



# Urban walking as a practice of care: sensorial activism in Durban, South Africa

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Received: 15 March 2022 / Accepted: 3 September 2022 / Published online: 20 October 2022  
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**Abstract** In this article, I explore how the sensory perception of urban environments translates into an activist practice of care. Based on a case study from my digital ethnography, I argue that activist artist and architect Doung Anwar Jahangeer’s performative “City Walks” are aimed at experimenting with, questioning and reframing perceptions of marginalised places in Durban. Re-interpreting and re-experiencing public attributions of meaning to locations through walking allows for a sensory re-appropriation of places labelled as poor and dangerous. Conceiving of sensing as an active process, I argue that sensorial ways of caring transcend boundaries of normativity, space and time in the city. I show how urban walking practices of care have the potential to partially realise future visions of spatial and social justice through sensory engagement with the city.

**Keywords** Urban perceptions · Sensorial walks · Spatial justice · Urban inequality · Digital ethnography

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## Urban Walking als Care-Praxis: Sensorischer Aktivismus in Durban, Südafrika

**Zusammenfassung** In diesem Artikel setze ich mich mit der sensorischen Wahrnehmung städtischer Umwelt als aktivistische Care-Praxis auseinander. Anhand einer Fallstudie aus meiner digitalen Ethnographie argumentiere ich, dass die performativen „City Walks“ des aktivistischen Künstlers und Architekten Doung Anwar Jahangeer die Wahrnehmung marginalisierter Orte in Durban sichtbar machen, hinterfragen und neu gestalten. Über das Gehen vollzogene Neuinterpretationen und Neuerfahrungen öffentlicher Bedeutungszuschreibungen ermöglichen eine sinnliche Wiederaneignung von Orten, die als arm und gefährlich betrachtet werden. Ich verstehe Wahrnehmung als einen aktiven Prozess und argumentiere, dass sensorische Care-Formen die Grenzen von Normativität, Raum und Zeit in der Stadt transzendieren. Ich zeige, wie Stadtspaziergänge als Care-Praktiken das Potenzial haben, Zukunftsvisionen von räumlicher und sozialer Gerechtigkeit durch eine sinnliche Auseinandersetzung mit der Stadt partiell umzusetzen.

**Schlüsselwörter** Urbane Wahrnehmungen · Sensorische Spaziergänge · Räumliche Gerechtigkeit · Städtische Ungleichheit · Digitale Ethnographie

## La marche urbaine comme pratique du care: Activisme sensoriel à Durban, Afrique du Sud

**Résumé** Dans le présent article, j’explore comment la perception sensorielle des environnements urbains se traduit en une pratique militante du «care». Sur la base d’une étude de cas issue de mon ethnographie numérique, je soutiens que les «City Walks» performatives de l’artiste et architecte militant Doung Anwar Jahangeer visent à rendre visible, remettre en question et recadrer la perception des lieux marginalisés de Durban. Réinterpréter et réexplorer, par une marche urbaine, la signification que prête le public à ces lieux permet aux promeneur-es de se réapproprié de manière sensorielle les lieux étiquetés comme pauvres et dangereux. Considérant que la perception est un processus actif, j’argumente que les méthodes sensorielles du «care» transcendent les frontières de la normativité, de l’espace et du temps dans la ville. Je montre en quoi les pratiques du «care», mises en œuvre par la marche urbaine et l’appropriation sensorielle de la ville, ont le potentiel de réaliser temporairement une vision d’une future justice spatiale et sociale.

**Mots clés** Perceptions urbaines · Promenades sensorielles · Justice spatiale · Inégalité urbaine · Ethnographie numérique

### 1 Introduction

I first chatted with Doung on a Friday morning in early February 2021. This meeting—our first—was symptomatic of the ways in which the pandemic had affected interpersonal encounters: instead of corporeally tuning in to Doung’s performative

activities, I was seated in front of my laptop, sipping coffee with a two-dimensional picture on my screen. During the hour that we were sitting down “together”, Doung told me about his performances and, in particular, about the “City Walks”, an urban walking practice that challenges normative attributions of meaning and habitualised patterns of movement in the city.

