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Is this the end of the world or am I just beginning? **Walking-scenographic methods for encountering bodies and landscapes in transition**

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ABSTRACT

This reflective account looks at an ongoing piece of practice research, where I apply walking-scenographic methods within coastal landscapes to question how transness might be approached beyond a suggestion of individual identity. I argue that both walking methods and scenographic practices provide ways of articulating and encountering material processes that extend beyond anthropocentrism, and that the enmeshment between bodies and surrounding ecologies that occurs while walking can contribute ways of understanding transness beyond expectations of legibility and linearity. This disrupts cisnormative discussions of transness, which are limited by binary presentations of gender and a linear understanding of transition.

KEYWORDS

Walking; scenography;
queer; trans

Introduction

In September 2023, over the course of two days, I walked from my home in East London to the Kent Coast, along the Thames Estuary. The route, following the England Coast Path, led me through the marshy and industrial landscapes of the Estuary; places where it is unclear where the land ends and the water begins, and the river ends and the sea begins. In this article I reflect on the process of walking with, and through, these fluid landscapes, followed by an abstract mark-making process utilising cyanotype photographic printing techniques, which I contextualise as abstract ‘mapping’. By finding trans resonance in both the fluid estuary landscapes and the abstract prints, I articulate a ‘walking-scenographic’ approach that allows me to read the material qualities of landscape and print-making alongside one another. This emergent practice-research methodology allows me to locate my own transness in relation to the zonal ecologies of coastal ecotone spaces and question how a ‘trans sense of place’ might be articulated through material qualities of abstraction and indeterminacy.

My desire to articulate a ‘trans sense of place’ that hinges on these materialities, rather than on a focus on individual identity, stems from a frustration with a cisnormative pre-occupation with regarding transness through frames of legibility and definition, often

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upholding a binary understanding of gender. Here, I follow the work of trans scholar Colby Gordon, who argues that cisnormative publics have a fixation on trans memoir: 'journeys' that fit the cliché narrative beats of being 'born in the wrong body' and 'fixed' by a linear process of social and medical transition (2020). To Gordon, these nar-ratemes reinforce 'techniques of surveillance and control that police trans life. The state solicits a self-narrative that renders trans experience legible and regularized in order to more easily manage its trans population' (2020, 197). Here, Gordon articulates the 'trap' of trans visibility under cisnormativity, where self-narrativising in a way that is legible to the state becomes a requirement to, for example, access means of medical and legal transition.

In response to this political landscape that 'defangs the subversive potentials of trans-ition by producing a docile and normative trans subject' (2020, 197), Gordon calls for a 'new aesthetic mode' that 'scrambles' (2020, 197) these transantagonistic strategies. Through the piece of practice-research I outline in this article, I suggest that walking-scenographic practices might go some way to addressing this call to articulate modes of transness beyond cisnormativity. Positioning walking, as a creative-critical practice, alongside the spatial imaginaries offered by expanded scenographic practice, offers a way of encountering both landscapes and bodies as continually in-progress, shifting, unfixed, rather than clearly bounded. Through an application of walking-scenographic methods, I argue that a scenographic understanding of place can present an expanded understanding of transness, exceeding an identity-focused approach to address processes of spatial and material transformation.

Developing a walking-scenographic practice

A walking-scenographic approach brings walking, as a way to experience an environment through motion, into dialogue with an expanded scenographic framing of the interplay between bodies, materials, and environments. Expanded scenography here forms a critical framework beyond the context of theatre and performance (McKinney and Palmer 2017) through which to conceptualise, and disrupt, norms and social orders of place (Hann 2019) and more-than-human materialities (Donald 2015). Walking becomes a method of multisensory and embodied attunement with what Louise Ann Wilson calls the 'emplaced scenography' of a landscape: its 'physical, material and environmental forces' (2022, 3). A walking-scenographic perspective, therefore, offers a way to foreground the different agential forces of a site: its more-than-human materialities and ecologies.

