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ESSAYS

The Politics of Walking:  
Rural Women Encounters with Space and Memoir

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# The Politics of Walking: Rural Women Encounters with Space and Memoir

REBECA IBÁÑEZ MARTIN

*A group of elderly and retired women from a northern village in Spain (they call themselves las chicas, the girls), try to gather every week to take a walk together. Assembling my ethnographic notes, I describe the walk and offer an analytical foray into the following questions: What can we learn about the rural and the relationship of these women with the rural? What is the specificity of walking here? Walking is a practice that has in this case a twofold capacity: walking creates a mobile space for visibility in which rural women's work is considered private, and thus, walking provides a precious inter-subjective space for relationality; and second, the walk enacts a particular archaeology of memoir. The landscape bears witness to the socioeconomic changes of the rural environment. Such memoirs are actualized in the walk. Finally, as las chicas walk, not only do they travel across space and time, their movement allows for a particular methodological engagement of the researcher with the methods of research. Mobilities often question what hinders mobilities. But here my question is, what is walking telling us about both the rural and these women in the rural context?*

## Introduction

Walking has gained increased prominence in social, cultural, geographical and anthropological works in recent years. Following the lead of de Certeau (1984 [1980]), walking has been analysed as a spatial practice that offers insights on the connection between embodied movement with space and time (Anderson 2004, Pinder 2011). In urban studies, walking has often figured as a vector to learn about how bodies, through their walking, learn to sense and learn the spaces that surround them (Pinder, 2011). Accounts of walking have served authors in delivering theoretical analyses of urban embodied experiences (Pinder 2011, Andrews et al. 2012, Pooley et al. 2014, Vergunst 2010). Vergunst goes a step further in his analysis as he takes walking as a rich practice to open up debates about urban forms, social relations and power relations that play out in familiar landscapes such as streets (2010: 98). My contribution in this case looks into a particular way of walking in a rural space. What is the specificity of walking here? What can walking offer as a practice to open up debates about women in rural environments? I draw on the work of Doughty (2013) and Vergunst (2008, 2010) to open up a debate about the social relations of rural women in the north of Spain and the political implications of such analysis. I first analyse the relation between walking and the politics of visibility of rural women in Spain. Walking, I point out, is a practice that has in this case a twofold capacity: walking creates visibility and it enacts a particular archaeology of memoir. As *las chicas* walk, not only do they travel across space and time, their movement fosters some sense of continuity and belonging and, in the same move, allows for a particular methodological engagement of the researcher with the researched. Thus, a complementary argument of the text turns to the politics of methods. Walking has received attention as one mode of fieldwork that can provide interesting methodological innovations (Aoki and Yoshimizu 2015, Bendiner-Viani 2005, Deriva 2005), for walking as a method allows us to create atmospheres for research that combine different levels of engagement. As Bendiner-Viani shows, walking the familiar public spaces with our informants provides rich narratives of the “personal and social structure of the individual’s experience of familiar public spaces” (Bendiner-Viani 2005: 395). Mobility studies often questions what hinders mobilities. But here I invert the question into: what makes these women move? What can we learn about the rural by following their walking? The analysis of walking offers insight of what mobilities facilitate or interrupt, both in the methodological and empirical level.

## Methods

The material that composes this text is ethnographic. To create the structure of the article I draw on two empirical examples based on my ethnographic accounts of the walks with the women I spent most time with. Each example is accompanied by an analysis that serves to arrange sections of the article. My interest is not to represent or identify the walks in isolation, but to compose a narrative drawing on specific situations that took place during the walks. For that I do not identify singled out walks as isolated experiences, but mix the walks for analytical purposes.

