

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Walking with Infrastructures: Urban Thresholds, Photo Walks and Narratives on the Move along the Tangenziale Nord, Padua

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Abstract: Walking has been increasingly explored as a research method, an educational tool, a dissemination practice and a social practice for knowledge co-production between academics and local communities. In this paper, the walking practice will be explored from a narrative and geographical perspective informed by literary, urban and cultural geography; mobility studies, and in particular the expanding field of mobility and the humanities; and the geohumanities. More specifically, this paper will work on the lines of convergence between space-centred and narrative approaches, between geographical and artistic research, between individual and collective walking stories in urban contexts. The empirical example explored in this paper is based in Italy starts from Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman's conception of 'walking-with'. In particular, the example explores the possibility to walk *with texts*, *with mobility infrastructures*, and *with art-based methodologies* in urban contexts.

Keywords: walking; geohumanities; infrastructure; storytelling; photography; photo-walking

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Thinking with walking

Walking has been increasingly explored as a research method, an educational tool, a dissemination practice and a social practice for knowledge co-production between academics and local communities. In this paper, walking practice will be explored from a narrative and geographical perspective informed by a set of different disciplines: literary, urban and cultural geography; mobility studies, and in particular the expanding field of mobility and the humanities; and the geohumanities. For the purposes of this discussion, it is not worth tracing the lines of separation between these disciplines; it is rather much more productive to expand the transdisciplinary interconnections that bring walking as an aesthetic and poetic practice into communication with walking as a methodology to conduct research in the social sciences. More specifically, this paper will work on the lines of convergence between space-centred and narrative approaches, between geographical and artistic research, between individual and collective walking stories in urban contexts. Moreover, the scope of this paper is to expand literary geographical approaches to walking stories, considering both the reading and producing of narratives on the move in urban contexts. In fact, the presence of a rooted and expanding literature on urban walking in the Italian context functions as a trigger for a more creative engagement with literature as a starting point for bottom-up processes of urban storytelling, activated through the reading of literary texts in urban space. This way, walking, reading, photographing and writing the city look as interconnected practices of spatial meaning making through the triangulation of texts, bodies and urbanscapes on the move.

The empirical example explored in this paper is based in Italy and starts from Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman's conception of 'walking-with'. In particular, the example explores the possibility to walk *with texts*, *with mobility infrastructures*, and *with art-based methodologies* in urban contexts; it further engages different audiences, considering the possibility to *walk with others* and with their stories as a way to reclaim our right to a collective urban space through sharing narrative practices; finally, these 'others' are not limited to human beings, they are rather more-than-human assemblages that come together when *walking with the city*. This example is part of the activities realised within the project 'WALC – Walking Landscapes of Urban Cultures', funded by Next Generation EU (PRIN PNRR 2022, Project Code: P2022X5L8B, CUP: J53D2301655001): this is a geoartistic project and a collective 'photowalk', open to students and citizens, organised in collaboration with landscape photographer Marco Lumini, founder of Catalogo Studio and a specialist in architectural photography. The pathway and preliminary activities we performed to design the workshop on the move were inspired not only by the work of Italian photographers such as Gabriele Basilico and Luigi Ghirri, but also by a series of urban narratives. These included Iain Sinclair's foundational experimental psychogeographic performance and his book *London Orbital: A walk around the M25* (2002); some hybrid literary and documentary experimentations in the Italian context inspired by his work, like *Tangenziali. Due viandanti ai bordi della città* [Ring roads. Two wanderers at the edges of the city] by Gianni Biondillo and Michele Monina (2010) and *Sacro romano Gra* [Sacred Roman Gra] by Nicolò Bassetti and Sapo Matteucci (2013); and Miguel Vila's graphic novel *Padovaland* (2020). Choosing the Tangenziale nord, the Northern

section of Padua's ring road, as our guide through the margins of the city, we identified this infrastructure as a narrative line that could guide our gazes and bodies through the exploration of urban thresholds. Whereas literary texts and psychogeographical explorations functioned as a methodological reference and narrative guide, Vila's graphic novel moved our gazes across the urbanscape in search for those spatial elements that constitute the visual patterns and spatial grammar of the landscape of North-eastern Italy's urban sprawl – also known as the 'diffused city' phenomenon. Furthermore, the cycling protagonist of his graphic novel moves *across* and *along* the thresholds of the city of Padua, taking photos as part of her research process: fixing frames and fragments of everyday life through photos becomes in her practice a desperate attempt to create connections with a landscape that is apparently empty of relations.

Rather than simply reading others' texts, the 'photo walk' was also designed to bring participants' own bodies and gazes, voices and stories into conversation with the ring road's mobile landscape, adopting an art-based attunement: this way, the walking workshop (walkshop) *with the ring road* represents a further opportunity to explore 'infrastructural storytelling', intended as 'a narrative approach to infrastructures [that] observes how the formal matter of roads, highways, pipelines, rails, airports etc., affects our storytelling practices, making the peculiar "poetics of infrastructures" (Larkin) visible through a creative, mobile, and narrative perspective' (Peterle and Harris 2024: 36).

Walking with a narrative approach across urban thresholds and along mobility infrastructures in the city is an opportunity to think urbanscapes through a creative and mobile lens, interpreting physical and administrative borders as permeable membranes that we can experience, cross and resignify through our embodied and collective presences. Echoing Tim Ingold's idea, this paper explores the possibility of walking along infrastructures as 'a way of thinking and knowing' (2010: 135). If 'like the dancer, the walker is thinking in movement', then walking with mobility infrastructures – especially with those that are not meant to be traversed by pedestrians but by motorized vehicles – produces an unexpected way of thinking and knowing through bodies and more-than-human entanglements. According to the anthropologist, this grounded process is partially an 'improvisatory movement – of "going along" or wayfaring – that is open-ended and knows no final destination' (122). The following sections, thus, want to be experienced as a series of steps that lead through a walk that is still ongoing, and an archive (visual, narrative, literary, graphic) that is still in the making.

