and ethically-politically situated.¹⁴ While we might not know in advance what will happen in the speculative middle of an event, the (in) *tensions* we bring to the research are firmly situated in a queer-feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial ethics and rigorous artistic practices.

Queer Walking Tours as research-creation practice

Queer Walking Tours activate the notion of *queerness* in various senses, including, attending to sexuality and gender identities; rupturing biologically determined notions of reproduction and progress narratives; obliquely or queerly taking up a concept in relation to a place; and defamiliarizing

established assumptions that walking is a convivial practice and that all bodies move through space equally. We work against reducing queerness to a form of exceptionalism and are critical of the Whiteness and privilege inherent in calls for queerness as transgression.¹⁵

To commence our speculative eventing, we begin with the proposition of a place – the physical location that the walk will occur. Propositionally, the place for the research shifts from being a surface where the walk will take place to a *concept*. For example, our walk, *Stone Walks Bruce Trail: Queering the Trail*, took place on a 9-km stretch of the 900-km Bruce Trail in Ontario, Canada. The Bruce Trail was the walk's physical or geographical site, but the concept of a 'trail' became the propositional concept that propelled the research. Similarly, *Stone Walks Edinburgh: Queering Deep Time* took place geographically in the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, while the concept to be explored was 'deep time'. In Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 'Lancaster' functioned as both place and concept for the walk *Stone Walks Lancaster: Militarisms, Migration, and Speculative Geology*.

We use the concept for each walk to cut obliquely across the geographic place. Once we have a concept, we invite scholars, educators and/or artists to create pop-up lectures or artistic interventions for the walking tour. Our invitation asks presenters to think about the concept in relation to their own research and/or art practice and to problematize the concept from different, sometimes-competing, and always-speculative angles in relation to the place we will walk. Presenters know that they will be presenting a 15–20-minute talk or doing an artistic performance/intervention during the walk, but we do not assign specific places on a map at this stage in our speculative practice. We ask presenters to provide a title or theme for their talk but do not ask for scripted papers or abstracts. In other words, while there is a method to the practice of our queer walking tours, what might happen on the walk remains open to the speculative middle, to chance, and to the dynamics of both the participants who come on the walk and the environment. However, this is not to say that the pop-up lectures or artistic contributions are random or careless. Rather, there is a thoroughness and exhaustiveness to the curatorial endeavor. For example, on the Bruce Trail, the walk sought to queer the concept of a *trail* (nature trail, hiking trail, environmental conservation, geology). The pop-up lectures included talks on Indigenous tree time, Indigenous and settler relations, posthuman geology of the Niagara Escarpment, and gentrification and poverty in relation to environmental conservation and sustainability. In addition to the lectures, the artist collective TH&B¹⁶ created a site-specific and mobile project that intervened into dominant practices of landscape urbanism.¹⁷

Each walk concludes with an invitation to participants to walk with us silently, a chance to reflect and dwell with the lectures and artistic pieces. The tours are advertised through social media, on art gallery and academic listservs, and through Eventbrite and typically draw anywhere from 50 to 100 participants.

In addition to the pop-up lectures and artistic components we plan the walk's route in advance: first, using Google Maps and then walking the route ourselves to get to know it through our own bodies and gait and consider how different (racialized, gendered, disabled) bodies might move through the route. Our research into a place guides where each pop-up lecture will take place. However, rather than presenters imparting factual information about a 'place' encountered on the walk, (e.g. 'at this site in 1923 such and such occurred'), the site (geographic location) cuts transversally across the lectures/performances enacted at each spot, as we explain in more detail below.

Stone Walks Lancaster: Migration, Militarisms, and Speculative Geology was curated for the conference, *Capacious: Affect theory/Making space*, in August 2018. Although the walk took place in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, we wanted to propositionally open the concept of Lancaster and the name's relationship to militarisms, migration, and geology (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is well known for its sinkholes!). As for previous walks, we invited pop-up lectures that would queer Lancaster

WalkingLab commenced the walk by introducing three 'militarisms' associated with the name Lancaster: the Lancaster Bomber, the Lancaster Treaty and the Sims' Speculum. The Lancaster



Figure 1. Chad Shomura's talk *Settler Affect in Native Lands*.

Bomber was a British WW11 heavy bomber, and more than 430 were made in Canada, just outside our hometown Toronto.¹⁸ The Lancaster Treaty of 1744 took place between the colonial governments of the Virginia Colony and Maryland Colony and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, also known as Iroquois' League of the Six Nations, and was signed in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.¹⁹ The Sims' Speculum was invented by Marion Sims, of Lancaster South Carolina. Sims' medical expertise was in repairing vaginal fistulas caused by childbirth. However, the advances he made in medical technology, while significant for women's health, came at a violent cost: he used enslaved women to test his surgeries and operated on these women without anesthesia and for hours.²⁰ The introduction of these militarisms pried open the place-concept Lancaster for participants, asking them to think speculatively and through a queer-feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial framework as we walked. Although the stops on the walk were carefully researched, they did not directly describe or impart historical or practical information about that specific place. Rather, the pop-up lectures transversally engaged with the site through multiple intersectional contexts.

