

# My BROWN WALKING-MOVING BODY as [M]ethod in Computing

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Black lives matter.

Don't all lives matter?

Yes - but *Black* lives matter!

But if all lives matter,  
*black* lives matter.  
Therefore all lives matter!

No! #*BlackLivesMatter*!

No. That's racist!

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms**; • **Applied computing** → **Law, social and behavioral sciences**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Anti-Racist Computing, Method, Embodiment, Restorative Justice, COVID-19, Insurgence, Phenomenology

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## 1 A GAME THE SIZE OF THE PLANET

The mere existence of the game *Pokémon Go* and how it operates does something quite transformative to our conception of human-computing relationships. The gameplay forces upon us some interesting new premises on how we interact with this specific piece of software as well as with(in) software as a whole. One's avatar [10] in softwares such as excel or word is the mouse cursor. Through the *totem* of the mouse, the user becomes projected onto the screen, monitor or 'right into the spreadsheet'. My use of the term *avatar* in this context alludes that this is a process of transportation in fact comparable to massive multiplayer online games such as World Of Warcraft [2]. Yet, despite being alike, locative mobile phone games also profoundly change the human-computer relationship fundamentally.

*Pokémon Go* (when played) explicitly repositions us<sup>ers</sup> out of an abstract *office space* back into the explicit and concrete physical life-world which we inhabit: Without my *moving* body, there is no game. Through such an embodied premise of interaction, the game brings (back) into consciousness the material organic human body that is conditional for the existence of the "user". *Software* and *user* thus are in an ongoing mutual process of *becoming*. The user becomes *digitized* and the software *landscaped*. *Play* only occurs when

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software and user "sense each other", when they are in a mutual moving engagement. As separate entities 'we' remain meaningless.

To the game, I only *come into being* as a function of a somatic (inter)action: My body becomes the nexus of game, landscape, cyberscape, 'Pokéscape', and cityscape; *the moving body* is the condition and catalyst for the possibility of gaming. This framing of *perception through engagement*; and *engagement through the body* in philosophy is referred to as *phenomenology*.

Through the lens of phenomenology, *landscape*, *body*, *perception*, *gamescape*, *movement* and *device* melt into another. The landscape is a perceptible bodily phenomenon in the same way as the software, and my movements. All suddenly becomes entangled, and *the moving body* is the medium to explore software-at-large.

With *philosophy and phenomenology out of the way* I want to report now on what happens, when *the body*, when my body; my Brown, Queer, foreign body, of erased Indigenous ancestry speaks about its experiences of "software".

### 1.1 Knowing software *through* a walking body

Phenomenological accounts do away with clean categories of *human* and *computer* and the allusion that their *interaction* can conveniently and neatly be curated. The phenomenological body acknowledges nuances what terms as *end users* and *user case* conceal. When taken seriously, *Pokémon Go* (et al.) force us to acknowledge the holistic personhood that makes up every user; every subject of any software or digital artefact. Whilst other digital artefacts may be less explicit about this, *Pokémon Go* leaves no more doubt: Merely through the existence of *the digital* everyone becomes subjected to it; becomes translated into *the digiscape* and inhabits a new type of landscape.

As I walk through the *cityscape*, *softwarescape*, *gamescape* the software and I get to know each other; and everyone around me enriches the *playscape* also. My body, my streets, my journey, my companions *become digitized phenomena* and thus part of the game. My moving body becomes re-instated as embodied and organic, material, somatic modality witnessing flow(s) and friction(s)

within,

besides,

and "on top"

of [the] software.

Taken literally, *Pokémon Go* is nothing less than *a game the size of the planet* - and the playing avatar in the game is *me* (or you).

Thinking with this game means letting the game take me on a walk; allowing each other to lead our walking, walking-thinking, game-thinking, being-thinking. *Pokémon go* - in the most exciting ways - completely overthrows comfortable categories of enlightened binary (dialectic) reasoning. Instead *the game* - merely by existing - transforms the oppositional logic of HCI into an unstable and contestable space of fluid topologies in motion: When playing, game, body and gamer continuously are in a mutual process of *becoming*.

The power of phenomenology then is its ability to account for the impacts of software in a ‘grounded’ manner: grounded in this case meaning ‘firmly committed to a first-hand empiricism’: A commitment to *key-witness* accounts. It is a type of empiricism that is unlike the type of ‘evidence’ that conventionally gets acknowledged in computing research venues.

Whilst accounts of *moving bodies experiencing the landscape* are part and parcel of the long tradition of phenomenological writing in (predominantly British) *landscape geography*, I make a case that this method must be a much needed urgent addition to the methodological repertoire of HCI. Critics of *British landscape writing* decry the practice as privileged “Armchair Geography” (already in the 1970s<sup>1</sup>) but I make the case that there is urgent need for this:

Whilst accounts by *those* who command bodies *deemed inoffensive in the landscape* may (on occasion rightly so) be deemed of limited value; I assert that:

in the hands of *unwanted, foreign, infra-human* [7], *communities*,  
the ability to write the land/cyber/digi-scape as-it-is-perceived,  
is a powerful tool  
and a desperately needed [M]ethod for/of emancipation.