My relation to the village where I conducted fieldwork was initiated six years ago when I arrived

in the village for the first time during the summer of 2010, on a private visit. Out of that visit I have been coming back regularly since then. Every year I spent a few weeks there during winter and summer, combined with more intensive visits during the fall or winter every second year. My interest in this village was sparked after observing how families living in the hills that loosely comprise the village related with food. I closely followed the communal sharing of patches of land, the interchange of food, and the collaborative feeding of scraps to the animals. Women walks quickly emerged as an important analytical category. Most of the women were already retired and had either lived in the village for all their lives, or had returned as soon as they retired. The village is situated on the coast of west Galicia, Spain. The top hills of this area of Galicia are dotted by houses which are typically surrounded by gardens, vineyards, and vegetable gardens. The mountains are now covered with eucalyptus trees planted during the sixties. As the hills go down into the coast, the Atlantic sea hosts an incessant movement of merchant ships, fishing boats and cargo ships going in and out the port of Vigo.

### ***Las Chicas: Women Living in Rural Galicia***

*Las chicas* is a term that the women who hosted me in the village use to refer to themselves. Girls would be the proximate translation of *chicas*. The context in which I first interacted with them is representative of the general background for women in rural Galicia. When I first travelled to this region in 2010 it had been a fairly hot and dry summer. It coincided with grape harvest so I volunteered. The big festivity of the village was coming up, and we were surrounded in a festive atmosphere. After the strenuous work, one of the women announced that later in the afternoon, they should go for a walk.

“Let’s meet tomorrow with *las chicas* to walk,” one of the girls said.

“Yes, its been a while since we went out for our walk,” another added.

### **The Non-Universalized Walker**

A classic figure in the history of the study of walking is the *flâneur*, the wandering urban walker of the nineteenth century, an idle and contemplative white man first studied by Walter Benjamin as a prequel of the tourist. For the *flâneur* walking was an aesthetic act. One would walk to let himself be surprised by the city – its corners, its mysteries, its shops. The stroller of the city was quintessentially an urban creature, a man too, that could roam the city without being called out for immoral behaviour. De Certeau (1984 [1980]) devotes one of his chapters of his *L’invention du Quotidien* to walking. Mobility is a crucial concept throughout the book as it focuses on practices of the mundane. Interestingly, walking is analysed as a form of resistance to the opaque: walking would be an elementary form to understand the city and inhabit the city, to make memories visible, either individual or collective. In his book, de Certeau compares the practice of walking to the capacity of speech. The pedestrian enunciates the city in his footsteps as the talker enunciates his discourse in his talking. Walking is the ultimate urban activity, and the pedestrian its natural creature. Walking shapes the contours of the city, creating the space of the city by the repetitive footsteps of the pedestrians. The paradox between space and pedestrian is a paradox between allowing and impeding. There are moments when space incites walking or interrupts walking (Solnit 2001). But there are such walking practices that have been interrupted not because they did not happen, but because they were not recorded. Rebecca Solnit reminds her readers that the walking practices of women have not figured in classic texts on walking (Solnit 2001). Due to moral and sexual constrictions, women have figured in the streets as unruly subjects, heavily sexualized. This has had the effect of not only preventing women from walking and taking over public spaces, but also having these acts ignored or not narrated as such (ibid).

Works attached to the ‘mobilities turn’ define mobilities as essentially composed of space and time (Creswell 2006, Urry 2002, Davies 2012). Space either facilitates or interrupts moving bodies and those bodies are essentially defined as moving across time. But who is allowed to move and who is not? What are the effects of moving in space and time? What kind of moving gets narrated and compiled and what move remains invisible? As Pinder (2011) points out in his essay on the poetics and politics of walking, the tendency to draw on de Certeau’s formulation of walking has the effect of universalizing the ‘moving body’ through references to a supposedly universal walker that is “seemingly ungrounded and undifferentiated” (Pinder, 2011: 687). There is a need to recognize the situatedness of walking and its positioning in relation to flows of

power and practices (Creswell 2006, Wilson 1992)<sup>1</sup>.