Doung has a very passionate and captivating way of talking about his experiences, visions and worldviews. The lively modulation of his voice and his vivid gestures gave me the feeling of being drawn into the world his “City Walks” try to show—even though I remained sitting at my desk. His way of speaking, he noted, also contributes to the performative experience of the walks. It was this aspect of the corporeal experience that I was able to share via digital ethnography, even if my body did not move and I could not trace his routes and their environmental embeddedness. Although my virtual access denied me the experience of physical-affective participation and copresence in motion, it did foreground the verbal-performative dimension of the “City Walks”. Thus, the pandemic situation has opened up a partial, but particular perspective for me.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I explore how the sensory perception of urban environments translates into an activist practice of care. In what follows, I will briefly outline the context in which Doung’s practices are embedded in order to describe how embodied relationships with urban space through walking are linked to practices of care and have the potential to partially actualise future visions of spatial and social justice through sensorial engagement with the city.

Doung refers to himself as an activist, artist and architect. He has a migrant background and has lived in Durban, with a few interruptions, since the 1990s. For him, to arrive in the city was not easy—the province of KwaZulu Natal, in which Durban is located, is known as the “murder hotspot” of South Africa (Baxter 2020). Owing to its enormously high crime rate, the public perception of the city is loaded with fear. Doung was seeking strategies to change his personal sensorial reality and initially invented his ways of urban walking as a way of countering his

frustration of living in a country where there the fear industry prevails. Everybody is afraid, you know, and I was also becoming afraid and out of that I wanted to go and take a walk and see for myself in the place of the other. (Doung, Zoom, 02/21)<sup>2</sup>

Even though fear is omnipresent in contemporary South Africa, perceived threats are more proximate for some than for others and feelings of security can act as “markers of segregation” in an enormously unequal society (Durlington 2006, p. 150).

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on my ongoing research project on “Activism as a mobile aesthetic form”, which is part of the interdisciplinary research group “Traveling Forms” at the University of Konstanz (<https://www.uni-konstanz.de/en/research/research-institutions/nomis-research-project-traveling-forms/research-fields/activism-as-a-mobile-aesthetic-form/>). Methodologically, I have so far relied on digital ethnography on social media platforms and websites of artists, activists and organisations, as well as Zoom and email conversations.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes from Doung marked with “Doung, Zoom, 02/21” or “Doung, Zoom 06/22” refer to the transcripts of our Zoom calls on 21 February 2021 or 30 June 2022 respectively; quotes marked with “Doung, YouTube, 05/11” refer to an amateur recording of one of his walks published on YouTube.

By corporeally engaging his audiences, Doung tries to get over this sensorial dividing line—a delicate project in a country that is built upon a long history of colonisation and apartheid (Özler 2007). Disparities reveal themselves not only in socioeconomic inequality but also in the fraught relationships between people and their wounded affiliations with space. Doung’s activism is intended to foster both connections: among people and towards their land, which Black South Africans in particular have learned over generations would not belong to them. Obviously, the urban space is closely entangled with human agencies and interactions—engaging with the city is likewise engaging with its people. Walking takes shape as an “intrinsically social activity” that is “continually responsive to the movements of others in the immediate environment” (Ingold 2011, p. 43). Through urban walking, Doung wants to enable experiences of equality and mutuality that facilitate a “looking into each other’s eyes” as a way of “humanising ourselves through place” (Doung, Zoom, 02/21).

Proceeding from Doung’s “City Walks”, I explore this sensorial form of activism as a reshaping of common perceptions, understandings and embodiments and, thus, as powerful tools for re-arranging the “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004). To challenge hegemonic sensorial realities is an act of care and simultaneously a way of unsettling normative care practices in the city. Drawing on Joanne Tronto and Bernice Fisher I take care as

a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web. (Tronto/Fisher in Tronto 1993: 103)

This definition only speaks to inclusion, but leaves open the question of where the boundaries of “our world” lie. I argue that Doung’s “City Walks” work towards experimenting with, contesting and reordering sensory ways of “caring about”. Acknowledging sensing as an active process, I argue that sensorial ways of caring transcend boundaries of normativity, space and time in the city.