## 2 OTHERS’ WALKING

Representing motion and movement is an evidently challenging endeavour. I outline 2 explorations which have informed my thinking about walking-writing, *the subaltern body* and its movements’ representation.

### 2.1 Dr Morag Rose [11–13]

The wondering, mischievous, dis/abled, anarchoflâneuse Dr. Morag Rose, leader of the *Loiterers Resistance Movement (Manchester)*, engages in a psychogeographic practise of walking-as-reclaiming. [h]er feminist (research) method of walking-as-engagement with oneself as well as with *the city* queers the academic fracturisation of knowing-vs-being-vs-randomness-vs-city-vs-sociality-vs-body. *Assertively living* demands the appreciation that - for some biographies - *being-social-amongst-friends* is a life-affirming method of recognisance.

### 2.2 The outstanding Poet Neiel Israel

Neiel Israel is a second key contributor I seek to acknowledge as having left their traces in my thinking. Israel’s poem *When a Black Man Walks* reflects back on *the Black male body as object of racism*. Yet in her poem Israel stresses that *the walking Black male body* is an agent of resistance.

This poem is merely a tip of an unimaginably large iceberg of accounts of instances of racialized bodies becoming *object of interpretation and prejudice*, rather than *subjects entitled to agency*: **#walkingwhilstBlack**, **#drivingwhilstBlack**, **#studyingwhilstBlack**, **#shoppingwhilstBlack**, **#sleepingwhilstBlack**.

I dedicate this paper, my work and thinking to my peers who find themselves

**#digitalwhilstBlack**

- with all the baggage that entails.

<sup>1</sup>MW. Mikesell. 1977. Cultural Geography. *Progr. in Hum. Geogr.* 1, 3 (10. 1977), 460–464.

When *I* was walking; I was not walking in isolation. It was very much a *networked* walk; a *distributed* walk; a *computer-supported-coopertative-walk*. I walk/سأمشي/سأمشي with those who have also walked whilst *being different*. My walk, their walk, is what I seek to share in this document. Our shared experience of *being mobile* and *walking whilst being misunderstood*. I seek to share the wisdom that resides within all subaltern bodies; the expertise that resides implicitly in *melanined* steps, the sagacity that every [Muslima]<sup>2</sup> knows who walked-whilst-covered through any space fraught with white assumptions.

But who would be daring and bold enough to try to approach *the digital* at such a ravaging level; Who would be so bold,

and speak about this *at CHI* of all places..?

The technology of *phenomenological reasoning* must be seen as part of this project. I tell my students that: [All] Innovation is at its most powerful and exciting when it is not a means to its own end, but when *progress* is put into *service* of a greater project of social justice and emancipation.

Whilst migrant, refugee, *unwanted*, unfitting and undesirable communities too often do not (yet) play their part in the *shaping* digital innovation, they are nonetheless very much a subject of technology. *Marginal, subaltern*, or merely ‘foreign’ accounts of the otheringness of technology are indictingly absent. These accounts (our accounts) demand a stake in *digiscaping*.

Occasionally, our voices are labelled as *extreme user(-cases)* [15]. I object and insist that refugees are not *extreme*. They are *us*, but find themselves in *extreme* circumstances [14]; they may *endure extreme events*; they may be subjected to *extreme deeds*; they are likely to become *extremely neglected* in the everyday practices of digital innovation.

## 3 OCKHAM’S TREASON

This section is dedicated to challenging the notion that:

“Critical Race Theory” (CRT) is [C]ritical.

CRT runs on the base postulation that the justice system is racist. I ask how this could be in any way framed to be a radical postulation? Be empirical then, observe:

The events of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 so far tell us much about the unequal treatment of bodies and the vastly different interpretations of their movements and where they are drawn to be; and where they find themselves injured, hurt, sick, dead or dying. The spreadsheets and moving images paint a clear picture of the consequences of systemic disenfranchisement. *Why does this not count as empirical evidence?* Where is positivism, objectivity and *evidence* in 2020? ~~I am under the impression~~, I have significant evidence to believe - that [E]vidence is a privilege not granted to *misplaced* communities. If objectivity is a privilege not bestowed to Black causes and their allies what remains then for us to speak from? Trayvon Martin’s crime was the wearing of a hoodie, the sanctioned sentence for such a transgression is immediate execution.

Albeit she never taught me, I consider her my teacher: Rosi Braidotti, removed the word ‘vulnerability’ from her vocabulary, as

<sup>2</sup>I intend to write this term in its original Arabic scrip. As for now, it seems that  $\LaTeX$ (or at the very least *this template*) is vehemently resistant to my many attempts to include any non-Latin lettering.

it is nothing by a euphemism for ‘of a life more expendable than others’. More mortal. *These* Black communities are not *vulnerable*. They are left to die. On all sides of the pond. Why is it then called “Critical Race Theory” and not ‘Empiricism’?

