Our Own Pace: Stories of Black British women walking and talking in nature

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STORIES OF BLACK BRITISH WOMEN WALKING AND TALKING IN NATURE

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the countryside has been a phenomenon in the United Kingdom for many decades. In contemporary discourse, challenges to who frequents these landscapes have risen. Indeed, ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the UK outdoors communities. As stories of human's relation to nature are foremost told from Eurocentric, white, and male perspectives, this thesis centres Black women and women of colour who are members of the women's outdoors organisation Bristol Steppin Sistas (BSS). Operating as a safe space for black women and women of colour, the organisation organises multiple walks a month to get local women to explore rural landscapes in the UK's South West region. This ethnographic research comprises two complimentary elements: a 30 min.-long film, and an article, which examine the role walking and talking in nature plays in the daily lives of black British women. It uses data gathered from interlocutor observation of BSS members, semi-structured sit-down interviews, and un-structured walk-along interviews with three members of the group, during two months of fieldwork. This article has the dual purpose of making theoretical arguments and discussing methodological considerations in reference to the film. In doing so, three key themes emerge: (1) BSS challenges racial and gender stigmas around exploring British nature, (2) the group provides a safe space for its members to gain a sense of belonging, strengthening their individual identities, (3) Black British women living in urban areas need the outdoors to lessen anxieties and better physical health. By claiming space in the South West UK's countryside, BSS provides an indispensable community for black women and women of colour living in the hectic urban environment of Bristol.

Keywords: *outdoors, walking ethnography, community-building, diasporic Black women, belonging, spatial analysis*

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Going for a walk is a simple thing, many people would argue. So simple, in fact, that it has been suggested to me when I'm in a rut so many times, the phrase "Go for a walk, Tamar!" goes in one ear and comes out the other. But walking, I've learnt over the first months of 2023, can be a radical act too. It means so many things to so many different people, it brings them together, it allows them to be apart from others for a time. It can make you feel in control of life, when everything is whirling around you. The elemental character of walking in nature, particularly, can beautifully off-set the chaos around us. Growing up, the Scheveningen wind, the rustle of centuries-old trees and beachgrass, the smell a good rainstorm leaves behind, all have had a profound effect on me. Importantly, I often walk alone to seek out these sensations. So, what awaited me in Bristol in those winter months was certainly entirely unique.

The steep, rising and falling hills spread out across Bristol are in such stark contrast to the flat lands of the Netherlands. The nature surrounding the city, and contained in the city, is equally different. The people I spent time with—Bristol Steppin Sistas, and in particular Sophie, Diane, Sabrina—you cannot find back home. To them, I owe an immense debt of gratitude. Sophie, for her eternal kindness, frankness, enthusiasm, for giving me the opportunity to come to the UK in the first place, and for the constant laughter. Diane, for her wisdom, the pleasure to listen to her eloquence and stories, the warmness of both her character and of her lovely courgette soup after braving a two hour-long interview in the cold. Sabrina, for allowing me to be a part of her personal journey into doing new things, for the understanding and profoundness, and for the best lunches and dinners Bristol has to offer.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to those who walk in nature and to those who make it safe to do so.

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THE FIRST WALK

There is a lot to take in. It's warmer than I thought, in the UK, in *January*, so I take my rain coat off.

Sophie and her friend Mary[1] had picked me up from a café in the Bearpit. I just drank a tall black coffee, they enjoyed English toast (baked beans, sausages). On the chair to my right lay the goody-bag with merchandise Sophie gifted me: a logo-stamped neon green t-shirt, water bottle, and pen.

We wait at the side of the house where, across the old stone balustrade, a view of residential neighbourhoods and the harbour stretches into the water-lined horizon: the Bristol Channel. On these grounds sits Kings Weston House—an impressive manor just north-west of the city centre.

I'm not anxious, I'm excited. I don't know what to expect. The first walkers arrive. There are a lot of excited "Happy New Year"-ses, hugs, laughing, and "Nice to be out today"-ses. When more people arrive at the side of the house, Sophie introduces me as the student from the Netherlands who will be joining their group. Polite nods and hellos in my direction. There's a mother and her 27-year-old daughter, the latter Sophie proposed to me earlier as one of my main interlocutors. Once everyone is gathered, there are about 10 of us, our walk begins.

We stop on a path hedged in by trees. Some brief intermissions include hugging and attempts at climbing said trees, hanging on a swing over a puddle of mud, and basking in the chilly rays of the winter sun. During these moments I take some time to really observe the group and I really feel in my body why this group is important. A bunch of Black women and women of colour laughing their heads off trying to swing from a tree and the calming silences they share in between conversations during the walks, feels both jarring and absolutely right that they are here, in nature, walking.

Also, the fact that it is a *group* doing this, exploring local nature, feels important. Because, and this realisation makes me reflect on my own prejudices about and experience as a woman of colour, how often do you see a group of mostly Black women with hiking gear walking in your local park, forest, or nature reserve? Before coming here, I never had.

A group member takes to an ancient stone pedestal-looking table and jokingly monologues "Thank you God for bringing Tamar to this group and bless her so that her research goes well. We are very happy to have you…"

A few yards further down the walking path, there is 'The Echo': a high-walled, pillared stone building, the ruins of an outhouse. Here, according to Fleur, an actress by occupation—but also, it seems, somehow always in character—women used to be courted by men in secret. She follows this fact by quoting Shakespeare and miming to the group how women in the Victorian age would hike up their many skirts to "get it on" with these suitors.

