

Walking inCommon

A Model for Mobile, Situated Knowledge

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Biography

Naiza Khan is an art educator, researcher and visual artist. Through a range of media, including drawing, archival material and video, she brings together ideas of embodiment and ecology. Khan represented Pakistan at the inaugural pavilion of Pakistan, *58th Venice Biennale*, (2019), and received the Prince Claus Award (2013) for her work in the field of art and culture. Khan works between London and Karachi.

Abstract

This commentary is a transcription of Episode 1 from the podcast series: *Walking inCommon*. The project conceived by visual artist Naiza Khan, offers a critical examination of alternative modes of practice-based visual research and learning. It opens a portal to explore how ideas of a performative, embodied mapping can trigger multiple ways of sensing the land and the body.

Keywords

Situated knowledge, environmental justice, counter-mapping, transnational, transdisciplinary, Global South

Introduction

Walking inCommon is a series of podcasts that I developed during the pandemic, as a form of remote research from the field. It is a chain of creative collaborations with different practitioners: visual artist, investigative journalist, scholar, and architect. The project evolved as part of my post-graduate research conducted at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths College, London, (2020).

In developing this concept, I use the situated and pedagogic learning of Perween Rahman, Director of the OPP-RTI (Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute), urban scholar and activist shot in Karachi in 2013. Through the participatory model of the ‘walking-map’, the community developed a form of counter-mapping that led to environmental literacy, political agency and urban resilience within the settlements of the Orangi Pilot Project and beyond.

Using a set of Guidelines for Collaboration, I attempt to create a methodological framework for each participant to reimagine their own practice in relation to the idea of walking and transversing space.

A way to draw lines from a field site and situate the collaborator and the work of Rahman within the intersection of postcolonial feminist and environmental justice struggles.

These guidelines are a provocation for the collaborator to locate themselves in a specific site or geography; in the sensory experience of that location; in relation to a text or memory; and consider the impact of the pandemic on their life and work.

Episode I: Walking across Disciplines

Sound: recordings from Wimbledon Common, London.

Freesound: Tired Ghosts Piano, Tyballer92

I am looking at the tracks that have opened up between the trees in Wimbledon Common to give more access to this sprawling woodland area for people searching for open space during this lockdown.

Over 1000 acres of countryside amidst the urban surroundings of South London.

I have been trying to find new paths through the trees, some can be seen easily, and others are just a trace. I've noticed these large tree trunks – that have fallen they lie between the standing trees and thickness of dense foliage.

Observing autumn, as it turns to winter.

In his essay - Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing Tim Ingold says, knowledge is grown along the myriad paths we take as we make our ways through the world in the course of everyday activities, rather than assembled from information obtained from numerous fixed locations.

As I walk, I'm also listening to the last presentation by Perween Rahman at the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, which she gave in Bangkok, on 24 Feb 2013 just weeks before she was shot in Karachi. So for us a map is like an X-Ray it tells us what the problem is so we can resolve it this speech has its own operative structure. It instantly creates an image for us, as we imagine an x-ray revealing stripping down to the core - what is essential - what is in distress a connection of mapping - to the body itself Rahman and others with her, have to walk the lanes to understand, she is drawing as she goes along, she is first involved in a process of embodied mapping herself, not easily translatable to actually locate herself in the settlement

the idea of the X-Ray inside the body is like an inversion of the map, transcribed onto the

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body – as opposed to imaging technologies from above.

The State not mapping is a clear political decision; a passive form of violence involved in withholding infrastructure. The X-ray becomes the tool that reveals the gaps as well as the true state of the settlement — the body of land. The purpose of their surgery is not to cure, and so Rahman uses this analogy to redress and resist the lack of political will.

I am thinking here of the intuitive force of Audre Lorde’s declaration, the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

So, the map becomes a tool, a bottom-up form of mapping — for the community that is developing maps in Orangi. It becomes a form of counter-mapping to dismantle the structures of power a resistance to the forms of production of a nothing space, terra nullis.

In March 2013: Perween Rahman a social activist, architect, urban planner and director of OPP-RTI was shot by four gunmen near her office. At the heart of this killing is the question of land security dispossession, and belonging. It is also a mobilization of the poor against structures of power and the slow violence of the corrupt establishment apparatus, which continues to disenfranchise communities.