Where is Ockham’s Razor?

But in absence of a *right to objectivity* – we are left to feel. If infra-human reason, and infra-human accounts are deemed expendable – we are left to feel. Look at the Capitol. Look at the Capitols. How differently they manifest.

The literature talks much about *being othered* – but how can I *be* othered – if I am of the landscape, and the landscape is of me? Racism exists, and it seeps into me, constitutes me, shapes me – and whilst I keep on walking, nonetheless, I cannot walk away from this landscape. I am not *othered* – *the other* is in me. I cannot walk away from me.

For the sake of my sanity, and to thwart exhaustion, I do my upmost to think of myself as my own semiotic trigger, but the walking leaves no doubt: My body stands-in for more-than-me and others-than-me.

I am at once infra-human and simultaneously more-than-one. When I walk, as I walk, *we* walk. I<sub>AM</sub> walk not merely in solidarity; I walk in *alliance*. I understand that my walk, is a one-person-protest. Claiming a right for my body to stand in for myself, neither more nor less. This walk is a petition for semiological justice. As for the status quo: I see that I *stand in* for general melanlined crowd – and<sub>sp</sub> they stand in for me.

My walk is not a walk in isolation. My walk is not my walk to own. My walk *is of the landscape, my landscape walks in me*. And the friction of my gate on the ground, my feet on the pavement, my steps across the city get heavier.

My inventory lacks Ockham’s razor and in its place – is the knowledge of being connected in a way that is foreign to those not gifted (with) this<sub>sub</sub> <sup>super</sup>jectivity.

Black communities call it *diaspora* – and we call it colonialization. And whilst they are not the same – they are *of* the same. And we hurt in solidarity. Thus stems the healing force of being surrounded by kin.

As much as I am of the landscape, the landscape is of me. And through the company of others, in the company of peers, in the knowledge of being seen without a semiotic coat, I can become me; a least for a while. Once I am me, we can get to know each other. There, we speak collectively just for ourselves. Hear our voices. Find our voices. Be. Being – simply being.

Being happy – feels like an act of resistance. Happiness is not a *given* but hard labour. In the presence of kin, in the company of us, we become us. And when-we-are-we there is no time to lose, there is so much to catch up, and

the burden of

being-a(s)-collective

becomes

the joy of

being-in-company.

2020 damaged us. It hurt us. It killed us. And it left scars in our bodies, minds, buildings and psyches.

Once more, Black and Brown communities carried the double-brunt of the price of racism.

Not only are we gifted with the wisdom of perspective of *outsiderness* by virtue of not being allowed *in*, we also get to do the dishes: It is left to us, to do the emotional labour of working through the racism that we are subjected to. To feel, (non-optional,) and we all felt it, across all disciplines.

I don’t want Ockham’s razor. It is blunt-and-too-sharp-at-once. I do not grow a beard and I have no interest in cutting my hair.

What good is disse[ct]<sub>epi</sub>tion if the price for knowledge is death.

*Publish-or-perish* – more like *publish-means-perish*.

I will not cut my knowledge into pieces: There is wisdom in how a Black man walks. And too many sought to study this walk with knives, guns, batons, cars, needles, museums, archives, databases, bullets, sticks, nooses, deportation, so forth. Their dreams of AI, facial recognition, predictive policing are the stuff of my nightmares.

[and then they ask me for my [E]vidence?]

We do not require the support of others to write what we know. What we know-know. In a way of knowing, so unlike the traitor’s ways of knowing. There will be no second-guessing. No pale citations, not *here*. Publish<sub>ers</sub><sup>img</sup> *is*<sub>are</sub> part of the problem. Whilst white(ness) *is* the default, it is anything but *neutral*.

I<sub>AM</sub> claim this space boldly.

And this body.

And this text.

See me.

See me build.

See me shape this environment.

See me build myself.

See me during my office hours, and seem me outside my office hours.

And then you see me and *be-of-me*.

And we become of each other.

I claim this space. This body. This text. I shape this environment, of which I am, which is of me – of us. And which you have entered.

Learn to know – or better – *remember* this way knowing, that is unlike the other ways of knowing.

I am my own object to think with.

I am a subject.

I am method.

Whilst *they* try to *stay with the trouble* – *we are* the trouble. I am the trouble. So trouble I will be.

In this way, 2020 was the great catalyst of understanding. What Black and Brown communities said for *centuries* millennia, - finally became legible (a bit). 2020 catalysed white knowing and literacy. The tuition fee being Black health, life, sleep, tears, blood, breath

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*“I think one reason people who aren’t racialized as Black so often misunderstand our collective grief in response to someone we don’t personally know being harmed is they really don’t understand the Diaspora, that it spans space and time & can constitute a place of deep connection. We know that healing and flourishing are fundamentally collective. That we are all inextricably linked. [...] I am sad that for some, the deep healing of community, collective space and action is unfamiliar. Yet in a small way, relieved that perhaps this way of knowing and existing won’t be appropriated, colonized and marketed.”*

[5]

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