Moments later, as we walk down the path side-by-side, she gets serious as well, telling me: "Walking as Black women in rural areas is not necessarily about making a statement, it doesn't have to be political, we

[1] Excluding the names of the three main interlocutors, Sophie, Diane, and Sabrina, this thesis anonymises any other interlocutor mentioned by name.

just have to… do it. It's important to just go out there and explore because we are as much entitled to this land as anyone else." Sabrina, the 27-year-old interlocutor echoes her, gradually opening up to me on this brief walk. For her, "[The walking] is not even about health or training, it's about just being in nature. I felt uncomfortable going out to walk because there was no one who looked like me. But now, with the group, I feel like I can go out. It's about the community and conversations. And have you heard of code-switching? Yeah? Well, we don't have to do that in this group."

The group's boisterous character is a breath of fresh air. And in the fresh, unseasonably warm air of the Kings Weston grounds, I realise the coming two months are going to be unlike anything I have experienced before.

INTRODUCTION

And I was right. Bristol Steppin Sistas (BSS), the walking group in question, is a true Bristol staple for many Bristolians. I had not anticipated the group's local, and national, notoriety. This does, however, not make the group intimidating one bit. Far from it: they welcome me with open arms. Stories and conversations flow with ease about family, work, nature, and their experiences being a walking group for Black women and women of colour in the UK. Based on these conversations, my personal observations, and research on diversity in the UK outdoors, I argue that the walking and talking activities organised by the Bristol Steppin Sistas enable indispensable forms of community-building, identity formation, and personal and collective healing for Black British women.

This argument is substantiated by a thesis film and this article. These components work in harmony to synthesise the visual anthropologic and the theoretical textual ethnographic into one multimodal project. The thesis film *Our Own Pace* presents a dispatch from Bristol and its surrounding nature. Together with BSS, the audience explores the British countryside and is invited to hear the life stories of the group's founder, Sophie, and two of its members, Sabrina and Diane. They guide us through Bristol's nature spaces—Dundry Hill, Clifton Downs, and Conham River Park—and tell their personal stories, hopes, and experiences with reclaiming the British countryside.[2]

In this article, I first discuss the historical, temporal, and local context of exploring nature in the UK, after which I introduce the challenges and endeavours to making the outdoors more inclusive and Bristol Steppin Sistas as an important actor in this quest. From there, we delve deeper into the safe space BSS provides for its members, focussing on diasporic identities, gender and age, and shared histories. Importantly, I analyse this story using an assemblage of concepts. The main concepts discussed in this thesis are walking and talking, sense of belonging, community (building), diasporic identities, and space. Taken together, these concepts lead the narrative of the article and allow for the text to both complement the film

[2] The intended audience for this film is informed by the practice of public anthropology (Fassin 2013:625). As a researcher I continuously consider what 'public' means in my research (dissemination) and "owe in priority those with whom [I] worked and those primarily concerned by the issues on which [I] conduct [my] work…" (Fassin 2013:640).

and answer to its open-endedness. Contextualising this story arc necessitates an illustration of the UK and its walking culture.

The outdoors is a big deal in the United Kingdom. The island has an abundance of nature spaces, from the Scottish Highlands to the long coastal paths in Cornwall and Devon, to Wales' tropical-looking seaside, to the 1000s of square miles of moors. And then there's the inner-city parks, grounds, and typical picturesque countryside. The weather, known for its abundance in rain, gives these places their unique elemental personality. It is therefore no coincidence that there exists a rich body of work on the UK's outdoors. Writings from the early walkers, who were often aristocrats, to the modern hikers focussing on themes like appreciating nature, pacing your life, escaping urban areas, and feelings of peace and freedom always come up have been dominated by Western, white, male voices (Aylward & Mitten 2022:2). In practice, it should come as no surprise that the biggest and oldest outdoor groups in the UK also have a membership consisting mostly of white, middle-aged, and often middle-class, people.

In response to this, the variety of groups catering to those who have felt unwelcomed and uncomfortable in the UK's countryside is ever-growing (All The Elements 2022). When I Google 'walking groups for women of colour', 'walking groups for Muslim people,' 'walking groups for queer people' an extensive list of websites, social media pages, and online articles pop up—notably, I find very few links to academic sources. These findings beg various questions. Who currently walks the British countryside? Who still feels uncomfortable to do so? Who are the people or groups that catalyse this growth in diversity in the outdoors? What is the importance of *group* walking? And what does re-claiming historically white spaces take and what are its effects?

Naturally, conversations about British nature space are far more nuanced than pigeonholing the growing diversity as a 'movement', as is often done when groups of people of colour become more visible in both online and physical spaces. While I had difficulty substantiating my own theorisations and thoughts, I sought a group of walkers who could tell me their story and bring my ruminations to life. Western academic research on group walking in nature tends to focus on physical well-being and if it is about mental well-being or community creation, Black women or women of colour are rarely, if ever, centred as subjects or interlocutors (Halfacree in Mischi 2009:5).

The group of interlocutors bringing all these factors in alignment I found in November 2022. "We are a walking group established in Bristol in 2021 to enable us to reach out to local black women & women of colour to encourage an interest in walking and thriving in open and rural spaces," reads Bristol Steppin Sistas home page (Bristol Steppin Sistas 2022). I stumbled upon it when, in a minor panic, a Scottish walking group I hoped to do this thesis with fell through. On our first call, Sophie was enthusiastic, genuine, and kind. By the end of November, the two of us had a plan ready for this thesis project to begin.

The Steppin Sistas are one of the walking groups in the UK that cater specifically to Black women and women of colour—a safe space to walk-and-talk on twice-monthly walks. Based in Bristol, the options of available open rural spaces are endless: Wales is just north across the Bristol Channel, Somerset and the

West Country to the south and east, and coastal paths to the west. Bristol is a hectic and eclectic city, steeped in history, and home to many generations of Caribbean, continental African, Asian, and Middle Eastern diasporic communities. Its neighbourhoods are sometimes in stark contrast: people tell me the neighbourhoods of St Pauls and Easton are known for their intergenerational migrant demography, whereas neighbourhoods such as Hartcliffe and Knowle West are insular, white, and racist.