I align this walking-scenographic methodology with an ethics of walking-with, building upon Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman's suggestion of walking-writing as a practice of 'thinking-in-movement' (2019, 141) that troubles the idea of a clear delineation between self and surroundings. Walking becomes a way of encountering the entanglements and imbrications that exist between human and nonhuman, and addressing the tensions this brings. Rather than positioning this worldview in opposition to an anthropocentric one, Springgay and Truman note the potential of walking-writing to activate these disjuncts within a 'speculative middle'. To them, 'walking-writing is a practice of muddling things, of making problems, and agitating thought. In the speculative middle, one does not resolve or clarify an idea, rather walking-writing complicates, stirs, and

unsettles thought' (2019, 134). The hyphenation of walking-writing, as I have taken up when discussing my walking-scenographic practice, situates these practices in direct relation to walking-with as an ethics for decolonising research, in a way that is 'explicit about political positions and situated knowledges, which reveal our entanglements with settler colonization and neoliberalism' (2019, 11). Walking-with, here, speaks to Rachel Hann's articulation of pluriversal scenographics as a collection of strategies with potential to unsettle 'the binary models of world as enshrined within Global North philosophies and aesthetics (such as object-subject, nature-culture, mind-body, human-nonhuman, female-male, etc.)' (2024, 316). Scenographics, to Hann, are plural stagings of material cultures that craft, and re-craft, place orientations and can be used to identify and trouble different worldmaking strategies. Applying this approach to a trans context creates strategies for acknowledging and subverting the colonality of gender (Leo 2020) and the violences inherent in the global naturalisation of a gender binary. Bringing walking and scenographic practices into dialogue offers tactics for subverting the binary worldviews and fixed definitions of gender that underpin much transantagonistic rhetoric, which is aligned with colonial practices of drawing and enforcing borders. Here, gender categories are treated as fixed and immutable instead of spatially and historically fluid and contingent.

I also find scenographic resonance within these practices of walking-with, and walking-writing by linking the 'writing' of 'walking-writing' to the 'graphos' of 'scenography'. This, directly translated, can refer to a practice of 'drawing with the scene' (Baugh 2013, 240): by highlighting this sense of process I draw attention to the ways that scenographic outputs operate as part of a creative-critical practice, alongside a consideration of how walking can become a method for crafting, orienting, or coming to know place. Walking-scenographic entanglements with place, therefore, foreground ambiguity, indeterminacy, and process rather than clearly-delineated knowledge positions. From this critical context outlining my walking-scenographic approach, I explore the application of this methodology through the account of my walk along the Thames Estuary. First, I analyse the scenographic quality of porosity within the estuary landscape, then I reflect on the scenographic 'mapping' process I developed in response to both these spatial conditions and the questions about transness they raised.

The walk

Coastlines are disorientated, and disorientating, spaces: they exist in a constant state of change through tidal patterns, weathering, erosion. Within Astrida Neimanis' hydrofeminist reading of these spaces, even the act of fixing a coast to a 'line' is artificial, as 'the line is a snapshot that extracts the coast from the flow of time where it cannot be weathered or eroded. But in a thickness of time, the line is actually a blur.' (Bezan and Neimanis 2022, 1). Coastlines afford an opportunity to explore specific spatial qualities of ambiguity and resistance to measurement through conventional ways. Considering coastal spaces through a hydrofeminist lens is a way of framing them as sites of possibility and encounter. To Neimanis, 'passage, transition, becoming, transmogrification' are 'the labours of the coastal zone' (Bezan and Neimanis 2022, 1) and these spaces have a 'membrane' quality. Walking-with and within these coastal zones becomes a way to explore the 'membrane logic' of body and site alongside and within one another: highlighting the transitory qualities of both.