The mapping process that began in 1980 with the OPP, through the work and vision of Akhtar Hameed Khan, then Arif Hasan, continued through the work done by Perween Rahman as Director of the OPPRTI.

The population of Orangi according to the 2017 census is 2.5 million.

One of the main initiatives of the OPP-RTI was to teach young people from within the community to develop maps of their villages and settlements.

To create a strong relationship between community-based mapping and environmental literacy.

As part of my project at the Centre for Research Architecture: I have reports, archival material and readings — conducted a series of interviews with urban scholars and academics

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that offer insights to Rahman, her practice and the work at OPP.

I realized the OPP and Rahman's work had more often been presented as a development project and was not well known beyond the settlements and urban arenas.

The spatial dimension of this project, is in part created from within the language and work of Rahman and OPP, and for this reason, I am using terms that were mobilised by her in different locations and scales — In this way her archive becomes a living and operative tool.

Transnational links — counter-mapping And as I move forward to write my research paper, there are a number of points to consider. I realize the OPP falls at the intersection of multiple forces And so, it is important to place it in conversation with other moments and movements of environmental justice. It is situated within global — de-colonial politics And of tactical counter mapping and cartography.

In her paper — 'The Impulse is Cartographic', Lisa Tilly writes: In the face of this capitalist expansion, the burden remains largely on frontline communities to defend their ecologies using the tools available to them. Across Indonesia's resource frontiers, the "cartographic impulse" Edward Said once named to describe anticolonial struggles is apparent in the form of counter-mapping.

I also see OPP within a conversation of transnational Environmental Defense and connected to social movements in South America and South East Asia.

But what does it mean to think of Environmental Defense in the context of this project, where most counter mapping efforts have been within indigenous communities and forest defense?

And how can we apply this notion to the spatial politics of a sprawling urban settlement?

OPP offers a spatial imaginary with several layers: a settlement formed with migrants, climate refugees, and movements of people between the dense urban and rural areas.

the research produced by the OPP-RTI helps us to mobilize some of these connections as

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well as the complex and particular history of Agrarian laws imposed by the British.

How can the process of counter mapping become a way to redress the inequality and exclusionary policies of a colonial present? In her book, ‘The Extractive Zone’ — Macarena Barris Gomez looks for submerged perspectives such as on the ground — de-colonial walking.

I also think about walking in relation to Partition history, as an inherited, inscribed language.

Rahman’s own personal history of dispossession from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as she and her family fled as refugees during the 1971 war.

The concept of counter mapping emerges through the work of Nancy Peluso who pioneered research on political forests in Indonesia in the 1990s — and this created a strong interlink between research and activism. In her text, ‘Local Counter-mapping Initiatives and Territoriality’, Peluso says:

Maps can be used to pose alternatives to the languages and images of power and become a medium of empowerment or protest ”counter-maps” as I call them here, greatly increase the power of people living in a mapped area to control representations of themselves and their Counter-maps thus have the potential for challenging the omissions of human settlements from forest maps, for contesting the homogenization of space on political, zoning, or property maps, for altering the categories of land and forest management, and for expressing social relationships in space rather than depicting abstract space in itself.

In the last 2 decades, there has been a growing awareness of international environmental solidarity and indigenous counter mapping where human rights lawsuits have been woven together with participatory politics - In each of these cases, map-making was intricately linked to the formulation of legal claims for land rights.

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Finally, in his book ‘Slow Violence’, Rob Nixon suggests a broad umbrella to the term Environmental Defense — it is an entanglement of food security, forest, rights of the dead, land rights, opponents of mining, mega-dams — and how all these struggles bleed into each other — the question of environmental justice is a movement that needs to be interrogated as an intersectional space — of class, mobility, gender and transnational solidarity. The re-forming or reconstruction of the commons becomes a larger question together with how and where modes of agency emerge within the uneven geography of the Global South.

ReflectivePRACTICE — Afterlife — Walking inCommon Podcasts format- interview- thematic — story — telling.