From January 5th until March 5th, 2023, I did fieldwork with the Steppin Sistas in Bristol and its surroundings. Next to the Sistas as a group, my main interlocutors were Diane and Sabrina, both members, and Sophie, the groups' walk leader and founder. I joined them on six walks, with the group's size varying from 3 to 36 members, during which I observed their interactions with each other, with the nature surrounding them, and with other walkers. With Sophie, Diane, and Sabrina I conducted at-home sit-down interviews and walk-along interviews in Bristol's various nature spaces.[3]

Throughout this experience, I employed various ethnographic methods that comprise a combination of embodied and reflexive knowledge. Inspired by Ingold and Lee Vergunst's (2008:2) meditations on walking in ethnographic research, this thesis centres walking ethnography as both an analytical tool and a method. Moreover, the thesis film utilises the tension that arises when an observational cinematic approach and interviewing methods are combined. Where the former allows for freedom of discovery for both the interlocutors and the researcher, the latter necessitates some form of script or directory preparation by the researcher (Postma 2021:120; Lawrence 2020:88). This interplay reflexive knowledge, where the interlocutors speak directly to the viewer, and embodied knowledge, where the viewer is only allowed to observe the interlocutors, helps to demystify 'the invisible' observational cinema explores—'the invisible' being "that which is seen but not usually noticed" (Willerslev & Suhr 2012:284).

I came to this thesis' subject in a roundabout way through three main factors. As an Indo-Dutch woman, some of my closest relationships are those with women of colour. They formed my identity in many ways—and still do. As such, I feel very comfortable with and inspired by women of colour. Consequently, my research focuses tend to gravitate toward women of colour and Black women since there is a definitive lack of genuine media and academic representation of this group. I was also raised, at times reluctantly, as a walker. Now I am 22 and see access to walkable nature as a profound privilege. Moreover, having been raised with an abundance of British media and literature and a self-found fondness for its landscapes, I knew the visuals the island had to offer. I thought these vast and brutalist landscapes would contrast nicely with intimate conversations between Black women and women of colour. This combination led me to contact walking groups in the UK for women of colour and, finally, to a positive reply from Sophie.

This thesis' main findings are threefold. First, there is a racial and gender stigma around walkers in British nature. Although BSS was not founded to challenge this stigma per se, in the group's own self-defined way

[3] This methods were used in adherence to the American Anthropological Association's code of ethics and the principle of 'informed consent' (AAA 2012; Marion & Crowder 2013:6).

it does: it stimulates Black women and women of colour to reclaim the British countryside—a challenge to the status quo in doing, rather than telling. Second, members enjoy the group because it gives them a sense of belonging that cannot be found in other social groups. And, importantly, this social cohesion helps some members to strengthen their individual identity. Third, BSS members feel that both their physical and mental well-being has been strengthened by walking and talking in nature with the group. Leaving the stresses of their lives behind, open spaces offer the members a temporary, and sometimes long-lasting, regeneration or realignment of sorts.

BRISTOL AS A PERSONA

This city is alive. It's alive and it espouses a deep need to explore in me. I feel immediately at home and I cannot put my finger on why. Talking on the phone to people back home I find myself repeating constantly "This city reminds me of a mixture between The Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht." Actually—geographically speaking—this city *is* remarkably similar to The Hague. It is located in the south-west of the UK right next to the sea, it is surrounded by vast green nature spaces, the city itself stretches out wide. A significant difference, though, is the river Avon around which Bristol first arose as a settlement. And Bristol, like The Hague, has a unique and compelling character, or persona.

Steeped in history, this city has known many eras, and many character changes—both admirable and sinister. Bristol's famous port was, for instance, heavily involved in the trade of enslaved people for centuries and is currently invested in, like many major Western cities are, acknowledging but also reckoning with this history (Tailor 2021). Most recently, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, on June 7 2020 the statue of Edward Colston, a man whose company made fortunes from the enslaved people trade, was toppled. The mass of protestors then rolled the statue to the foot of the Pero bridge—named after an enslaved African boy—and dunked it into the waters of the Bristol Harbourside (Siddique & Skopeliti 2022). When I joined a city walk tour a month-and-a-half into my fieldwork, the tour guide described Colston as a philanthropist who invested much in social welfare, specifically for impoverished people. I managed to suppress a scoff. Two weeks prior, during our walk-along interview, Diane had pulled back the façade of 'Colston the philanthropist' and told me, in detail, the extent to which he and his guarantors exacerbated slavery in Bristol. After the toppling, traces of Colston disappeared from the city in quick succession; for instance, by changing the name of a Bristol University building.

This did not happen without major protestations from people who attributed these actions to the radical anti-racist left-wing. In *Tales From Two Cities*, Dervla Murphy (1989:87) homes in on Britain's storied history with racism and anti-racism. Her account of South Asian diasporic communities in Bradford is nearly 40 years old but seemingly timeless. About the encouragement of white supremacy by the National Front in the 60s and 70s, Murphy (1989:87) writes "Before [moving to] inner-city Britain, I had not fully appreciated the importance—and *durability*—of these influences."

I bring up her specific account of racial history in the UK because it bears an uncanny similarity to my interlocutors' personal experiences of Bristol. The durability of race hate flows as an undercurrent

through almost all my interactions with the Sistas, with Bristol. When I ask Diane if the government has done enough to mitigate racial tensions—or bluntly put, racism—she says "No, the current government have created this climate wherein it's okay to be as racist as you like, to be transphobic, to be… hate-filled." She trails off slightly "... cos even in the 70s with the National Front… it feels more acceptable to be hate-filled [now]."