First step. Narratives that move

'When did our walk begin? When will it ever end? We cannot remember, and will never know' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 1), write Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst at the beginning of their edited collection *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. When trying to keep track of the research and creative process that led to the *photowalk* that will be at the centre of the empirical part of this article, I found myself in the same condition as the one described by Ingold and Vergunst: when did this walk, and the correlated research process, begin, what was the first step and what will be its end? Adopting a processual approach means thinking of

texts as triggers of movement rather than static objects, but also observing the walking practice and the narrative lines it produces as they emerge. Yet, what does walking actually mean: is it a bodily movement or a method, a narrative topic, a mobile perspective on the ground, or more broadly a way of thinking, a mode of performing narratives and letting stories emerge? In their introduction, Ingold and Vergunst further expand the idea that walking and thinking are inextricably interrelated practices. This is especially relevant for ethnographers, who often embrace the mobile gaze of walking as a way to collect stories on the move: for example, researchers have shown how, through walk-along interviews, place-specific data emerge thanks to a more spatially focused conversation than those that might occur with the same interviewee but in a sedentary context (Evans and Jones 2011: 856). Walking with others is a means to collect place-specific ethnographies. From a literary geographical perspective, though, the idea of walking with others may become a tool to collect and connect with place-specific stories, be they fictional or auto-ethnographic (or both). For literary geographers moving from textual spaces to real ones, 'walking with texts' (Peterle 2023a) may become both an autoethnographic or collective storytelling experience, where texts are performed in various spatial contexts through shared readings, and stories emerge through encounters with other walkers and inhabitants, or with the context and more-than-human entities along the road. This kind of narrative-centred and mobile practice is also an opportunity to explore the 'social capacity', or 'the social capital' of walking and reading together (Heddon and Myers 2017). For all these reasons, besides auto/ethnography, a reflection on the interconnections between walking and thinking may be extremely productive also from a literary geographical perspective: to be more precise, it may be useful to consider a triangulation between walking, thinking and storytelling. In fact, walking can become a form of narrative thinking both if we bring texts with us while on the move and if we perform movement on foot as a form of storytelling. The practice of moving with texts 'suggests considering the possibility to perform them, tracing routes in space that are guided by the reading of literary texts' (Peterle 2023a: 41); moreover, writing-while-walking exercises offer participants a creative opportunity 'to re-map, creatively reimagine, and narratively perform their everyday environments' and urban spaces, finding new spatial and urban meanings through stories (53). There is, indeed, a generative potential in walking interpreted as a practice of narrative thinking. By walking from point A to point B we trace lines on the ground that move us across space and time, and create plotlines that ask to be narrated (Anderson 2014): every step back and forth, change of direction, encounter or detour may become a narrative clue to be collected, expanded, and narrated.

Moreover, according to Ingold and Vergunst, 'A way of walking, for example, does not merely express thoughts and feelings that have already been imparted through an education in cultural precepts and proprieties', rather, they continue, 'It is itself a way of thinking and of feeling, through which, in the practice of pedestrian movement, these cultural forms are continually generated' (2008: 2). Reading this quote through a narrative lens, we can think of walking as a form of storytelling on the move that does not merely express stories that have already been read and written, but also makes stories emerge through embodied, immersive, creative and mobile thinking. The authors further expand their reasoning provocatively,

putting the same proposition in reverse ‘to argue that thinking and feeling are ways of walking’ (2). As they observe, ‘this would, necessarily, be to interpret the notion of walking more broadly than is usual, as a paradigmatic instance of what Maxine Sheets Johnstone has called ‘thinking in movement’” (2). Thinking and storytelling in movement are ways to produce immersive and embodied knowledge and compose spatial stories: the modes in which these practices emerge, and the stories they produce, are profoundly influenced by the city, participants, contexts, infrastructures, texts, more-than-human entities, and the methods we walk with.

Whereas understanding walking as a way to produce stories turns a mobile practice into a narrative one, understanding texts as triggers for spatial action moves narrative mobilities from space representation to practice (Peterle 2023b: 111), allowing for a theoretical and methodological shift that considers textual representations as ongoing processes happening in the encounter between authors, readers, and contexts. Within mobility studies, and more specifically within the emerging field of mobility humanities, the approach to literature and narrative representations of moving bodies, ideas, texts, people, and concepts has been increasingly considered as a field of interest to explore unexpected visions, enact different perspectives by embracing, for example, fictional characters’ embodied experiences or non-human points of view, and imagine future mobilities (Aguiar et al. 2019; Biasiori et al. 2023a, 2023b; McLaughlin 2016; Merriman and Pearce 2017). As McLaughlin states, authors working in the transdisciplinary field of literary geographies have been ‘foregrounding mobility of people and texts as a key site for the generation and understanding of the relationships between the work and the world’ (2016: 123): if ‘being mobile is as important as being in place for people’s encounters with fiction’ (123), then to explore the interconnections between the (literary and narrative) work and the world necessarily implies the need to focus on the mobile practices that interconnect them. Drawing on Rebecca Solnit’s works on walking, McLaughlin further sustains the need to reinforce the analysis of narrative mobilities by stating that ‘experiences gained on-the-move, are the engine which drive the process of literature, knitting together actual-world experiences and literary texts into one, continuous and indivisible happening’ (123). In her book *Mobilizing Narratives: Narrating Injustices of (Im)mobility* (2021), Hager Ben Driss moves the analysis of the interconnections between mobilities and narratives in a specific direction, focusing on the possibility of telling stories about (im)mobility and (in)justice. When structures of power impose forms of (im)mobilities, then literature and the arts, she states, can become a space for hidden movements and voices to come to the fore and ‘narrating these (im)mobility injustices in artistic forms becomes an act of mobilization’ (Driss 2021: xiii). Narratives move us: through empathetic engagements, they trigger our emotional reactions and, sometimes, our spatial actions, not just guiding our gazes, but leading our paths through spaces and the processes of re-signification or reclamation. As Driss affirms, ‘Writers, texts, and readers serve as “mobilizers”, “agents, go-betweens, translators, or intermediaries” (Greenblatt 2010: 251), capable of galvanizing consciousness and calling public attention to (im)mobility inequalities and violations’ (2021: xiii).