## 2 Caring about inequality

To just go for a walk without paying attention to where exactly they are going, or more importantly, where they are *not* going, is not something people do as a matter of course in Durban. The high crime rate and related fears are associated with the aftermath of apartheid regulations, as well as the politics that have prevailed since 1994 and that, for many people, have not brought about substantial changes to their livelihoods (Pithouse 2008). At the latest since 2004, when massive protests against the unequal distribution of state care appeared in almost all South African cities, the profound inequality of the post-apartheid era has become unmistakable even for the wealthier segments of the population. The uprisings were designated as “service delivery protests” (Alexander 2010; Booyesen 2009)—a denotation that fails to recognise the core of the resistance. As some scholars argue, the protests were not simply about the satisfaction of physical needs, but claimed “a vision of

a different kind of politics” (Gibson 2011, p. 171) and “dignity and respect” (Bryant 2008, p. 58). Many protests did not take anti-state positions, but rather held the state accountable and called on it to fulfil its responsibility to all citizens (Goebel 2011, p. 386).

Although inequality is no longer defined by skin colour alone, the politics of socioeconomic distribution post-1994 have merely been *reformed*, not *transformed* (Seekings/Nattrass 2005: 6). Current inequality might not be exclusively racialised, but rather centred around a divide between the rich and the poor; still, it is more than obvious that the percentage of Black people living below the poverty line is much higher than that of white people (Durlington 2006; Özler 2007). And this is also reflected spatially: segregation is an unacceptable term in public discourse, but manifests significantly in the spatial division of living areas (Freund 2001, p. 546). Even though the fall of the apartheid regime was followed by “symbolic reinscriptions of geography and social space”, the split of respective lifeworlds, attributed meanings, immobilities and movement patterns is still tangible (Durlington 2006, p. 149).

South African activism challenges these spatial and social arrangements in different, often emphatically sensorial ways. In 2014, an extraordinary form of sensory redistribution made headlines in Cape Town and all over South Africa: activists carried faeces from the portable toilets of the townships to “the centres of power” to protest against the scandalous sanitary conditions they lived in, which became palpable in the “lingering smell of shit” flooding the airport and the motorway (Robins 2014, p. 1f.). Passers-by were inevitably drawn into a sensorial engagement with the lived realities of the townships. The impressively articulated dissent addressed both the unacceptability of living conditions in the townships, and the persistent ignorance of them on the part of the wealthy and powerful.<sup>3</sup> There is more to this than just raising awareness or being recognised: even if it is of limited duration, the usual distribution of the sensible is overturned by the event. The moment the sensory properties of the lives of the marginalised are brought into the elite space, the predefined order is suspended and cannot simply be undone by police force; the semantics of pollution, and even infection, clings to the smeared streets and squares for a longer time and will perhaps never completely leave. The strict separation of the modern, clean and prosperous urban area from the poor, polluted townships is temporarily interrupted by the intrusion of faeces.

Doung’s performances address social inequality more subtly. Unlike the shocking confrontation with the unbearable realities of life for the marginalised that becomes corporeally perceivable through redistributed faeces, Doung’s activism relies on a rather unspectacular enactment of a new way of relating to urban spaces. The simple act of walking takes shape as a visceral realisation of a desirable relationship to the city, characterised by equality in it. In his walking practices, Doung challenges habitual ways of urban locomotion and perceptions, understandings and valuations of the city. He seeks to transcend spatial perpetuations of apartheid regulations that he conceives of as “binarisations” (Doung, Zoom, 06/22). Walking *as if* there was

<sup>3</sup> So-called “poo protests” are also known from other contexts in South African activism, such as the struggle against colonial statues or against exclusions in the art and culture scene (cf. Pauwels 2021).

equality, without accepting the public designation of some places as marginalised and dangerous, questions the standardised experience of space and supplements or replaces it by other sensory potentials. Here, change does not unfold as a concrete, material alteration of urban space, but rather starts more subtly at the level of perception. These urban walks can be considered as a form of reappropriation—not in terms of adopting elite but emphatically precarious places, by re-experiencing and re-interpreting those parts of the city designated as poor or dangerous and their semantic attributions of crime and fear. This makes it possible to connect with urban space in a new way and to abandon patterns of sensing that have been shaped over decades and are very much influenced by experiences during the harmful periods of coloniality and apartheid. Doung’s performance could thus be conceived as a processual decolonisation of the senses.