Through a desire to explore these qualities of coastal spaces, and as part of a wider practice-research project of walking from and around my home in East London, I decided to walk from my home to the sea. The route took me through the Thames Estuary, along a route marked by the convergence of two National Trails: the Thames Path and the England Coast Path. This question of designation, labelling the path after both river and coast, exemplifies the indeterminacy of the estuary landscape, as do the varied and conflicting suggestions as to where the Thames itself begins and ends (Schneer 2005). At the river's source in Gloucestershire there are many potential sources; a series of springs that depend on groundwater levels. The western reaches of the river from Teddington Lock, west of Richmond, are tidal, including the stretch through the centre of London, so here the river still behaves like the sea. There are also many points where the moment the Thames meets the sea within the estuary might be mapped: the Nore sandbank, the point where the River Medway meets the estuary between Sheerness and Grain, or direct lines drawn between the northern and southern side of the estuary (between the Crow Stone in Southend-on-Sea and the London Stone near Allhallows in Kent, between Shoeburyness and Sheerness, or between Whitstable and Foulness Point). Evidently, there are no clear answers to these questions of definition: along the Thames Estuary the same place can exist by one definition as river and by another as sea. It is in these moments that the limitations of language can be explored in order to articulate a *sense of place* as shifting, in flux. This sense of spatial ambiguity provided a relevant starting-point to my walk, alongside the affective qualities of this landscape: what it might feel like to inhabit a space that is immeasurable in many ways.

Through the full-body awareness that walking brings, I became attuned during my journey to the 'emplaced scenography' (Wilson 2022, 3) of the urban and rural landscapes I walked through, attentive to the different markers of place that orientated me in different ways along the path. Some of these, like place names I noticed on road signs, offered linguistic descriptors moving from those evocative of the river (Thamesmead), to the sea (Salt Fleet Flats, Allhallows-on-Sea). Others had more ephemeral or atmospheric qualities: as I walked eastward the smell of the ocean became stronger. This walking-scenographic process of navigating the river prompted me to consider the different ways in which place can be measured and known, beyond conventional cartographic practices and, reciprocally, how I can come to understand myself through encounters with my surroundings.

A key material quality that emerged, the further I walked away from the city and towards the sea, was the increasingly waterlogged nature of the landscape (as shown in Figure 1). Walking eastwards from Gravesend the landscape begins to open up into the North Kent Marshes, and the Thames Path skirts around pools of water, tracing a route between the river and the surrounding marshland, dotted with lakes and pools left behind from quarrying and other industrial activity. Coastal landscapes such as these are often described as ecotones, transitory zones between different ecological systems or biological communities: here, the land and the water. I return here to the work of Astrida Neimanis, who highlights the potential of ecotones as spaces of transition wherein 'matter comes to matter differently': the liminal materiality of the ecotone 'rejects an ontological separation between "thing" and "transition"' (2012, 93). In the ecotone, distinct bodies are not as bounded as they might seem, and there is a sense of transgression



Figure 1. St Mary Hoo, Rochester. Image copyright the author.

between and across different materialities. There is, I feel, a ‘trans sense’ to this in-between space.

Visual artist *micha cárdenas* also identifies the trans resonance of ecotone spaces, exploring the potential of the geographic metaphor of the ecotone in trans media studies to theorise ‘the transition and spaces between mediated ecologies, as well as

spaces of shifting and transformation within and across lines of species and matter' (2022, 212). The 'in-between' nature of the ecotone space, as well as the sense of blurring or unsettling stable categories, is related by cárdenas to Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism*, where 'glitch is all about traversing along edges and stepping to the limits, those we occupy and push through, on our journey to defining ourselves' (Russell 2020, 22). To cárdenas, 'the intertextuality of extending beyond one's present body and identity can be a way of imagining the trans body as a kind of ecology' (2022, 210). These gestures of exceeding the body frame an understanding of transness beyond a focus on individual subjectivity or categorisation. Like Neimanis' feminist 'hydro-logics', which utilises the subjectivity of being a 'body of water' to speak to wider geopolitical and ecological figurations within a 'fragile global hydrocommons, where water [...] is increasingly contaminated, commodified and dangerously reorganised' (2013, 27), an ecotone understanding of transness presents transness within an ecological context. Linking trans and ecological politics in this way highlights the potential of trans perspectives to speak to the uprooting of ecological arrangements of stability and fixity that is currently occurring due to the climate catastrophe (Durban and Moore 2024), and refute binaries of 'natural' and 'unnatural' that support colonial and cis-heteronormative paradigms.