As these examples show, the practices of ‘moving with narratives’ and ‘walking with texts’ can activate several processes: first, they can help us trace the interconnections between

the work and the world, reconnecting the red threads that weave together our spatial experiences in real lives and the stories we tell, or the ways we interpret and make sense of the stories we read; second, they can trigger our empathetic connections with stories and places, and the people that inhabit or traverse them, stimulating our engagement; third, they can move us, calling for a spatial action that stems from textual spaces but happens in real ones; finally, these practices can stimulate a mobilization that leads to a collective action on (im)mobility (in)justice. Rather than merely come with us along an already traced route, texts can change our directions, move our bodies and our thinking, lead our steps across space and guide our spatial actions, letting new place-centred storytelling practices and spatial meanings emerge.

Second step. Walking with stories and storytelling

Relational approaches to literary geography have been focusing on the entanglements between pages and places, stressing the interconnection between pathways and plotlines (Anderson 2014, 2025; Saunders and Anderson 2015). More recently, they have been discussing the possibility of using the term ‘interspatiality’ to describe ‘dynamic combinations of the textual, the social, and the spatial’ (Hones 2024: 38), a term ‘in which the “spatiality” component refers to the socio-spatial, and the “inter” draws on the literary studies idea of intertextuality as “a space in which a vast number of relations coalesce” (Allen 2022: 12)’. These approaches are particularly relevant when the discourse explores the connections between the textual, the social and the spatial by activating a mobile practice that moves across real place, engaging readers and narrative thinking through embodied movements triggered by texts. In fact, walking represents an opportunity to perform these connections, making them visible, tangible, and thus readable to wider audiences and through collective moves. With Jon Anderson, we can think of walking as one of the multiple ways and mobile practices we have to explore ‘the myriad of ties entangling page and place’ (2014: 190). In his work on relational geographies, he focuses on the role of readers and authors, who enact texts bringing their own ‘outlook, culture and ideas to the plotline, making it actor-centred’ (28). In his view, plotlines exist through practice, as ‘once stories lay untold or unread, their worlds decompose and die’ (28). Walking with plotlines, thus, keeps stories and storyworlds alive, adding new meanings through the readers’ own background and bodies.

Yet what does it mean to walk with stories? To answer this question we need to move a step back, focusing first on the meanings activated by the proposition ‘with’ in combination with the practice of walking. As Patricia Ticineto Clough and Bibi Calderaro say, in their foreword to *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab* by Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, ‘walking-with’ encourages an ontological shift that ‘requires a recognition of an alterity within the self, an indeterminacy prior to consciousness and even bodily based perception – that is, the nonexperienced or inhuman condition of all experience’ (Ticineto Clough and Calderaro 2018: xiii). No matter what follows the preposition ‘with’, the practice of *walking with* is both an exploration of the self and a mode to open the self to more-than-human others. Walking with is a mobile attunement to the more-than-human agencies

that co-construct assemblages in a world always in the making: in fact, by the practice of walking with the more-than-human there is a reciprocal exchange that starts where ‘foot touches matter but matter touches foot’ (xiii), and that continues, I argue, through the multiple encounters with materials, atmospheres, and other non-human entities along the road. This resonates with Ingold’s idea of ‘culture on the ground’, where locomotion and not cognition becomes the ‘starting point for the study of perceptual activity’, he says, ‘since walking is itself a form of circumambulatory knowing’ that is mediated through the more-than-human encounters and entanglements we make along the road (Ingold 2004: 330). Walking with, indeed, means listening to more-than-human others while on the move. ‘There is a sense, if not recognition, of the vibrancy of matter, of a worldly sensibility, of the force of the world’s causal efficacy’ that comes from walking (Springgay and Truman 2018: xiii).

The stories that emerge from these experiences, thus, are inevitably part of a more-than-human sensitivity toward urban landscapes. Walking with (in) the city, for example, makes it possible to think about the ways in which urban assemblages emerge through the presence of our own situated bodies in specific contexts. In the photo walk that will be presented in the following section, walking with a photographer becomes a way to share methodological and theoretical references; a form of openness that allowed us to walk with the more-than-human, being guided by unexpected encounters, materialities, and polysensorial connections; a narrative approach by which we could both bring literary references with us, as guides through the landscape, and produce our own stories, while on the move; and, most importantly, a social practice to be performed by a collective moving body in order to cross gazes, collect a broader archive of visuals, and of stories connected to them. The line traced by a geographer walking with a photographer thus becomes a narrative infrastructure through which other stories, both textual and visual, can emerge along the route.

In our case, for example, before we even began walking with each other and others, we shared a dense network of literary texts, critical readings, and visual references that reciprocally shaped our imaginaries, guided our gaze and influenced our performance. In particular, whereas a narrative geographical approach suggested a series of literary references of walking-writers that will be discussed in the next section, Lumini’s visual and photographic thinking informed my initial geographical perspective, inspiring the ways in which I was framing and reframing the ring road as a mobility landscape. Luigi Ghirri’s work, for instance, inspired our understanding of the word *threshold* in relation to photography. In his practice, he interpreted the photographic frame as a threshold between the inner space of the photographer, who takes the picture by inevitably choosing what to leave outside the visual field, and the outer world, where a complex array of elements attracts the photographer’s attention, asking to be potentially included within the frame. As Veronica Della Dora observed (2015), in her critical reading of Ghirri’s work through a geographical lens, his ‘work focused mainly on the relationship between humans and the environment, on identity, on the sense of place – and more characteristically, on the blur among reality, representation, and mystery’ (346). This helped us place Ghirri’s work on the threshold between the human and the more-than-human, imagining our steps with the ring road in continuity with his poetics, aimed at noticing the changes of a landscapes in the making. Also, in his collection of writings *Lezioni di fotografia*

[Photography Lessons] (2010), the photographer explicitly writes that the moment we take a picture we find ourselves on a threshold (154), at the point of sensing the possibility of filtering our inner world through the outer one, and vice versa. Thus, even within a single photograph, and within the same landscape, it is possible to imagine a multiplication of potential thresholds, framings that constitute the mediation between that landscape and the gaze that moves through it. Walking with Ghirri's words in mind, we looked at the ring road as a threshold landscape on the move and on the practice of photographing while moving with it as a form of exploration of the entanglements between the self and the surrounding more-than-urban liminal environments.