These accounts continuously challenge my fondness for the UK. Love and hate can exist at the same time—some even argue they must—but reading and hearing about the shambolic state the UK currently lives in put a real strain on my love for the place. The cost of living crisis, a multi-million pound Coronation whilst citizens cannot afford their gas bills or food, an almost openly right-wing government all amount to a deep need for escapism. And, thankfully, the island is home to plenty of places to escape to. Some of the most stunning nature I have ever seen is in these places. Walkable nature and the South West region go hand-in-hand. For some it takes an extra push, a safe space, to realise that these open spaces are on their doorstep, but it is a whole other thing to actually walk in them.

WALKING IN THE UK: A BRIEF HISTORY

Walking in British nature has its own character. It is one of solitude, ruminating in quiet thought on a lonely walk through endless fields, overcoming a personal hardship whilst climbing a hill, feeling at home in rural pubs. Being with the Sistas, however, made me question these sensibilities around walking. Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust* (2002) detangles the genealogy of walking in UK nature, by discussing walking and thinking, walking and talking, and walking as a political act.

The 'aesthetic of walking' is an appropriate way to refer to the early ideas around walking in the UK. Walking as a past-time activity was popularised in the 17th century in the UK, primarily between the walls of mansion gardens. The aristocratic ideal of wandering through these gardens, manured for the spectators' consumption, aligned with the notion that there is "an order in nature and that it is in harmony with the "natural" society enjoying such gardens" (Solnit 2002:90). Accessibility to nature hinging on how society itself was spatially and socially ordered—the upper class and their gardens—had lasting implications. Even after people started to venture out into nature beyond their private gardens, the socialised harmony between the privileged and nature stretched throughout the coming centuries (Solnit 2002:90).

It also created the image of what a walker should be. The 'perfect image' of solo-walking through desolate fields and dense woods is often referred to as 'rambling.' But, importantly, this idea of rambling as a movement, a dynamic, physical concept carries gendered and racialised connotations. During the ascendence of rambling as an outdoor activity, the link between the 'wild' outdoors and the masculine world was "gendered as an object of the male gaze" (Tebbutt 2006:1150-1151). Men sought reprieve from their domestic environments and found it in the open space of nature, bringing them a sense of comfort, familiarity, and belonging previously experienced in the home. Walking was moreover seen as an act of masculine power.

In the early 20th century, the image of the 'complete rambler' had been established as the 'right' person to engage with the UK outdoors. They—or I might as well say 'he' (or 'she' if 'she' was middle to upper class and white)—must approach nature in a rational and orderly manner. A complete rambler would take time to observe nature and engage in rational discussion, backed by natural sciences, in peace. It follows that this lens through which to observe nature, and who was allowed to observe nature in the first place, was created for and by white men (Anderson 2011:86-93).

At the same time, I acknowledge the complexities within this history of walking. Firstly, within the white, male lens on nature, there existed marked difference about the philosophy of walking. For instance, for the poet-writer and influential walker Wodsworth, walking was "a mode not of travelling, but of *being*" —a metaphysical experience for anyone to enjoy (Solnit 2002:102). This reminds me of the beginning of the second chapter in the thesis film *Our Own Pace*. As an introduction to a peaceful sequence in the film where I let the three main protagonists explain how the walking group helps them reckon with their own identities and their presence in nature, Sophie says "We need to be able to feel that nature is not just a place to visit. It's home [...] So, when we're walking into nature [...] [i]t's just so important for the mind." Being able to feel that nature is home, a place of feeling yourself, of literal 'being,' goes far beyond the idea of walking as an aesthetic, or walking as a sophisticated and rational manner to engage with nature. It speaks to the idea that walking can shape one's identity.

Secondly, ramblers from Manchester helped normalise walking for the working class by advocating for the right to roam rural privatised lands to escape from the polluted inner cities of the 1930s. They were, whilst using the 'complete rambler' ideology, instrumental in democratising the UK's countryside (Ramblers 2020; Mingle 2018; Solnit 2002:151). This is something they have in common with BSS, who, in its own way, bridges class divides for its members. The group uses a donation-based scheme for members to give one or two pounds, it is sponsored by various organisations, from local outdoors stores to The North Face, it receives free hiking kits for less well-equipped members, and it sells merchandise. As Sabrina tells me, "There is no special membership, there's no pre-conditions. As long as you're comfortable walking with the group, that's all there is to it [...] It's meant for everybody."

WALKING AND TALKING

Film still [14:37] Two Steppin Sistas wave at the observing camera, others walk in silent thought or are in deep conversation—walking and talking in action.

Bristol Steppin Sistas makes walking more than walking. Moving their bodies and engaging with nature aside, the Sistas talk. A lot. I therefore offer the concept of 'walking and talking' as the pathos of the group, where interpersonal connection through community and connecting with nature through that community is central—a direct challenge to the idea of a complete rambler. 'Walking and talking' can encompass many things. As Doughty (2013:144) argues, walkers in groups have the dual experience of affection towards the landscape and of affection towards their fellow walkers. Especially when these companions view the purpose of walking – and the importance of a connection to nature – in a similar light. The so-called 'social imaginaries' that are created through the embodied practice of, in this specific context, rambling in nature, reveal the shared understandings of one's position in the world (Dawney 2011:542).

Both methodologically and conceptually, walking and talking, in the form of 'walking ethnography', takes centre stage in this thesis. In the simplest terms 'walking ethnography' is ethnography that reflects on walking itself (Ingold & Lee Vergunst 2008:3). Since ethnographic practices are often focussed on walking with people, reflecting on the position of the ethnographer in this process of walking is required. Importantly, as this research takes place on a dynamic site that centres walking in nature there is merit in foregrounding 'walking' as both a conceptual notion *and* a methodological concept. Walking, as Ingold (2010:5135) argues, espouses thinking and knowing: the movement of bodies is intertwined with one's mental process during such movement.