During the lockdown, I began to think about ways to extend my research through some form of remote — practice that could be a set of instructions perhaps.

So I began to storyboard a chain of virtual encounters, And invited a group of collaborators to follow a loose set of guidelines, which are formed through the understanding of the – walking-map or the map as an x-ray for the body.

I began to think how each collaborator could move the frame of this storyboard. Situate a moment in time — that reveals a testimony about a place or a witnessing. But coming out of the specificity of their location and a way to reimagine their own work in relation to these guidelines.

Over the last few weeks, I have received recorded sound moments from the Botanic Gardens in Port of Spain, situated recounts and poetic spatialisations of the city, sounds from Lawrence Gardens in Lahore.

as I edited the podcasts, I realized the many complexities that are part of a chain of creative collaborations and production. The uneven recordings and the ambient sounds gave me a sense of the uneven geographies we live in.

I realized there were points of intersection in here ideas that transmit from one author to

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another. Discussions that are transdisciplinary a new, imagined network of conversations. Perhaps, a multi-sensory map, to situate each participant in their geography.

So, walking inCommon — is a method of research for me, an investigative tool to think about how I can develop a language how do modes of moving through space, understanding difference through geography, become the grounds for producing an audio, visual lexicon.

I am thinking here of Abdul Malick Simone's notion of people as infrastructure: I want to translate and repurpose this phrase and think about the walking and the sharing of embodied knowledge and the passing of knowledge across generations as creating a very different kind of infrastructure — but one in which life would be more livable.

In the essay, 'Walking across disciplines: from ethnography to arts practice', the authors talk about how various existing examples that combine walking, ethnography and visual practice often form part of the complex of research practices and invites multiple perspectives.

As a visual artist I feel the goal of practice is to create transversal relationships.

These podcasts, are a set of punctuations a pilot that will grow in further episodes.

They are an attempt to bring into visible dialogue the 'voice' of Rahman with other voices.

And to understand the issue and urgency of the project. To offer a proposal on political action and resources.

It is also an attempt to make this work an act of active inheritance.

To think about the way in which this body of research can Find new access through a form of mobile situated knowledge and learning.

Walking inCommon. All the episode can be found in the Listening Room

Episode 2. Formal - Informal Interface and Public Space Making

Asiya Sadiq Pollock.

Architect Asiya Sadiq discuss ideas of public-space-making, through her current project in Place

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Liedts, Schaerbeek, Brussels; and the ways in which her training in Karachi and work with OPP-RTI has informed her ideas on recognition, recording and redistribution.

Sound: Freesound, Garuda 1982

Episode 3. Walking back over a Karachi line Sustainability, Karachi, and Other Irreconcilables

Mahim Maher.

Journalist Mahim Maher navigates the city of Karachi without a map. (Published in Urban Planet: Knowledge towards Sustainable Cities Cambridge University Press, 26 Apr 2018)

Sound: ambient sound of crows, Karachi

Episode 4. On the move; about walking in open/free space; between territories...is what I keep thinking but can't arrive at anything as yet...

Christopher Cozier.

Artist Christopher Cozier creates a speculative map of observations around language, autonomy and geography as he recalls his walk through Port of Spain. For Cozier, the Caribbean is a fluid space and an ongoing negotiation with shifting narratives and interpretations.

Sound: Area Code Riddim by Isaac Cozier.

Sounds from his garden and the Botanical Gardens, Port of Spain Trinidad and Tobago

Episode 5. Trees, Class, Cycling, and Lawrence Gardens in Lahore

Saba Khan.

Through a series of situated readings in Lawrence Gardens, Lahore, the artist Saba Khan traces the legacy of colonial, racialised segregation within public space and its legacy in every day lived experiences.

Sound: Lawrence Gardens / Bagh-e-Jinnah, Lahore

Episode 6. Navigations through Space and Time: the poems of Fehmida Riaz

A conversation with Amina Yaqin.

Professor Amina Yaqin- Reader in Urdu and Postcolonial Studies at SOAS, University of London. Professor Yaqin discusses the work of poet Fehmida Riaz through the lens of an ambulatory walking, sensing the city and the frictions across it.

Sound: Akbar Khamisu Khan, alghoza player

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