This idea of photography as a way to inhabit the multiple framings of a single landscape connects to the notion that walking is a practice inherently tied to multiplicity and to coexisting spatio-temporalities. Walking means both being here and now but also thinking of the *theres* and *thens*, and the multiple virtualities that collapse one into another in the moment in which we walk through urban space:

walking-with is not to be understood simply as a matter of conviviality or therapy, or a neoliberal inspired self-investment in well-being. Rather, walking-with must carry with it a sensitivity to a politics of knowledge production that has become central to the capitalist economy more recently described as an 'affect economy' or an 'experience economy'. (Ticineto Clough and Calderaro 2018: xii)

Walking is a performative and participatory, subjective and social practice that activates bottom-up narrative processes through immersive gazes.

Within the field of literary geographies, this kind of approach may seem distant from more traditional approaches to walking literature: in this case, walking with narratives extends the attention of literary geographers beyond the space of the text, exploring the interconnections between fictional and real spaces, reading and walking practices. In fact, the expression *walking narratives* may be interpreted both as a reference to all those texts that are written by walking authors, or speak about walking characters and contexts, and as an opportunity to create narratives while walking. Angahard Saunders, in her works, writes 'about the creative power of walking and route making' (Saunders 2016) and the possibility to turn daily walks 'as a time to tell stories and play with language', for both adults and children (Saunders 2020: 192), starting from the experience of walking with her child during the Covid-19 lockdown. Despite the particular spatio-temporal context of the pandemic, Saunders' work is of great interest for the reasoning proposed here, first, because it shows how walking with – in her case, with her son – may change our perspective on the things we see or imagine, the stories we live and tell along the route; and second, because it openly shows the lively entanglement between places and fictional imaginaries by connecting walking and storytelling. Telling stories while walking, she says reflecting on her experience, 'became a way of coming to know place, of connecting it to other people and places, both real and imagined, and it gave me space, albeit limited, to ponder the relationship between children, place and storytelling' (Saunders 2020: 192). Although geographers have been for a long time interested in the

geographies of stories and storytelling, Saunders further observes, they have been mostly focusing on adults' and often established practitioners' stories, but walking with children makes it possible to see how much we come to know the world by connecting our spatial and bodily movements to those of our imagination.

Whereas bodies may be, at least apparently, anchored in the here and now, the 'interspatiality' (Hones 2024 37) of imagination spans far away from the geographical location we may be traversing while telling the story, making other worlds happen. If stories feed our imagination across the road, 'they proffer children an insight into other worlds, they present them with difference, danger and challenge, and they nurture a sense of timing, gesture and rhythm' (192). Children's engagement with stories tells us something more about the processes of creation and knowing we all experience during walking and storytelling. Narrative thinking while walking may be a form of re-enchantment that changes our perception of everyday urban spaces, even of those more neglected and less considered liminal parts of the city like. Our photo-walk on the thresholds of the city, indeed, aims to move in this precise direction. Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox use the idea of 'enchantment' to speak about road infrastructures by following Bennett, thus decoupling 'enchantment from belief in the supernatural or religious phenomena, to recast it as a more generally visceral, affective form of relating to that which is sidelined or cast out of formalised, rationalised descriptions of material and social phenomena' (2012: 523). When focalising through walking and photographing the capacity of the ring road to enchant, this project aims at exploring the 'unexpected, surprising and uncanny dimensions' of its hybrid mobile and static landscape, made of commuters and inhabitants, rooted stories and passers-by (522-23). In this sense, following Harvey and Knox, enchantment is intended here more as a 'mood' than a form of knowledge or belief, that shows how the ring road is able to retain a generic social and narrative promise (523), even though it is often perceived as a space to traverse rather than a place to stay with and explore.

Third step. Walking with infrastructures. A photo essay along the Tangenziale Nord in Padua, Italy

The idea of walking, and telling stories, along ring roads is not new, of course. Authors have been exploring these car-only environments by foot to cross marginal, often neglected parts of our cities, trying to re-establish a connection with these liminal areas. The main reference for this kind of psychogeographical experimentation is, as noted above, Sinclair's walk along the M25 in London: from there, other authors, mainly men, have been doing the same in other urban contexts, turning these mobility infrastructures into pathways to follow and plotlines to narratively explore through bodies and stories. Beside his walk around London, it is Sinclair's approach that has been changing geographers' (and writers') perspectives on these liminal spaces and mobility infrastructures: with his 'interest in chronicling places that have been overlooked and unwritten', often bypassed or passed over, through his embodied and narrative performances, he has been adding value to them, 'changing *no-wheres* to *now-heres*' (Anderson 2014: 292). His approach implies a form of re-enchantment of ordinary landscapes

that bears with it a political value: by being there, in neglected places, all the more-than-human subjectivities that inhabit them become visible, hearable, touchable. Margins become the unexpected centre of narrative gazes and attention, and the stories that may otherwise remain stuck in those interstices come to the fore, being told and listened to. Walking becomes a way of contacting the ghosts, the presents, pasts and futures of cities, weaving together geographies and stories (293-4). In Italy, beside other psychogeographical experimentations spanning from geography to architecture and urban planning,¹ Sinclair's work has openly inspired at least two hybrid literary and journalistic texts, merging fictional writing and reportage: these are the already mentioned work by Biondillo and Monina, titled *Tangenziali. Due viandanti ai bordi della città*, published in 2010 and based in Milan; and *Sacro romano Gra* by Nicolò Bassetti and Sapo Matteucci, a project that comprises a book, a docu-film, a website, an exhibition, based in Rome and more precisely along the well-known highway A90, better known as Grande Raccordo Anulare (GRA), a ring road with more than 40 interchanges that runs around the capital city for around 68 km. A recent work on urban interstices conducted by geographer Martina Loi (2024) has further expanded the scenario, adding a feminist approach to an often male-centred perspective (at least in the Italian context) on mobility infrastructures: in her work, motorways and the interstitial spaces around them are interpreted as 'spaces of possibility', 'as nodes of break and friction within urban value chains, where other spatial forms and dynamics are made visible, conceivable and therefore possible' (2552). In the 'warning note' at the beginning of their book, which they say is 'neither a guide nor an essay or a reportage', Bassetti and Matteucci explain that the 'sacred' in their title, which refers to the GRA, 'alludes to the chivalric search for a numinous and transcendent element' along the ring road, something they 'perceived almost everywhere, never completely anywhere' (2013: 9-10). What is particularly relevant, in their note, beside the importance they give to encounters with inhabitants and places, who both show an extraordinary capacity (and necessity) to experiment and invent, is the need to change their perspective on a space they had been traversing for years without ever seeing it properly:

We had already driven along the GRA hundreds of times before, but we had seen nothing. What does someone who travels on a highway without stopping see, if not the asphalt, the cars around them? The landscape is reduced to a background, flows and goes away. Without people.