Moreover, Ingold and Lee Vergunst (2008:2), highlight two important features of walking that incidentally are at the core of this story: walking as social and walking as a reflection of cultural or societal forms. Firstly, "ethnographic analysis of walking […] can help us rethink what being social actually means," write Ingold and Lee Vergunst (2008:2). Foregrounding the social allows for a discussion of Bristol Steppin Sistas as a walking community. Secondly, taking Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which is placed in the

relationship between the body and its "active engagement in its surroundings," walking has the ability not only to engender knowledge, but also to reflect our ways of social life; from cultural norms and forms to social hierarchies (Ingold & Lee Vergunst 2008:2). Thus, walking ethnography has value on at least two counts: it helps me, an ethnographer, to reflect on my positionality in the field where my physical positions are dynamic and transitory, and it facilitates engagement with the Sistas. Interestingly, the reflective inward-looking character of walking ethnography echoes the very status quo of rambling-walking that BSS challenges. However, I argue that, in the case of this field research, walking as a reflective tool is inherently tied to the Sistas and their pathos as a group—most of my ethnographic reflections on the group happened when I was in their presence.

As a final analytical tool to grapple with the complexities of walking in nature with a group I propose spatial analyses. Setha Low (2011:403) argues that "... when spatial analyses are employed, they offer the engaged anthropologist a powerful tool for uncovering social injustice." She sees the potential of spatial analysis to demystify the relationship between social inequalities and spatial control of the environment. The social construction of space is defined by power relations—race, class, gender—that are often assumed to be transparent but actually rarely are transparent. A critical examination of space can yield an understanding about spatial and social bias, prejudice, and inequalities (Low 2016:69).

WE'RE JUST A WALKING GROUP

> When I first moved to Bristol, when I was walking I did reckon, I thought to myself– It is the one question I ask myself is, 'I can't see no people of colour out,' you know. This is before the lockdown. 'Where's the people of colour, do they not come out to these places?" So, I just did a bit of research and I asked a couple of women of colour and it was like… They don't walk, they usually drive. It's a city and they find themselves contained in the city. And also it's the fear of going out to unknown places. You know? How they would be treated or would people accept them, would they feel intimidated? And also they didn't realise we had so much beautiful countryside just outside of Bristol, as well.

The thesis film, *Our Own Pace,* uses this brief monologue by Sophie to contextualise the creation of Bristol Steppin Sistas. The group's website clarifies further, "Bristol Steppin Sistas was established in Bristol in April 2021 to enable us to reach out to local women in the Bristol area to encourage an interest in walking and thriving in open spaces. We are a grassroots group of black women and women of colour who are passionate about walking and enthusing who identify with our lived experience to do so" (Bristol Steppin Sistas 2022). This brief yet evocative description captures the group's ideology well.

But there is more and I notice I struggle trying to introduce the Sistas in my own words. Simply put, they are a group of Black women and women of colour that, twice a month, walk and talk in the rural and seaside areas of the UK's Southwest region. (Occasionally, they go beyond the Southwest on organised coach trips.) There is a loose admission process, not monetarily, but based on identity.

When I apply to be a member of the BSS Facebook group during my first week of field work I am met with two prompts: 1) Are you a Black woman or a woman of colour? and 2) Do you live in Bristol or its surrounding areas? Simple and effective. Yet, these questions allude to two fundamentals of community-building. Firstly, keeping the group 'by and for Black women and women of colour.' Secondly, the importance of geographical proximity to one another and to one's local environment.

MORE THAN JUST A WALKING GROUP

A sense of belonging for the Steppin Sistas is, I argue, chiefly fostered by three key elements: the similar diasporic identities represented in the group, the safe space-character of the group, and the relatability to one another the group safeguards—a shared understanding. Notably, these elements are all deeply intertwined and, together, stimulate the creation of knowledge through walking together (Ingold & Lee Vergunst 2008:2).

OUR CULTURES

Dervla Murphy's (1989:10) experience of diasporic communities in Bradford being selective in their living areas thereby creating close-knit, small-scale, almost insular communities, is quite similar to my own experience of Bristol. Every now and then, I get to know more about the clustering of Bristolian diasporic communities. During her sit-down interview Sophie tells me with a knotted brow, "... in every city in the UK, there's a ghetto. Black people were put in one place in the ghetto. […] And that's why you've got St Pauls, you've got Easton. It wasn't multicultural back in the day, it was just black and white."

I visited Easton with her weeks before. The neighbourhood borders Eastville Park. A beautiful and big park, where I came with the walking group, with Sophie and her friends, and, multiple times, alone to location-scout or record ambient environmental sounds. Easton itself has a community centre building, where Sophie and I went three times for her monthly appearance on Bristol's popular BCfm radio station.

Jotham, a friend of Sophie's whom I met early January, told me about the demographic history of Easton, and St Pauls. Two neighbourhoods he saw as one ("They spill across the motor way into each other.") First came the Italian and Irish immigrants who then took in Jamaican immigrants. And whilst these neighbourhoods are often described as Black neighbourhoods, they are far more ethnically diverse than that. Now there's many different ethnicities represented—from Jamaican to Bangladeshi. And at the centre of Bristol's a rich diasporic history are the diasporic Caribbean women making up the majority of BSS.

Black British female diasporic identities are complex. Their lived experiences unique to them, as is their positionality in British society. Double marginalisation—that based on gender and race—is a reality. And, importantly, Black Britishness is intertwined with Caribbean culture after the post WWII-immigration flow in the 50s and 60s of Caribbean people (John 2019:89-90). I emphasise Caribbean culture here, because, even though BSS is a group for Black women and women of colour, those members I co-created this research with are predominantly of Afro-Caribbean descent.