Going for a walk, the Spanish *paseo*, is an habitual practice in Spain. *El paseo* is a walk generally taken after lunch or before dinner when the weather allows. Arm in arm, in big or small groups, adults and children take the streets for fresh air to stretch their legs. Most city centres of Spain have big *paseos*, avenues to walk under the shade of trees. The geographical makeup of the village, however, is different. Composed of scattered houses surrounded by patches of land in this somehow chaotic and unplanned makeup, there are still many patches of land that are not fenced, and can be walked, as *caminos* are kept open between them. Those *caminos* communicate houses with other houses and are kept open by the villagers that know where the *caminos* are and lead to. To get from house to house one can either know the *caminos* still open and cross through vineyards and gardens, or take the road transited by cars. Furthermore, this village is somehow an anomaly, as there are no pedestrian walks whatsoever, as the old main *camino* has been turned into a main road with space only for automobiles. It seems that walking has been replaced by the use of cars or motorcycles. But *las chicas* still walk. Against all odds, and in a landscape that no longer welcomes pedestrians, they walk. Walking is a substantial part of their social relations<sup>2</sup>.

Rural walking has been contextualized as leisure hiking, a medium for transportation from one place to another, a pleasurable way to enjoy nature, and lately, as having therapeutic capacities. None of these categories apply to *las chicas*. The 'therapeutic landscape' framework shows how specific places either contribute or negatively affect wellbeing (Anderson 2004, Milligan et al. 2004). The therapeutic qualities rural walking can offer to wellbeing have been analysed elsewhere (Gatrell 2013, Conradson 2005, Doughty 2013). In such analyses, walking is performed by patients or guests in health residences seeking to improve their wellbeing. The intentionality of such walking in the rural space is therapeutic and the actors do not necessarily belong to the rural environment. Thus, it leaves out the analytical scope of 'rural actors'. What is the walking telling us about both *the rural* and *these women* in the rural context? I identify two instances that, thanks to the walk, become visible to the analytical eye. First, the walk permits us to flesh out how rural women deal with visibility, and second, the walk is a catalyst for an archaeology of memoir, which performs the landscape into a witness of the economical and social transformation of the rural environment.

## Visibility: Domestic Work vs. Open Walks

### *Fieldwork Vignette 1.*

The walk begins. It is a very hot day; it is so hot that we meet up at seven in the evening. The walk will take us a little more than two and a half hours today. Certainly *las chicas* have all done their house chores, including getting dinner ready for when they come back. I am impressed by their outfits. I was expecting them to be wearing sneakers and comfortable clothes but instead they are wearing street clothes, have make-up on and wear comfortable yet urban shoes. They all look pretty, I think to myself, and have cared for their appearance. This, I understand, is not a hike as I expected. This is more similar to 'going out' than 'going to walk'.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson (1992) argues that with the intensification of the private/public separation after the Industrial Revolution (here we are just talking about urban north European settings), the presence of women in the streets was the occasion for a number of moralizing and regulatory discourses.

<sup>2</sup> In this text I pay attention to what the walking of these women tell us about rurality and walking in the specific rural setup investigated. As my fieldwork progressed, one of *las chicas* got diagnosed with high cholesterol. This produced a shift in their walking. They partially re-invented their usual walks into a new category, that they came to call *ruta del colesterol* (cholesterol route or walk). Reinventing their otherwise custom walks, they started walking these *rutas*, alongside with their usual walks. Even though only one of *las chicas* was diagnosed with high levels of cholesterol, they collectively took up the advice given to the individual. I analyse elsewhere *la ruta del colesterol* as a relational and collective dispositive of care, suggesting that the management of one's well being can also be nurtured through relational care. They see cholesterol as a threat not to the individual body (as conceptualized in medicine) but as a threat to the collective. Naturally, they respond to the collective threat with collective action: taking up the instructions of medicine together. Instead of detaching from the collective following directives in an individual way, they collectivize care directives targeted at the individual.

We are going towards the beach of Santa Marta. It is a trajectory that they have walked many times before, they tell me, since they were children and used to go swimming, spending the day at that very beach. However, the ground they step on is quite different, asphalt replaces sand. The path we follow is not a pedestrian path but a proper road, one for motor vehicles. It is more dangerous now than before, they say, because the road has many blind spots for drivers and in the summer there are even more cars because of visitors from other parts of Spain, and festivities. They admit that the conditions are not the best and are angry about not having proper paths to walk on but:

“This won’t change until a tragedy happens,” says Marina.