First, we changed our attitude. We went back to the Grande Raccordo Anulare, respecting the map and the direction (clockwise), but otherwise ready for every detour, we focused on slowness and methodical confusion. Determined to arrive somewhere, we reached a pre-established destination, almost always by taking the wrong road. (Bassetti and Matteucci 2013: 9)²

These words functioned as triggers for us to start walking with them, having a conversation with Lumini about the possibility to walk with infrastructures in the city where our geographical and photographic practices and our daily lives are based: Padua, in the North-eastern part of Italy. The result of this conversation is the photo walk *Sulla soglia. Passeggiata*

fotografica ai margini della città [On the threshold. Photo walk at the margins of the city], which is part of a broader project titled WALC – Walking Landscapes of Urban Cultures – funded by the European Union within the national PRIN PNRR 2022 programme.³ The photowalk was performed both alone, individually, and as a form of walking and mobile dialogue between Lumini and I, as we explored together in a series of on-site surveys the thick network of roads and paths along and across the Northern ring road of Padua; it further became a collective social experience, as we organised a photowalk in April 2025 with a mixed group of around twenty five people, including students in Landscape Studies at the University of Padua, students in an Education program in photo-journalism, researchers and PhD students in geography and private citizens. Unfortunately, due to limitations of space, we will not be able to present all the results of both the collective storytelling practices and the photo-essays realised by the students, and we will only focus on the closer collaboration between myself and Lumini, showing the results of this geo-artistic duo.

The idea of bringing geography and photography together is not new: ‘photographs have always played a major role in geographical studies’ (Rose 2008: 151). Yet, as Gillian Rose maintains, for a long time photographs were used by geographers as unproblematic pictures, rarely discussed, often taken by researchers themselves as documentations of the field site (151). This has been changing more recently, and ‘instead of thinking of photos as transparent windows that allow us to peer into places we would never otherwise see, some geographers are starting to think of photos more as prisms that refract what can be seen in quite particular ways’ (151). *Sulla soglia* was inspired by this move from illustrative and documentary style to more creative and evocative photography that has been changing the ways geographers not only work with but also compose their images (Arnold 2021). As Emma Arnold suggests, in a recent work on photographic composition for urban geographical research, moving from documentary to interpretative, more creative approaches to photography changes the way geographical texts and images work together: in fact, she affirms, ‘rather than snapping a shot as an attempt to “objectively” capture a scene to support text, artistic approaches to photography involve creating images before the text’ (669). If read through this new lens, the collaboration between geography and photography, or geographers and photographers, allows photos and texts to create new assemblages of meaning. In fact, if interpreted through Arnold’s approach, each shot taken by Lumini ‘can simultaneously be insightful evidence made in the course of urban research and be an evocative work of art open to interpretation with all the possibilities and imagination that come with that designation’ (669).

The photowalk *Sulla soglia* was inspired and sustained by a series of other activities and generative encounters within the WALC project. In short, the WALC project is based on a transdisciplinary, literary critical, geographical and sociological conversation on walking as a method, a topic, and storytelling practice. Sharing these common visions, each Research Unit developed different activities, which include: in Bologna, a collaboration with Italian walking writer Wu Ming 2, who organised with Milani’s team three urban trekkings along the cities’ waterways and a series of collective writing laboratories, with all the participants who walked together becoming part of a community editorial team; in Milan, a series of urban walks in the area of the University Milano Bicocca, inspired by the works of an Italian sociologist who

specialized in urban walking and flânerie, Gianpaolo Nuvolati (2006, 2013, 2020), and community walking-audits organised with students and inhabitants to collect their voices and personal experience of walking in the city; in Padua, the focus is on the relationship between geography and arts in the co-construction of walking landscapes and urban cultures on the move. In particular, beside the photo walk, the Research Unit in Padua organised, among other activities: a seminar series based at the MoHu Centre for Advanced Studies in Mobility and Humanities; an art residency co-curated with Stefania Schiavon and Caterina Benvegnù (Creativity Area of the Progetto Giovani Office of the Municipality of Padua) hosting two artists, Daniele Costa and Caterina Morigi, with the aim to install two context- and site-specific artworks in public space; a graphic workshop titled 'Walking in the city' and co-curated with artist-researcher Tânia A. Cardoso. All these experiences inform and influence each other, leading to a set of practices aimed at experimenting with the politics and poetics of walking in different urban contexts: rather than conducting through a secure path, the activities were designed to leave space for the unexpected, the accidental and sudden, the unlooked-for and well-known, the amazing and disgusting. The scientific team of WALC asked themselves a series of questions that resonate with those posed by Alice Twemlow and Tânia A. Cardoso:

What might be considered the research output of a walking practice? Where and when does the research occur in relation to the walk, the walking and the walkers? Does the walk activate our senses, or do our senses demand that we walk? What and where are the objects and subjects of a walk? How might walking help us emphasise our connection to the more-than-human world? What are the entry points to a city through walking? How might walking provide a path toward more socially just urban spaces and commons? (Twemlow and Cardoso 2022: 31)

The photo walk *Sulla soglia* further posed new questions, about the limits and opportunities to *walk with infrastructures*. How do mobility infrastructures, like ring roads, highways, train tracks, trace the margins of contemporary cities? Shall we read them as secure limits, or as walkable thresholds, permeable borders, whose role is questioning our positionality rather than giving secure answers about whether we are in or out of the city? As we know, ring roads were often built in the second half of the twentieth century to embrace cities and create new 'gateways' accessible for car users to enter and exit the city. As Loi observes in the Sardinian context, although '[t]he road, built in the open countryside, marked the ultimate limit of urban growth for years, representing a strong territorial sign and a boundary of the city', nevertheless '[o]ver time the city expanded, and this boundary has now been reached and crossed with fragmented and still-ongoing urbanization processes' (2024: 2054-5). As Ash Amin highlights, in recent years in the social sciences we have been witnessing the 'rise of a new genre of thinking that narrates the social life of a city through its material infrastructure' (2014: 137).