Constructing a Black British female identity is perhaps a matter of "becoming rather than being" in that the process of finding an identification with oneself and with one's locality is continuous, dynamic, and hinges on carving out spaces where one can 'be' a Black British woman (John 2019:75). I adopt John's (2019:163) argument that diasporic women—subjected to both race and gender marginalisation—should be considered "as a growing collective community that occupies a permanent position in British society," in order to take steps to redress the injustices unique to their positionality. These injustices are often deemed as not 'authentically British' and therefore not awarded the same gravity other issues might be. And, I argue, the idea of an 'authentic British identity' still rests on this historical definition of a British person: quiet, polite, and white—especially in quiet, rural, and white Britain.

Having not grown up with any Caribbean women in my near vicinity, nor any trace of Caribbean culture in general, being immersed in it for two months was both illuminating and exciting. Precisely because the essence of this culture, from my outsider perspective, seems to challenge the 'authentic British identity'. The first ever fieldnote I wrote for this thesis reads "There was a lot of laughter." It was on the first walk, Kings Weston House, my second day in Bristol—the Sistas were, in Diane's words "hooting." And 'culture' is indeed a key factor here. On every walk I went I overheard conversations about family recipes, trips to the Caribbean, some Patois. It all felt very familial.

On several walks Sophie's JBL music speaker would appear out of thin air to blast anything from soul to funk to reggae—*From A Cottage In Negril* keeps getting stuck in my head during the film editing process. There were fully choreographed dances during walking breaks; or just some bopping along with a stunning view of the Bristol Channel. Diane calls it "unfettered joy" that is "very much like [Black women and women of colour's] cultures." Sophie describes the talking next to the walking as "little happiness going out, serotonin levels going up, dopamine and all that." Sabrina calls it the "positive aura of the group" and substantiates this with the Pensford Pig anecdote—that I was, thankfully, present to have witnessed in real time.

Film still [20:05] The Sistas hysterically laugh at one Sista's suggestion that they should turn the pigs behind the hedge into bacon. Sabrina attributes this to the dark sense of humour in the group, "something you [don't] come across all the time."

BSS's uniqueness in character—that is in part certainly determined by these strong diasporic influences—is equally fostered by the group's inherent safe space-spirit. This term is unmissable in most contemporary discussions, academic or not, about community-creation for minoritised people. In my conversations with the Sistas, it varies whether I use 'safe space' in a question or they bring it up themselves. For instance, Sabrina tells me during her sit-down interview that "[BSS] is a very open group in that we all have a shared understanding of each other and we could talk freely about what was affecting us either as a woman or an ethnic minority in one safe space, rather than having to go to diff spaces to talk about whatever we wanted to." I then ask her if she would define BSS safe space. "Most definitely," she responds resolutely.

The Roestone Collective (2014:1355) defines a safe space as a "paradoxical space": to create a space that is safe for certain people, others must be excluded. Inclusion therefore necessitates some form of exclusion based on the very binaries or (stereotypical) assumptions about societal groups that safe spaces aim to sensitively negotiate, a paradox.

This inclusion/exclusion paradox is a reality for the Steppin Sistas too and is most acutely presented to me right before Sophie's walk-along interview. In her small and cosy living room I eat my sandwich to fuel myself for the upcoming uphill walk on Dundry Hill. On the opposite couch Sophie is busy on her phone. She sighs. "Ugh, Tam, there are so many white women trying to get in."

"Pardon?" I ask, struggling to swallow my last bite.

"Like on Facebook. I just had a woman who wanted to join the Sistas and her profile photo— Like she's white." She laughs her very recognisable laugh and tuts at her phone.

"But how do you know someone's actually white?" I ask carefully, trying not to sound accusatory.

"Yeah, okay. I don't know… really. But often you can just tell right? Names and stuff. And then sometimes– Like, you know the questions we ask on Facebook to become a member?"

"'Are you a Black woman or a woman of colour?' That one?" I offer.

"Exactly. Well, sometimes I get these answers from white women who say 'No, but my partner is Black.' Or 'No. but I grew up in a Black neighbourhood.' And I'm like!" Sophie scoff-laughs and gestures comically, arms outstretched, in 'what the hell?'-fashion. I stifle a laugh.

Evidently, there is a certain 'freestyle' element to keeping Bristol Steppin Sisters for Black women and women of colour only. This does not make the plight to safeguard this safe space any less legitimate in my eyes, though, precisely because Black women and women of colour, especially those from the working class, are often excluded from both spaces *and* social groups.

In this vein, we could transcend the paradoxical nature of safe spaces and rather see them as "contested spaces," as proposed by Ludlow (2004: 47). A space where contestations are encouraged, espouses analyses of power and constructive conversations about privilege and identity. Here, the paradox of safe spaces can be acknowledged and challenged in an environment where all feel able to speak and act (Ludlow 2004: 49).

Extending this further, I conceptualise safety, in Black women's safe nature spaces, as being "safe *from* and safe *to*" (Lewis, Sharp, Remnant & Redpath 2015:10). Indeed, communities such as Bristol Steppin Sistas promote and seek to make spaces for black women and women of colour to be safe to engage with

and find each other on common ground. They also create a safety from those social influences or perceptions, be they the white male gaze or internalised fears about walking in nature, present in nature spaces. Allen-Craig et al. (2020:125-128) make an interesting distinction that illustrates this *from/to* 'binary', analysing the 'noninclusive experiences' and 'inclusive experiences' of female outdoor leaders. The former category was dominated by accounts of marginalisation at the hand of male peers in the outdoors sectors, and nature spaces in general; necessitating a safety from these circumstances. Whilst the latter category recounted stories of the importance of role models and supportive environments within nature spaces; alluding to a safety to, for instance, discuss these experiences (Allen-Craig et al. 2020:125-128).