This time, as on other occasions, *las chicas* walk in a compact group, bouncing from side to side as they are totally immersed in their walking and chatter. The fact that *las chicas* occupy most of the road with their bodies makes them visible to the drivers. This not only protects them from being hit by a car, I think to myself, as they are visible from a distance, but allows drivers to recognize them. Every time they hear a car coming, they pay attention to the car, and move towards the edge of the road, to yield place. In fact, as it happens, each time one recognizes the other, a driver would stop by them and chat briefly.

“How are you?”, “Where are you going?”, “How are the grapes looking this year?”, “Terribly wet this year, right?” an unknown driver stopped by and asked.

“This is how I get to see people!” Marina points out. “Otherwise I would be home all day, as work is never finished. And nobody walks anymore, everyone is with their cars, so this is how we get to bump into people, going out for a walk”.

Marina clearly points out that for her the walk is a medium to interact with people. A way to get out of the ‘domestic’ sphere of their never-ending work at home and in their gardens. As Marina points out, nobody walks anymore. However, they keep on walking, even if the infrastructure is not the most appropriate for it. The infrastructure actually hinders their walking, but they reverse such hindering in an act that, following de Certeau, could be interpreted as a form of ‘resistance’. Walking would be an elementary action to inhabit the rural space for these women, as walking has the impact of re-appropriating the territory as walkable, invaded by their bouncing. As they walk together, they make the landscape *theirs*, claiming it by invading what otherwise is not supposedly meant for them but for motor vehicles. They occupy the public roads and revert them into a mixed space for walkers and vehicles.

The first performative effect of their walking is making themselves noticeable –heard, seen, talked to and about by others. At the same time, their invasion of the road, the second performative effect of their walk, makes a problem visible – the lack of pedestrian walks. Thus, the impact of certain infrastructure or lack thereof is exposed to the eye of drivers and passers-by, while at the same time *las chicas* remain visible. What does this visibility tell us about the other side of the coin i.e., about their life in the rural context?

These women are busy women. Their daily lives are bursting with activity. The tasks and chores they have differ from *chica* to *chica*, as their family lives are different from each other. Some live with their husbands, sons or daughters, even grandchildren; others live alone, like Marina and Sofia. What they have in common is the fact that all these women carry out similar domestic chores – cleaning, shopping, cooking, and farming practices. All of the *chicas* have a vegetable and flower garden. Sofia is the only one who keeps chickens, not only for herself but for Alicia and Azucena too, as they do not have the space nor the expertise to raise and kill them. Tending their vegetable gardens is a daily activity spiced up by the peaks of labour at certain times of the year: giving phosphates to the vineyards, checking and repairing the poles that sustain them, picking fruit, killing chickens, driving to Portugal to get new young chickens, and so on. Such demanding work as picking fruit, repairing poles, or killing chickens is done together rather than alone. Eскурriol Martinez et al. (2014) argue that not only have the productive activities of rural women typically been ignored in scholarly work but, and more importantly, these activities tend to remain invisible as most men in the rural context joined the agricultural model (monoculture) promoted in the sixties, while women kept practicing a small-scale model focused on small patches of land, rotation, and combination of animals,



vegetable gardens and fruit gardens (Escuriol Martinez et al. 2014). This is the arrangement I found going on with the elderly women I did my research with. Women tended their small patches of land and often shared the work of, for example, grape harvesting, corn cultivation or distribution of food scraps to the small farm and domestic animals. The work of these women fed their families and others through their extended network of food exchange among friends and family. Tending vegetable, flower, and fruit gardens goes hand in hand with making artisanal food products such as jams, cakes, dry flowers and wine. Food crafts have been traditionally a way to preserve excess food and agricultural production in rural communities, but in the case at hand, it is a form of sustaining and nurturing relations, as there is no monetary exchange whatsoever. Thus, I identify their food-production practices as a way of *feeding relations* rather than creating business relations. They would feed their networks through the reciprocity of exchanging food amongst each other to keep on feeding their families and their gardens. These feeding relations are eminently situated in a domestic realm.

The walks are a way to re-socialize outside of the farming work, which is, in the case of rural women in Galicia, a continuum of domestic work. Going for a walk is an opportunity to get out of the house, put on nice clothes (as they do) and put on some make-up. An obvious opportunity to be visible out of the domestic space is to take a walk together.