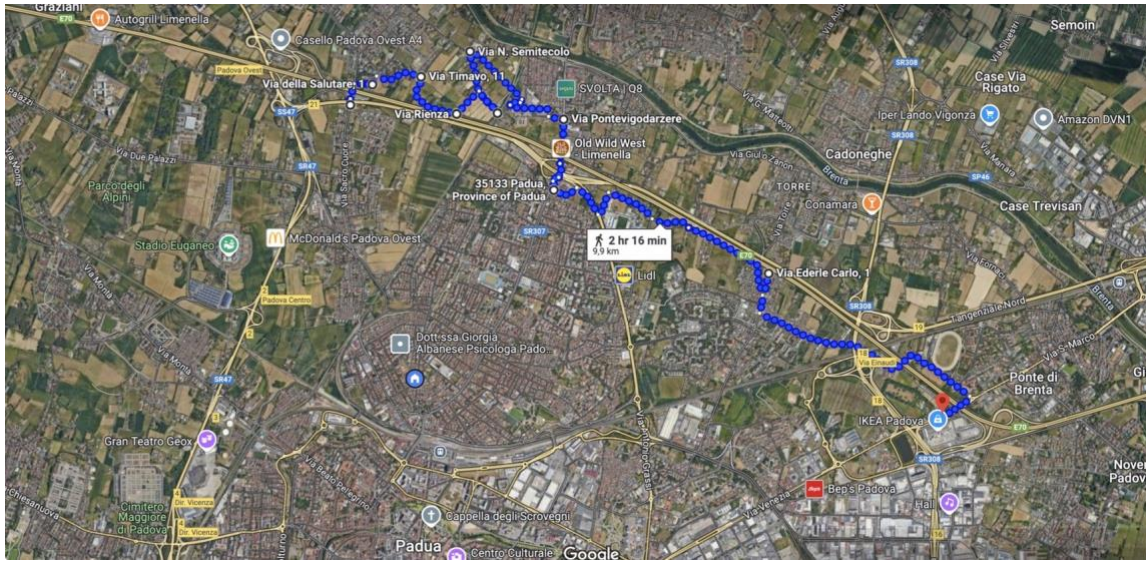


Figure 1. The map of the photo walk, *Sulla Soglia*.

The ring road has its own materiality. We tried to walk as close as we could. The only rule of our urban game was to keep it as a guiding line to walk with along the path. We had looked at the map, tried to sketch the route on it, yet as soon as our walking began, we learned rapidly how much unforeseen would have changed our directions. It's not that the map was lying, it's just that it didn't really think we would have walked there, for real.

These emerging works function as reorientations that consider how infrastructures are socio-technical processes that result from diverse agentive powers, materialities, socialities, narratives, and imaginations. The result, Amin maintains, 'is the birth of an exciting anthropology of infrastructure that foregrounds the urban backstage to reveal the sociality of roads, pipes, cables, broadband' (2014: 139). Thus, the experience of walking with infrastructures makes it possible to focus on both their material and social aspects, exploring their aesthetics through the mobile body, questioning the expectations they may represent and the imaginations they may provoke. It means being attuned to their politics, poetics, and aesthetics. 'Aesthetics in this sense', following Larkin, 'is not a representation but an embodied experience governed by the ways infrastructures produce the ambient conditions of everyday life' (2013: 336). He continues, 'our sense of temperature, speed, florescence, and the ideas we have associated with these conditions' are influenced by infrastructures, that 'create a sensing of modernity, a process by which the body, as much as the mind, apprehends what it is to be modern, mutable, and progressive' (7).



Figure 2. Photo by Marco Lumini, via dell'Ippodromo, Padua, March 2025. Reproduction by permission of the author.

I wonder whether there is something sacred about the mobility infrastructures we often just pass by. Bodies, ideas, means of transport, stories, they all pass by everyday along this ring road. Some of them just for one time, or rarely. Others cross these lines every single day, for years, to go to work, to school, to the University, wherever they must go. From here, I cannot see their faces, neither their cars, I can just hear the engines, from below the pilons. I can just imagine their storylines that I will never know.

If walking is both a way of thinking and composing stories through the mobile body, then walking with ring roads may become an example of how to work with infrastructural storytelling in a creative, embodied, immersive, and open way. As we suggested in a former work on infrastructural storytelling, a 'narrative approach to infrastructures observes how the formal matter of roads, highways, pipelines, rails, airports etc., affects our storytelling practices, making the peculiar 'poetics of infrastructures' (Larkin 2013) visible through a creative, mobile, and narrative perspective' (Peterle and Harris 2024: 36). In our view, infrastructural storytelling is a 'a methodological technique that places infrastructures at the centre of narrative research practices: rather than using stories as an end-point to represent research, we are attempting to do research through stories (Cameron), interpreting stories 'as the origins of thinking and feeling' (Bissell 2021: 369) about infrastructures'. The practice of

‘storying infrastructure’ (369) through writings, oral storytelling, and photo walking, building hybrid archives, contributes to the production of infrastructural thinking, in an ongoing process of collaborative meaning-making that changes the ways in which we leave with and make sense of urban infrastructures.



Figure 3. Photo by Marco Lumini, via dell'Ippodromo, Padua, March 2025. Reproduction by permission of the author.

Who lives in this house? Who opens the window everyday, gently moving the curtains and having a face to face conversation with the ring road? I can feel the body of the house vibrating every time a truck passes by. Again, and again, and again. Small earthquakes shake the walls, the glasses, the window shutters, the inhabitants of the house. Bodies of flesh and blood, concrete, sheet metal, plastic, rubber, tarmac, water, and air, for just a few seconds, they vibrate together, like an impromptu symphony. And then they stop vibrating together as they keep on moving away. But the house, and the ring road, they stay there.