Finding trans resonance in the emplaced scenography of the ecotone landscape led me to consider the different ways in which material qualities of porosity and permeability blur the boundaries between body and landscape. When something usually considered as a static boundary, like the line of a coast on a map, is instead presented as changeable and in-process, further material processes of transformation are uncovered. A desire to continue thinking with and around the material qualities of permeability and porosity, the behaviour of water, and the idea of a 'membrane logic', stayed with me after the walk. This informed the development of my walking-scenographic practice to explore material mark-making: an abstract 'mapping' process that I will now address.

The map

The fluid ecotone landscapes I encountered while walking along the Thames informed my development of material processes that reflected the watery and porous qualities of the estuary landscape. This marshy landscape was also characterised by its flatness, where the open sky and bright sunlight took on particular significance. Walking in much the same direction for two consecutive days it was easy to feel the movement of the sun throughout the duration of the walk. Because of the particular significance of sunlight and water that emerged during this practice I looked for a process that utilised both of these elements, eventually finding cyanotype printing, an historic photographic printing process. I created a series of abstract prints on paper and fabric, working with cyanotype emulsion and collaborating with the material agents of the coastal landscape: sunlight and saltwater. By letting saltwater (gathered from the estuary) and the photosensitive cyanotype emulsion intermingle, before exposing the sheets of paper and fabric to sunlight, a series of abstract patterns and textures emerged (as shown in Figure 2). These range from simple light-blue fields to more varied compositions with areas of deep blue and white. Through relinquishing control over the outcome of these images, I draw attention to the agency of my scenographic collaborators: the sunlight developing