He deliberately guides his co-walkers through places that usually remain unseen and uncared for by the public—a condition that Doung calls “urban amnesia”. The people he takes on a walk are not a predefined audience, but learn about the “City Walks” through word-of-mouth. Doung, who holds an anti-capitalist stance, rejects advertising. Furthermore, in line with his philosophy, he does not define a target group, but gets involved with the people who approach him—even if he often does not know how they found out about him. He prefers not to call them “participants” and emphasises their own agency: it is the walk “that lends to the footstep of the city walkers” and “that exists alongside their practice” (Doung, Zoom, 06/22). Instead of sharing common knowledge and taking popular routes, he reveals Durban’s unknown stories and points to easily overlooked details, such as the diligent structure of “carefulness” (Doung, YouTube, 05/11). Sometimes the soundscape is so noisy that he has to scream in order to address his co-walkers. The visible, audible and tangible chaos that he deliberately encounters appears as an immanent, substantial part of his walks. His caring attitude takes shape as an emphatic reversal of mainstream attention in order to break with the continuity of harmful patterns in South Africa:

We haven’t unlearned apartheid, we haven’t unlearned the space making. Now that apartheid has broken down its structures, now that it exists in an invisible form, it’s penetrating anything and anywhere without us knowing. (Doung, YouTube, 05/11)

Doung’s sensorial walks are an endeavour to render the invisible continuities of apartheid visible in order to deprive them of power. His activism is based on grasping socio-political problems with the senses, and requires care to be impactful. As Tronto explains, the practice of caring can be split into four fields—caring about, caring for, care giving and care receiving. She points out that “[C]aring about involves recognising the need for care in the first place” (2006: 6). A moment of “caring about” is essential to start recognising normative patterns of perception and, thus, concealed power structures, hierarchies and inequalities. For Doung, the “City Walks” take shape as a visceral engagement with the place in order to challenge hegemonic perceptions—an approach that resonates with care as an embodied, practical and “hands-on” involvement (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017: 6). By collectively walking with others, Doung challenges somatic perceptions of normativity and en-

courages others to experience the seemingly fixed social and spatial order differently. Normativity is not only a politically or conceptually abstract arrangement, but rather sensorially perceivable and viscerally tangible in everyday movements around the city. It takes the caring attitude that Doung has and encourages during his walks to reveal that the perpetuation of “a violence that is rooted in the past is being kept alive” (Doung, YouTube, 05/11).

In a Rancièrian reading, Doung is performing dissent and thus deliberately disrupts the common order to stimulate the reconfiguration of the sensible and “new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time” (Ranciè 2010, p. 139). The dominant arrangement that allocates fear and crime to certain areas is challenged by Doung’s alternative practices of unworried walking. Rather than fearfully avoiding deprived areas, walking comes with embracing, acknowledging and thus taking care of neglected urban places.

For him, the origin of his practice is crucial. He initially walked for, and by, himself to become emotionally and physically comfortable with his new environment; in doing so, he formed long-term relationships with local dwellers. He visits his acquaintances regularly and exchanges news during shared meals to take care of these long-standing relationships. However, his personal ties to local residents are organically linked to his private walks and do not become part of the performance that he shares with other walkers. He wants, above all, to avoid any form of voyeurism. He explains that he has a great responsibility, since he started the project through his personal practice, which he now shares with others. He is aware that the act of walking not only affects him as an individual but also the social environment through which he passes (Doung, Zoom, 06/22).

### 3 Walking future visions into the present

For the perception of the environment and orientation therein, walking is crucial because “it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground (albeit mediated by footwear), that we are most fundamentally and continually ‘in touch’ with our surroundings” (Ingold 2011, p. 45). I conceive of perception as an active process rather than a passive impression for “our sensitivity results from an activity of partition and partaking” (Citton 2009, p. 121f). To carefully walk through the city is an act of participation and a practice of forming the environment. As active doing, care is always provisional and it is precisely this processual state of becoming that makes change possible.