Yet, as we experienced with Lumini during our geo-artistic research process, walking with mobility infrastructures like ring roads is not that easy. A series of material limitations often change the processes along the road: car-only environments are often traversed by fast motorized vehicles and not expected to host the presence of people walking. In fact, ‘walking with’ ring roads means tracing routes that pass close to them (aside, beneath, under), which

in many cases lack sidewalks or include dead-end streets, thereby forcing walkers to make long detours that would be very short by car but turn into exhausting paths for pedestrians. The route we traced on the map, indeed, was the result of a negotiation between the extended spatialities of the ring road, and the walkability of the paths drawn along it: this practice of mediation happens as a series of different rhythms, stops and starts, encounters, and perceptions, where bodies walk at different paces. Unmapped human bodies, more-than-human entities we found along the road, forced us to stop, maybe to take a photo, frame the scene, read it through literary quotes, questioning their and our own presence in that liminal space. Moreover, whereas the first on-site visits we made with Lumini were mainly performed by car, with the possibility to explore dead ends and detours along the ring road without any particular time limitations, during the collective photowalk, on the contrary, we needed to keep time and consider the needs and slower rhythms of a walking group. When tracing the final route on the map (the one presented in Fig. 1), we found a compromise between what we wanted the participants to see during the walk and what we could expect from a transgenerational group, made of people of different ages and with different levels of experience walking in urban environments. For this reason, we chose a route that would be sufficiently varied from a landscape perspective, meaning one that included residential areas, transitional zones between urban and rural environments, semi-deserted or abandoned areas, and industrial zones under development. This variety was important for both narrative and visual reasons: on the one hand, in order to explore the manifold ways in which the ring road presents itself as a threshold, between built and abandoned areas, private and public spaces, urban and rural ways of life, we had to trace a sufficiently long route to include even contrasting situations along the pathway; on the other hand, the discrete length of the route allowed for a mixture of landscape elements that made the walk more stimulating, also from a visual and photographic standpoint.

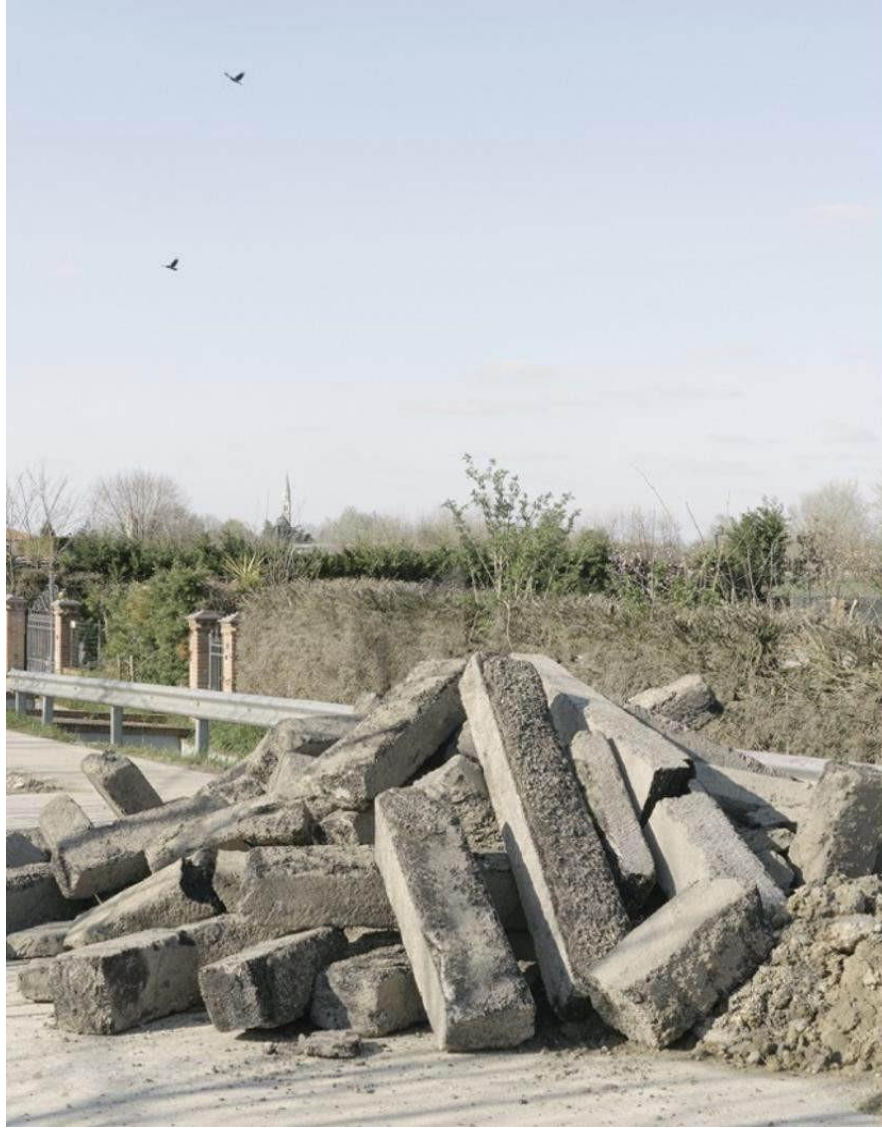


Figure 4. Photo by Marco Lumini, via Rienza, Padua, March 2025. Reproduction by permission of the author.

What's this? Why am I here? Why did I stop and even start walking?