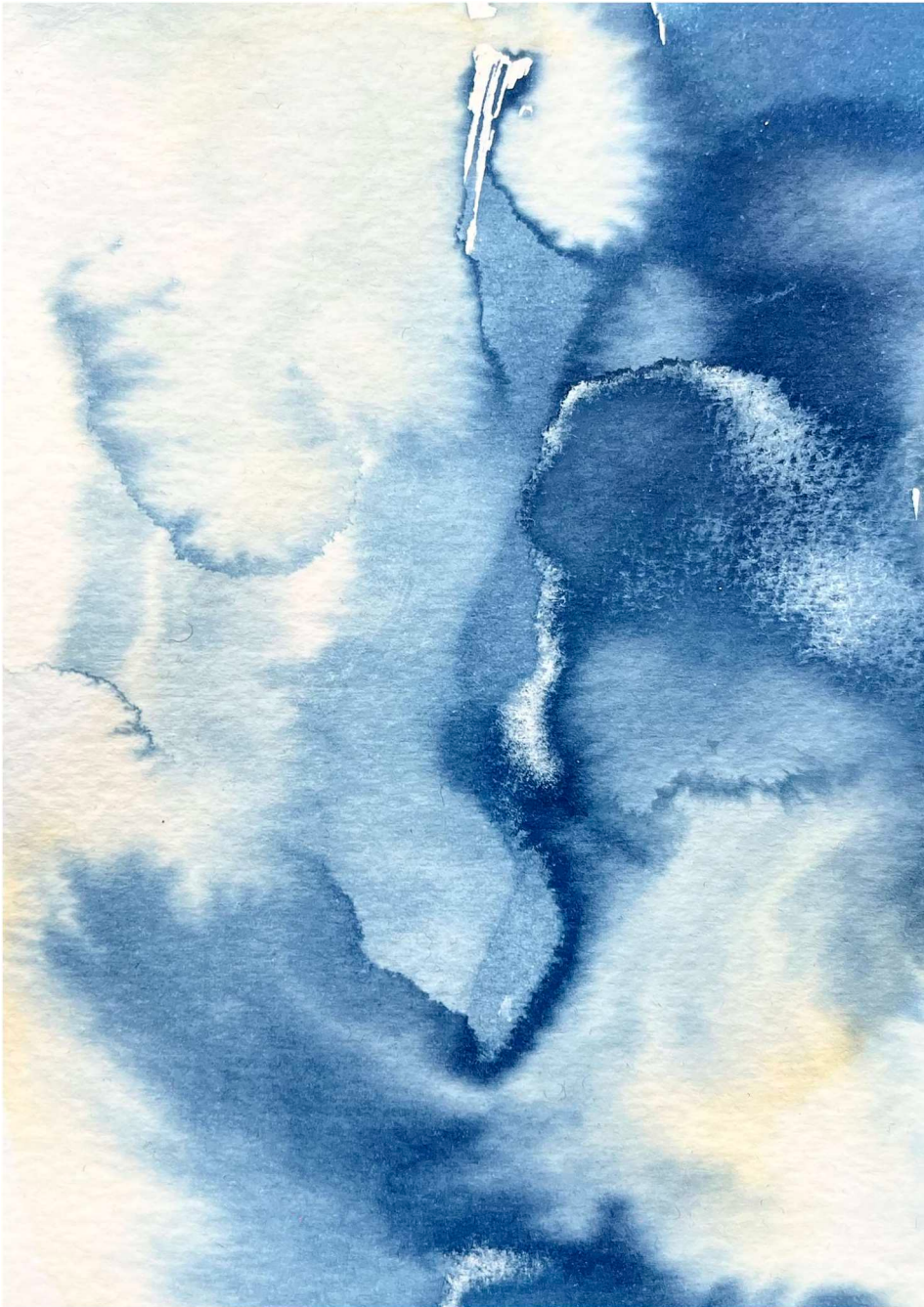


Figure 2. Abstract cyanotype print on paper. Image copyright the author.

the emulsion to a deep blue, and the saltwater creating abstract patterns across the surface.

Cyanotype printing is an historic photographic process where a material, often paper, is covered with a photosensitive emulsion, made by mixing ferric ammonium citrate and

potassium ferricyanide. Once dry, this paper can be covered with a stencil or negative and exposed to sunlight; the resulting photographic reproduction is printed in white on a blue background – blue where sunlight passes through the stencil and reacts to the emulsion on the paper, and white, where the passage of light has been blocked. Cyanotype is often considered a simple alternative photographic process; in a history of the process artist Christina Anderson suggests that ‘because of its simplicity it has earned a less precious reputation than other more complex alternative processes’ (2019). This also reflects its industrial heritage as a process; in architecture and planning the term ‘blueprint’ refers to how drawings were traditionally copied using this method.

Cyanotypes also share history with Kent, where I walked through the Thames Estuary, and its coastal ecologies: botanist Anna Atkins’ 1843–53 collection *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, often considered to be the first book illustrated with photographic images, was created there. Within this collection, prints of seaweed and algae appear ghostly white on a deep blue background. Ann Garascia (2019) approaches Atkins’ collection through an eco-archival lens, arguing that the plant samples and weather are as much archival agents as Atkins: this is a shared process between human and non-human agents. An ‘intimate, trans-corporeal contact’ is initiated ‘among seaweed, organic and inorganic substances, cyanotype paper, and weather patterns to enable the porous interconnectivity of different environmental agents’ (2019, 277) and there is an ephemeral quality to Atkins’ images, with their layers of strings and fronds. I noticed similar qualities to my abstract cyanotypes, with different layers of blue washing over the paper’s surface. These images resist fixity and straightforward modes of depiction, rather suggesting a wider ecology of encounters between the different actants involved in the process: the surface, the emulsion, water, plants, the artist, light.