Doung explained to me that the “City Walks” enable people to look at “eye level” and thus facilitate a corporeal experience of equality. Such acts of relating to urban places can be considered as a partial actualisation of a broader vision for social life in the city. For Doung, equality is central to the reordering both of spatial relationships and of people’s relationships with each other. His performances intend to “open up a space of mutual encounter” and enable people “to recognise each other’s issues (...) each other’s powers” (Doung, Zoom, 02/21). Further ideals of social coexistence, such as mutuality and recognition, are tied to the “eye level” sensation and reveal

an idealised coexistence that can become possible in the urban space. The political possibilities of walking can be understood in terms of microutopias that are pulled into the present in terms of prefiguration (Graeber 2009: 210) and as “a critical exercise on the limits, rules and violence of the landscape, the city and mobility” (Sansi 2020: 152).

Taking the city as a “reservoir of multiple histories and stories, and as a range of possible futures” (Till 2012: 11), myriad layers of place can actualise through spatial perceptions and practices. Thus, urban places take shape through corporeal engagements. And these embodied ways of relating to the city trigger imagination, which is deeply interwoven with lived reality as “an active component of experience and perception, engaged in a constant interchange with the material textures of the existing world” (McLean 2007, p. 6). Doung’s walking is not only a catalyst but also a subtle manifestation of the change he is anticipating. For Doung, to walk a place is simultaneously to have agency over it and thus a form of empowerment and relief from predefined meanings. This form of agency could be read as taking over the role of a caregiver—the active and responsible agent in a caring network. The dynamics during the “City Walks” are, however, more complex than that. Walking redefines the relationship between him and his material environment:

So to engage the body with the body of the city I think is quite important for us to be able to not only think but also to feel. I think that’s what is the point. It’s also a forward commitment, you know, you’re committing yourself in its entirety, you know, you’re bringing your history, you’re bringing everything with you. You collapse the distance that exists between yourself and the place. (Doung, Zoom, 02/21)

Here, walking becomes an intimate relationship that is even close enough to unmake the boundaries between body and place. The walking body and the city merge into each other and thus the distinction between care giver and receiver dissolves. Doung is simultaneously taking care of the place, himself and the urban relationship as such. As Held argues, “(...) the well-being of a caring relation involves the cooperative well-being of those in the relation and the well-being of the relation itself” (2006: 12). Walking as a careful embodiment transcends not only space but also time, because the caring relation encompasses the present, as well as the past and a desired future.

#### 4 Sensing and caring: A conclusion

Taking care of this complex caring relationship, however, requires a long-term engagement: having walked the same route for years, Doung compares his repetitive activity to a “mantra”. It takes a long-term commitment to change sensory and semantic perception:

like you find a rock in your garden and you polish it you need to keep on polishing it again and again and again and again before you realise it’s a diamond. (Doung, Zoom, 02/21)

To corporeally and affectively invest in *caring for* is a question of *caring about*. Always fluid and unstable, the complex web of caring relations in the city is intertwined with ways of dwelling and moving. As care is never fully inclusive, but always oriented towards a certain purpose, the embodied shifts in moving through the city have the potential to modify, extend or constrain the contingent sensorial inclusivity of care through spaces and times.

After years of walking, Doung felt “comfortable in my (his) own body in that place for the first time”. This statement illustrates that the affective body, localised and embedded in a particular place, creatively mediates internal and external stimuli that feed into situated experiences of proprioception (self-perception). Doung further described the form of well-being he acquired through his regular walking practice:

My chest opened up, my head raised and I looked at eye level and the act of looking at eye level is I think what makes us able to negotiate ourselves in space in order to understand place. (Doung, Zoom, 02/21)

Doung’s new perception involves a different psychosocial orientation in a defined place. He links his corporeal sensory experience to a cognitive process. Ingold argues that “cognition should not be set off from locomotion, along the lines of a division between head and heels, since walking is itself a form of circumambulatory knowing” (2011: 46). The distinct intelligence of walking is “distributed throughout the entire field of relations comprised by the presence of the human being in the inhabited world” (ibid.: 47). This emphatically relational approach reveals the caring aspect of walking—navigating requires care since urban “places are both deeply personal as well as socially shared” (Till 2012: 11). Urban walking takes shape as an embodiment of care: to change the ways of walking is also to change the ways of caring about the city, its people and places.

**Acknowledgements** I sincerely thank Doung Anwar Jahangeer for his kind openness in sharing his experiences and insights through our Zoom and email conversations over the past 2 years. I am grateful to the NOMIS foundation for funding my research as a subproject of the research group “Traveling Forms” at the University of Konstanz.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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