As Biondillo and Monina affirm, thinking about the case study of Milan, to retrace a walkable line aside the ring road is never an easy thing to do. Neither is to actually perform them: in fact, in the interplay between the two characters that the authors somehow incarnate through their alternating voices in the book, Biondillo asks to stick to the line traced on the map and the need to actually walk along it, while Monina calls for a more creative, even fictional approach. Writes Monina, almost at the beginning of the book:

My secret hope is that, as we approach the delivery date, he will be convinced, a victim of my oratory skills, to write the book based on imagination, or at most on Google Earth. (Biondillo and Monina 2010: 16)⁴

The narrative expedient of using alternating voices, found by the authors to create a multifaceted narration of a shared walking performance, makes it possible to open to the multiplicity of stories that may be told along the same route. Infrastructural storytelling, thus, is not just about registering the meanings and imaginations connected to infrastructures, it is also an opportunity to understand how the same ring road, pipeline, pylon, street, may be perceived and told differently by bodies moving at different rhythms or with different purposes, for example. The combination of Lumini's photos with short geo-centred creative writings witnesses the possibility for different infrastructural stories to co-exist and speak to each other. As infrastructures, and especially ring roads, have the power to 'enchant' (2012), they 'hold competing and often quite divergent hopes and expectations together', mobility infrastructures enchant us in different ways, according to our positionality, body, background, expectations and hopes (Harvey and Knox 2012: 522). The co-presence of photos and texts on the page not only allows for a comparison between visual and textual narratives, by bringing together different perspectives and voices – those of a landscape photographer and a narrative geographer – within the same mobile object, but also creates an additional layer of meaning. Through the dialogue and tension between what photographs and texts articulate, the icono-text presented in this article expresses the vivid contradictions and unruliness of infrastructures. It also makes the presence of different possible framings within the same landscape visible. In this way, it is the hybrid form of the photo-text, and not merely the verbal-visual content of the representation of the *Sulla soglia* project, that enables us to convey the nature of the ring road understood as a threshold, also between what is said and unsaid, and what is visible and invisible.

Walking with photo-texts and telling our own stories of infrastructures allows to explore the social promise of roads and ring roads, questioning their ability to enchant and disenchant, moving beyond dominant narratives and turning our attention toward the microstories that are flourishing around them, in the interstices of their concrete blocks, in between their pylons, in the cracks of cement. *Sulla soglia* functions as an example of infrastructural storytelling, where photos and texts, combined, make the perspectives of a photographer and a geographer walking together with infrastructure coexist as a symptom of infrastructural complexities. As Springgay and Truman affirm, 'Walking-writing is a thinking-in-movement', it is 'a practice of concept formation' (2018: 131). With them:

We do not conceptualize walking in one register and writing in another, any more than we understand our research-creation walking events as pre-writing. Walking activates the creation of concepts. To walk is to move-with thought. In addition, we understand writing as something more-than what exists on a page or in a book. Walking-writing is experimental and speculative. Walking-writing surfaces. It is viscous and intense. Walking-writing is collaborative. (Springgay and Truman 2018: 131)

Together we tell different stories, and our stories inform and at the same time prove each other wrong. Social presences and promises are not captured in Lumini's photos, yet they are stuck there, in the folds of the texts that come with them, in our bodies that were there,

witnessing and embodying these infrastructural enchantments. Walking as thinking, but also walking with texts, walking with infrastructures and, finally, walking while photographing and writing.



Figure 5. Photo by Marco Lumini, via Ederle Carlo, Padua, March 2025. Reproduction by permission of the author.

I cannot touch you, but we have never been so close.

Keep on walking with...

The politics and poetics of walking cross both the representation and composition of contemporary urban landscapes. In fact, narrative geographies represent a useful perspective through which we can look at the interrelations that co-construct urban spaces and the narrative imaginaries that inform them. This contribution explored, through a transdisciplinary point of view, informed by geography, literature, mobility studies and art-based methodologies, the practice of ‘walking with’ as a way of thinking space, being open to more-than-human perspectives, and composing spatial stories. Walking is a narrative topic and perspective as well as an everyday mobile practice, a research method, and a creative research practice that allows literary geographers not just to traverse and read real spaces

differently, but even to re-compose urban narratives through movement. By walking with texts, we perform them, enacting their narrative potential, keeping them alive; yet, we also multiply their meanings beyond the authors' intentions, adding readers' bodies, cultural references and ideas, but also unpredicted more-than-human assemblages to the complex narrative they produce. When walking with texts, we make them happen in socio-spatial contexts that are not replicable, creating new spatial meanings every time our steps cross pages and places. When these walking practices are performed with others, the co-presence of bodies and visions of different kinds makes it possible to activate processes of sharing, collecting, discussing, and even disenchanting stories about infrastructures.

This contribution, organised in three steps that metaphorically bring readers through a mobile thinking practice, stems from the idea that walking is not just a means to move across space, but rather a way of thinking and telling stories about places. As Ingold and Vergunst suggest, 'we tend to forget that the body itself is grounded in movement', but 'Walking is not just what a body does; it is what a body is' (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 2). As mobile beings, we make sense of the world by telling stories while we move across it. Exploring the possibility of walking with texts, intended as a way to read and perform them in open space, but also to compose them while walking, the article discussed how walking with infrastructures may stimulate stories to emerge that tell us something more about their lively essence and social lives. Infrastructural storytelling, thus, allows us exploring the enchantments, intimate, political, and social meanings of infrastructures.

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Notes

- ¹ See for example the Stalker group founded by Francesco Careri in Rome, a collective of architects and researchers connected to the Roma Tre University, who came together in the mid-1990s. In 2002, they founded the Osservatorio Nomade (ON) research network, including architects, artists, activists and researchers (Careri 2017 [2006]). Another example is the Laboratorio del Cammino, an inter-university network of researchers that develop innovative educational projects aimed at exploring the methodological

potentialities of walking for urban planning: since 2017 they have been launching every year a summer school, changing location, topic and aim, with the scope to explore Italian landscapes and places through a slow, bottom-up perspective.

² Translation of the author from the Italian: 'Prima avevamo già percorso il GRA in auto centinaia di volte, ma non avevamo visto nulla. Che cosa vede chi viaggia su un'autostrada senza fermarsi, se non l'asfalto, le auto attorno a sé? Il paesaggio si reduce a una quinta, scorre e se ne va. Senza le persone. / Per prima cosa, abbiamo cambiato atteggiamento. Siamo tornati sul Grande Raccordo Anulare, rispettando mappa e senso (orario), ma per il resto pronti a ogni deviazione, abbiamo puntato sulla lentezza e lo smarrimento metodico. Decisi ad arrivare in un luogo, raggiungevamo una meta prefissa, quasi sempre sbagliando strada'.

³ To learn more about the project, see the project's website: <https://site.unibo.it/walc/it>.

⁴ Translation of the author from the Italian: 'La mia recondita speranza è che, arrivati a ridosso della data di consegna, si convinca, sempre vittima delle mie arti oratorie, a scrivere il libro basandosi sulla fantasia, al limite su Google Earth'.

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