Developing an abstract cyanotype process in response to the materiality of the coastal spaces that I walked through along the Thames Estuary, this relational strategy came to the fore. As abstract patterns and textures were activated by the cyanotype emulsion mixing with water and developing in sunlight I relinquished control over their outcome, drawing attention to the agency of my environmental scenographic collaborators: sunlight and water. This scenographic outcome of the walking-scenographic process, created in response to and in dialogue with the material qualities present in the coastal ecotone of the Thames Estuary, therefore reflects the ‘transmaterial ethics’ (Springgay and Truman 2019, 140) of walking-with.

It is important to acknowledge that, in my printing experiments, I am arguably ‘doing cyanotype wrong’. I am not working in a light-controlled environment like a photographic darkroom, nor am I carefully exposing stencils or specimens to achieve faithful reproductions. Instead, I am committing to a messy and intuitive process of figuring things out as I go along. I find queer resonance in this misuse or misappropriation of a practice that is already perceived within photographic communities as an amateurish method, not the least because of its distinctive colour. Anderson describes how ‘cyanotype’s blue has been accused of being insistently blue, disagreeably blue, not for the production of real photographs, cloying, ugly in tone, forbidding, a colour not suitable for the average subject, a colour severed from any neutral relation to observed reality’ (2019, 2). This suggestion of ugliness, disagreeableness, and severance from ‘neutrality’ resonates with how I approach this ‘outsider’ technique as a queer and trans artist.

Reclaiming some of these suggestions draws attention to the frameworks within which 'neutrality' is designated. The 'blueprint' of the cyanotype, created with the more-than-human collaborators of sunlight, water, and salt, here maps the different materialities encountered during my walk along the Thames Path. The porosity of the landscapes that I walked through is reflected in the abstract cyanotype prints; blue dissolves into water, crossing any clear delineation of line and boundary. I am reminded of Derek Jarman's suggestion, also writing from the Kent coast, that 'for Blue there are no boundaries or solutions' (1994, 115). Blue troubles clear spatial delineations and moves across the plane of fabric or paper. Considering the etymological roots of 'trans' as 'across', this could be considered a trans materiality.

Through a walking-scenographic process, relating these abstract images to my walk along the Thames Estuary, they become maps, or blueprints, charting both the indeterminate and edgeland spaces I walked through and a sense of fluid embodiment and motion. The relationship between walking and mapping is of course well-documented (O'Rourke 2016), as are the varied and multiple forms that 'maps', as records of walks, can take. An expanded view of mapping might go beyond the traditional 'birds-eye view constructed from the vantage point of an ideal observer' (O'Rourke 2016: xvi) towards a suggestion that a wide variety of practices that are used 'as a way to locate ourselves in the world' (ibid. xvii). Through reading my cyanotype prints as maps, abstraction becomes a tactic to bring together the multiple disorientations of coastal landscapes and trans embodiments.

Walking-scenographic practices have offered me a way to explore aesthetics of transness underscored by process and unknowability, moving away from cisnormative expectations of legibility and representation. The gestural quality of these cyanotype images offers a spatial and temporal trace of the coastline, rejecting an understanding of this landscape as clearly-delineated. Applying this scenographic thinking to transness suggests a similar mode of exceeding frames of representation and legibility: transness, like the meeting of materialities in ecotone spaces, offers a shifting and transformative ground that is not easily categorised or bounded. An alternative understanding of trans is suggested, echoing cardenás' intertextual model of body-as-ecology (2022) and perhaps speaking to Gordon's call for new aesthetic modes counter to cisnormativity. Taking up this ecological framework offers an alternative to cisnormative framings of gender that seek to draw borders, categorise, and impose a sense of stasis. If, in this way, cisnormativity can be conceptualised as a kind of stasis, then I question whether walking-scenographic practices can provide modes of resisting these politics, recognising the in-process nature of bodies, landscapes, and materialities and questioning the terms by which trans individuals or communities are rendered legible, which often centre or weaponise ideas of visibility.

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