For example, Chad Shomura gave a talk titled *Settler Affect in Native Lands* while standing on a street corner that, while currently populated by row houses and a convenience store, was the site of the Lancaster jail from 1753 to 1851 and the Conestoga massacre in 1763.²¹ There is a small plaque on the corner that refers to the massacre. However, Shomura's talk did not reinforce this colonial narrative but worked frictionally, obliquely, or queerly against the dominant discourses available at that particular site. Drawing on Vanessa Watt's *Place-Thought*,²² Shomura asked participants to think about recognition and what it entails historically and in the present. He spoke of enduring worlds (plant, animal, land, and people) and re-centered Indigenous cosmologies to that crowded, small patch of concrete sidewalk (Figure 1).

Other pop-up lectures included Sarah Cefai's narrative-poetic piece called *Market Exchange in Experience Capitalism* on the steps of the Lancaster Central Market, one of the oldest farmers' markets in the United States. Cefai took up the concept of the market queerly, discussing the predatory

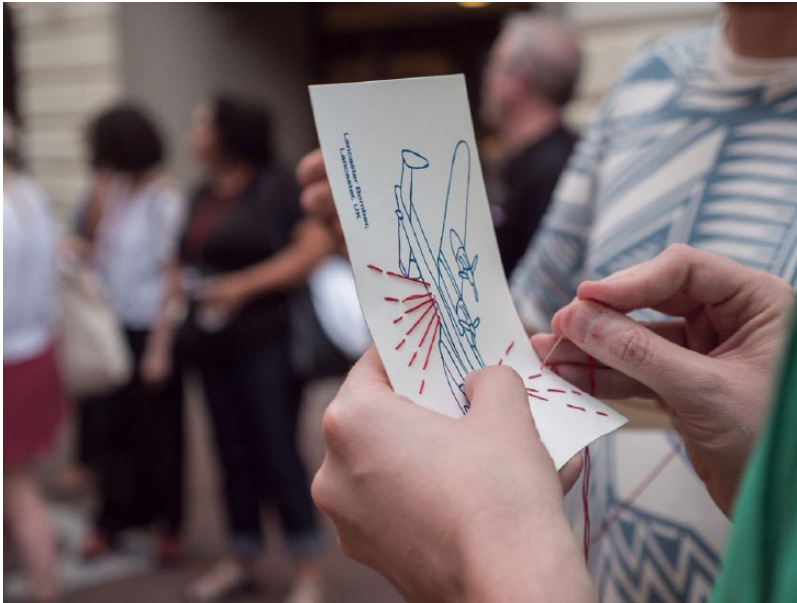


Figure 2. Artistic intervention, Lancaster Bomber.

nature and militarisms of online dating, toxic White masculinity, humiliation, and misogyny. Michelle Wright's lecture *Discipline & Punish and Entanglement* focused on an epiphenomenal understanding of time, where the past is constructed in the present. Standing where the former train depot, an important stop on the Underground Railroad,²³ was located, her talk narrated past and present abolitionist movements. Dana Luciano's lecture on speculative geology and sinkholes invited walkers to pay better attention to the material world, to the relationship between interhuman violence and genocide, to the Anthropocene, and to the ways that geology has always been imbricated in settler colonial biopolitics. Greg Seigworth, a Lancaster resident and host of the Affect Conference, provided what we called 'Lancaster Shimmers' – affective notes on the city's changing residents and places. We ended the walk, as we often do, by inviting participants to walk in silence for an extended period of time, in this case, through the Lancaster Cemetery, in the dark (Figure 2).

An important component of each Queer Walking Tour is an artistic intervention that invites walking participants to respond to place affectively and bodily. For the Lancaster walk, we hand-drew and then screen-printed each Lancaster militarism onto cardstock 5 × 7 inches in size. Each card had a piece of red embroidery floss and a needle attached. Participants were invited to hand-stitch onto the cards during the walk and as they listened to the different pop-up lectures. Participants could follow the image's contours, create text, draw on feminist cross-stitching, or mark their responses by deconstructing the image itself (Figure 3).²⁴

Conclusion: affective contours

In the final chapter of our book, we discuss the affective and ethical-political dimensions of walking.²⁵ Contours, we argue, germinate, assemble, and shape things. As a practice of thinking-in-movement, Queer Walking Tours contour – a curved line, an irregular shape, a frictional conversation. A part of our contouring as a walking research-creation practice has been to hold in



Figure 3. Artistic intervention, Lancaster Treaty.

tension the history and inheritances of walking and walking methods. Who walks, how they walk, and where they walk require constant queering.²⁶ Using the propositional form, speculative middles, and the ethics of queer-feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial worldings, the walking tours more-than-represent a place in unexpected ways. Walking makes a place palpable as different configurations of bodies, materials, environments, and texts come into being. They are ethical-political insofar as they attend to affective spacetimes, while also questioning how these spacetimes become the focus of experimentation and action.

As an open and eventful way of doing research, Queer Walking Tours examine place as a geosocial, cultural, and political manifestation and disrupt settler colonial understandings of a place/concept. If place and place-based research are important concepts and contexts for cultural geography, Queer Walking Tours offer a particular method or practice of doing research that cultivates our capacities to sense variations and to generate ways of being that are composed of oblique and queer arrangements.

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Notes

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16. TH&B is the creative partnership of Simon Frank, Dave Hind, Ivan Jurakic and Tor Lukasik-Foss. For more information on the arts collective see: <http://www.thandb.ca/>. TH&B is the name of the former railway that ran along the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo corridor, and its initialism can still be seen marked on many of the railway bridges in the city of Hamilton, Ontario.
17. See chapter 1 in Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*.
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