## Archaeology of Memoir

### *Fieldwork Vignette 2.*

(...) After a good while we arrive at another beach called Melide. After Melide, a building in ruins on the horizon catches my attention. It is on a pier, huge and by the sea. We are facing the ruins of the Massó factory, an abandoned fish cannery. Not every *chica* but almost every woman in the region had worked at least once in her lifetime under its roof. Sofia's mother worked there. Susana's mother worked there. Marina and her sister got jobs at Massó when they were young, removing tiny anchovy spines. Almost everyone I would meet in the village has had some relation to Massó. Now it is all ruins.

"The City Council had a project to destroy the old factory buildings and build luxury-summer-apartments. It is a doomed plan now with the financial and political crisis in Spain," explains Azucena.

"The factory fell victim to urban and political speculation," adds Sofia.

Massó is a spectacularly big complex made by the main building (the factory) and several smaller adjacent structures like the pharmacy, workers rooms, the medic, the shop, and so on. Like a miniature town.

I am surprised how the chatter abruptly stops in Massó for a while. When we walk beside the factory a new silence takes hold of *las chicas*. After a while, the conversation resumes. It is not by chance that we arrived at Massó. It is a place *las chicas* often visit during their walks as it is a standing building from their past.

Walking practices have become an important site in the analysis of commemorative and political actions (Bonilla 2011). Once a year, a number of *chicas* and other friends hike into the woods on a walk that finishes at a monument where they symbolically commemorate the Spanish Republic and those killed by the fascist rebels during the Civil War. This commemorative walk creates a particular collective engagement with the history of the village and, more broadly, with the history of Spain. The walk turns into an emotional action. Emotions, argues Cole, help to provide and seal knowledge about the past in a way that is turned into a lived experience (Cole 2001).

Yet, the kind of memorialization that takes place in front of the Massó factory is both intimate and political, familiar and public. This walk into the factory impacts their personal lives as much as the political and public, for their walks are not politically oriented, but their presence has a political bearing. They create a social practice that makes them visible in the public space, a group of women that decidedly put on their

good clothes and some make-up to take walks without a determined purpose.

“You know, these [walks] are an occasion to keep track of how people are doing. Passing by the homes of people we can check on each other and see if someone knows how he or she is doing. We often [when we go to walk] take a detour to check out how the construction of a new house or how our fields are doing. Most of us have lived here before [in the past], so we know our way around. So we keep on cutting through fields, or crossing through small forests. This is how it has always been here,” says Marina.

Their social practice of walking leads to their walking by and through places – houses of people, buildings, lands, factories and so on. The visualization and passing by such locations permit histories to flourish. Sharing such histories of people and places is a way of sharing social knowledge – about the history of the place and about their lives. Walking in this way functions as a repository of memories, which is also a repository of knowledge about the rural landscape and its socio-economic changes. A world that is not an abstract entity, but local and lived in the landscape. A landscape that bears witness to the historical changes that have cut through rural Galicia, and that these women memorialize in their walks.