A Plethora of Experiences

Film stills [02:37]; [04:12]; [5:16] Sophie, Sabrina, and Diane during the sit-down interviews, held in their respective gardens. A location chosen both for its practicality (better lighting and more space) and to sustain the film's focus on the Sistas' relationship with nature.

Breaking down barriers is not an individual endeavour. Audre Lorde said it best "Without community, there is no liberation" (Lorde 1984:111). Fittingly, Diane tells me, "It's really nice, talking to strangers [in BSS] but with shared history and recognisable signposts." I felt both these elements strongly throughout my stay with the Sistas. Every walk, every meeting outside of the walks, whether with one or multiple Sistas, was imbued with this sense of camaraderie through shared histories.

Shared History

What history do Black British women share? During her sit-down interview, I ask Sophie how she explains to people who scrutinise her for running a Black women and women of colour *only* group why such groups are important. "I just say "Cos we tend to be pushed in our lanes. We go through a lot in life where there's places we're not welcome," she answers with some exasperation in her voice. "And we need to be in an environment in company where we feel safe to explore and to express! That's important, and we express. Like I said, we walk around with a hell of a lot of scars hidden scars, you know?"

The overwhelming majority of the women I meet on the walks are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. Some retired, some nearing the end of their careers. The decades of life experience, of lived experience, they have on others—such as the few younger Sistas—has left marks on them. In the worst cases, using Sophie's apt terminology, it has left them scarred. And the positive walk leader is not reserved whatsoever about sharing life experiences that scarred her. She grew up in a single-mum household, had a controlling sister, and is a survivor of both physical and psychological domestic violence on two occasions. Yet, "I never let that

change me," Sophie tells me. It is important to her to be strong of character—having a certain unwavering demeanour—nourished by her ability to be a walk leader, "a guide" in her words, for others with similar experiences. Out of all the Sistas, Diane is the woman she relates to most; "We've almost been through the same life experiences."

Whenever I am in Diane's house I feel at home. It is eclectic, with warm colours, books, dark wood. Outside the well-kempt *jardin anglaise*-style front yard shields the street-facing windows. Diane, however, has felt suffocated by this home for a long time. When she guides me to the backyard for her sit-down interview, she gestures to the unfinished kitchen—it has all the appliances but no walls, just wooden, paint-stained beams and boards. "My ex-husband was adamant to redo this kitchen, really expensive all new stuff, and then, now, it's not even finished. And he's gone. I told him not to do it, but his control, yeah…" I quickly take it in before we step out into the garden. I come to find that the unfinished kitchen seems to mirror Diane's scars.

"It's been such a hurtful few years, such painful, hurtful few years," she tells me an hour later, sitting in her precious green house. "Emerging from a coercive, abusive, violent marriage, has had such an effect on me and my children. It has wrecked our relationship at times." I think of her daughter, Deena, who joined us on the Pensford walk. She was a bit shy, but we talked about our love for filmmaking and our respective school programmes. I liked her.

"[T]he walking has really helped me think about them in a clearer way," Diane continues "and think about me—*me* separate from their father. Just putting myself in a place that is safe and that I acknowledge I cannot change him and there's nothing I can do to improve him I can do in anyway." This echoes other things Diane has told me about Bristol Steppin Sistas providing her with a safe space to "run towards" and escape her home life, the wreckage of her marriage, and her busy work life as an aromatherapist teacher in Bath. A safe space giving her safety to discuss these personal struggles and safety from the enclosure of her home or the sometimes unwelcoming rural areas (Allen-Craig et al. 2020:127).

The effects that being confined within a space can have on one's mental health are all too well known to Sabrina, who is 20 years younger than Sophie, Diane, and the majority of the Steppin Sistas. Her backyard, where we set up her sit-down interview, borders a shallow river and a busy road feeding and draining the northern Bristol suburbs. Sabrina rents the house with her partner.

Knowing she previously mentioned feeling suffocated or closed-in by the four walls of her home, I stepped into her living room one afternoon. And I immediately understood. A small window, barely letting in any light, with low ceilings, beige carpeting and a narrow winding staircase that leads to the first floor. It is homey in its own way, but feels box-like without much room for thought.

Once we are sat in the backyard, Sabrina's thoughts and worries about the pandemic-period of her life flow free. "[When] the pandemic happened, it just became very isolating. It was extremely difficult to make friends and even coming out of the pandemic [...] with my social skills, it needed a bit of working on. I needed to feel comfortable again." Isolation, as experienced so distinctly by young Black women and women of colour, Sabrina often tells me, is a massive issue in the UK (Goedluck 2022). It is why she is thankful to the Sistas, to Sophie, for "[bringing] me out of my shell and [making] me feel comfortable again

hanging around people." It is also why she hopes more young women join BSS. And although Sabrina cannot speak to the scars her fellow, older, Sistas have gained over multiple decades, she can speak to how the knowledge and wisdom that comes with these scars has helped her—how it might help these other young, isolated women too.[4]

The activity of walking and talking BSS provides thus empowers members to safely share and discuss their personal histories (Morris, Guell and Pollard 2019:5). It engages their personal identities and motivates them to use the interpersonal connections to positively influence their *intra*personal connections; engendering a transformation in identity (Wynn 2018:431).

A Family of Women

Weeks before her sit-down interview, during our walk-along interview on the windy and slightly sombre Clifton Downs, Sabrina and I come to a natural halt in our walk. With the Suspension Bridge looming in the distance behind her, Sabrina looks out to the cliffs rising from the banks of the Lower Avon. "I kind of got a whole other family, but it's a family of women," she says contemplatively. "They can share with me their experiences and life stories [...]. They understand. They've been through it. And I would say it's one of the best resources that I've ever had really."