Their walks are not guided by anyone in particular but created by their own local histories. Once they convene at the meeting point, a route will be chosen. Marina says: “[we] know our way around. So we keep on cutting through fields, or crossing through small forests. This is how it has always been here.” *Las chicas* are creating their own shared territory of memories and knowledge through their walking practices. For *las chicas* the walkability of the village, then, does not depend on the built environment, like in the previous section on visibility. The built environment – roads made only for cars, fences, or almost invisible *caminos* – do not hinder walkability. It is their shared memories revived in their walks that make the landscape apt to their walking. And walking makes that knowledge alive, as their walking reiterates the paths they know. Here most clearly, the interconnection between memorialization and what mobilities allow for, even though the infrastructure hinders it, becomes a salient characteristic of the walks.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have analysed walking in relation with elderly women living in the rural context of Spanish Galicia. Such description fosters an exploration of the politics of visibility/invisibility of rural women and the relation between mobilities and memorialization. Walking, I show, is a relational practice that has a twofold capacity: walking makes these women into visible subjects in the rural context, providing the women with inter-subjective space for relationality; and second, it enacts a particular archaeology of memoir through contact with the landscape. I want to point out that as *las chicas* walk, not only do they travel across space and time, their movement fosters some sense of belonging and facilitates an analysis of the situation of rural elderly women in Galicia, what I call here *the politics of walking*. When they stubbornly occupy a space that has been taken away from them, they re-enact the landscape as belonging to their lives by walking time after time. Thus, the walkability of the built environment turns out to be defined not by the material infrastructure, but by the shared knowledge of the walks, the *caminos*, and their memories and recollections of places. The women create their own intervention into walking. They don't hike. They don't look for a pleasurable contact with nature. The destination of the walk is not what matters to *las chicas*, as they do a round trip. They do not have a destination or aim. They do re-interpret the *flâneur* in their own way. Walking would be an elementary form of understanding and inhabiting the city for de Certeau, of making memories visible, either individual or collective. Walking is the ultimate urban activity, and the pedestrian its natural creature. Walking in rural areas seems to be a practice limited to the activities of transportation, sporting, or the pleasurable enjoyment of nature. However, in the walk analysed in these pages, *las chicas* enact walking as a way to continue inhabiting the rural, which in their case is a way to keep their memories alive and get out of their never-ending domestic chores into the visible public space – even if that entails walking through dangerous roads.



I want to conclude the discussion section with a methodological intervention<sup>3</sup>. An analytical exploration of the walks of *las chicas* has something to add to social science methods too. Walking is a methodology that has been used in previous research on women's political situation in Spain. Walking was the methodology implemented by the Madrilenian feminist collective *Precarias a la Deriva*. The *derivas* were walks undertaken by the researchers with the women subjects of the investigation. The topic was to study the situation of migrant women in Madrid in the context of an economic and political shift in Spain in 2004. As more Spanish women were incorporated in the labour force, migrant women took the role of paid caregivers to cover care work. With the *derivas*, a group of researchers cut through the city of Madrid following the trajectories of women care workers – from home to work, from work to school to pick up their employees' children, from there to their own children's school, and so on. *Derivas* made the circuits of female precarity visible and analysable. Walking was chosen because it gave research a fluid character. Thanks to the *deriva* it was possible to cut through different environments, crossing through diverse spatial, temporal and social spaces, which is actually how we compose our lives.

The ethnographic potential of conducting walking tours has been analysed also by Aoki and Yoshimizu (2015). The authors wanted to explore the experimental possibilities and limits of walking as a methodology. In their text on women sex workers in two different cities, they used walking tours as an ethnographic method that functioned as a mode of 'historical engagement' to reflect on the lived and unfolding relations that the subjects of their research had with space and bodily relationships towards it. In contrast to sit-down interviews, walking allowed for moments in which different engagements with space and time unfolded during the walks. At the same time, the territories of the walks elicited memories and experiences that unfolded during the ethnographic encounter.

Walking, as I stated in the introductory section of this text, has been incorporated into ethnographies by scholars interested in the urban space, and walking has been seen as a way to engage and shape the urban territory. Space was the main analytical entrance to theorize walking (Bendiner-Viani 2005). Here I propose that walking is a practice that, in juxtaposition with their domestic rural work, creates a mobile space for visibility. Walking practices for these elderly women in the rural context has a political effect, as occupying the streets turns these women into visible actors in an otherwise setting that more and more impedes their visibility. The walk too has the capacity of sustaining ways of knowing that are collective. And those ways are re-enacting memories that foster knowledge preservation practices. These ways of knowing are not located in the abstract realm but are enacted by and through the practice of walking, thus producing a shared understanding and engagement with space (O'Neill and Hubbard 2010). The landscape is made a witness of the past and the recent socio-economic changes in the rural village.

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<sup>3</sup> Ingold and Vergunst (2008) notice one of the striking characteristics of ethnography is that much of the actual work is carried out on foot. The issue of walking often figures in ethnographers' field notes, no doubt, and in their results too. Beautiful examples can be found in the following texts: Pinder (2011), Pink (2007), Vergunst (2010), Anderson (2004), Bonilla (2011), *Precarias a la Deriva* (2005).

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