The multigenerationality of a family that Sabrina points to here stimulates intergenerational learning between the Steppin Sistas. Admittedly, on every walk with the Sistas, the age demographic was heavily skewed toward 45+ years old. Sabrina, Diane's daughter Deena, another young Sista, and myself were the only ones in our twenties. But the age-differences, albeit often minute, do factor in the group's inclusive character.

"D'you know," Sophie says when I ask her to reflect on the interactions between the older and younger women in the group, "I noticed the younger women, they… listen to the older women. [...] When the older women are telling their stories or sharing ideas—cooking, the culture [...] [the younger women] have got a smile on their face and think "Wow, this is life!" She punctuates this profound statement with a hooting laugh.

"Does it work vice-versa? Older women learning from the younger ones?"

"Oh, yes definitely. [...] I find the younger generation [in our group] quite fascinating because I learn. It keeps me young as well." Another laugh followed by a shoulder shimmy.

Sabrina echoes this sentiment, comparing her mother's experience feeling unsafe walking the outdoors in the 60s and 70s to her own. "[T]hat's also the beauty of it: it's a full range of conversations of women's experience, cos my experience at my age is completely different to [those of] other women [in the group]," she tells me with a contemplative tone.

[4] I am mindful not to solely rely on the well-known but often unacknowledged tropes of Black women in media, journalism, and literature, of being a wounded and angry group of people (Ward 2015:7). Emphasising the difficult life challenges some Sistas have lived through, however, also means respecting these life histories and the agency they have or are regaining in those stories. It deserves an understanding that trumps the apprehension of perpetuating gender and racial tropes.

This beauty is what I personally love about intergenerational conversations. I was brought up to have a certain reverence for my grandparents and elderly aunties and uncles, for my parents, in a way, as well, which I stand by to this day. Now, this is not to say that I think it is both necessary and empowering to challenge the ideologies of older generations—change cannot happen otherwise. But bridging gaps between generations rather than closing the proverbial portcullis behind you is at the core of my research interests. Learning from each other whilst leaving room for dissent.

Scafe and Dunn (2020:129) even attribute the 'longevity' of the Caribbean diasporic community to the strong intergenerational bonds that it fosters. However, on the whole, age-segregation and differentiation in Western societies is a comparatively contemporary but very real phenomenon. Age integration can be promoted by "breaking down structural barriers and bringing people together of different ages" (Vanderbeck 2007:210). Bristol Steppin Sistas covers both of these processes. It breaks down structural barriers on the count that it adopts a flexible age criterium for membership—18 and up. It brings people of different ages together, which I interpret as an active, continuous process, by encouraging interactions between different generations. 'Bookend generations'—those that mark certain eras, like first and third generation migrants—especially necessitate active promotion of intergenerational engagement (Riley & Riley 2000:267).

Next to age, gender is an integral part to sharing a history within BSS—"a family of *women*." "It's just women, innit!?" a Sista offers one day after a BSS walk. "It's the talking with women amongst ourselves. And to do that in nature is just great." The BSS website's 'About Us' section quite aptly reads "There has been a reluctance for women of colour to venture in unfamiliar spaces where they feel exposed, judged, and remarked on. *This has led to our staying in our lanes* [emphasis added]" (Bristol Steppin Sistas 2022). 'Staying in our lanes' is a very physically and mentally apt description for the gendered and racialised construction of space. As Pitcan, Marwick, and Boyd (2018:165) argue, in spaces where they make up a minority group, Black women are subjected to the act of 'impression management,' meaning their self-presentation hinges on the managing, or need to control the public perceptions of themselves. The reason Sabrina, for instance, feels safe with the Steppin Sistas in nature, is precisely because she does not have to manage her actions as a Black woman, to "be palatable to the people around [me]," referring to the demography—often white, middle-class, and male—of walkers she encounters in the outdoors.[5]

Diane, however, adds a perspective on the open-ness of the countryside space, telling me, "[I]n a wide space you don't feel so constrained. Part of our identities is that we had to make ourselves small to live in a white space. But out in the country you don't have to make yourself small. You can just be who you are." Making yourself small as part of your identity as a Black woman puts the onus Black women to not stand out, as various Steppin Sistas have told me. Where a wide space, for Diane, means being free, being able to explore that wide space in the safety of other Black women, means being free to Sabrina. With Sophie, however, gender is more implicit in everything she says about the Sistas. We never discuss it as a

[5] A more thorough study of changing your behaviour, speech, or clothing, as a minoritised person to be palatable to your social environment, also known as code-switching, is Macklin's (2021) The Influence of Code-Switching on Black Women Leaders: A Phenomenological Study.

component, a facet of identity, on its own. Only when she speaks of the scars Black women share—these scars are unique to a Black *female* experience—I see her focus on gender identity most acutely (Carlson 2019:20).

Taken together, the "recognisable signposts" Diane speaks of are subsumed in the histories the Sistas share, one of scars, of impression management, of making yourself small. But also one of learning from each other and of appreciating each other's knowledge. Diane's inventive word-choice fits the context of walking beautifully. "Signposts" can mean the marks life has left on women with a shared heritage and shared life experiences. It can also mean the signposts you find along walking paths. Signposts guide walkers, they give direction. The Sistas share a want, or even a need, for guidance: a sense of direction that helps them to both individually and collectively heal their scars, which is exactly what the walking group provides.

These narratives unite in a sense of belonging to one's history and community (Miller 2006:218). The very presence of Black women and women of colour who, by walking and talking, by exploring their shared lived experiences, by changing what it means to engage with nature, challenges the status quo of walking as aesthetic and of walking as, in Sophie's words, a "militant, physical fitness thing only for men." The Sistas are not complete ramblers, but rather Black women for whom walking means healing, and thus, in the Wodsworthian sense, means *being* (Solnit 2002:102). In order to further explore this abstract, metaphysical, idea we must pass the doorstep into the rural and open spaces the Southwest has to offer.

THE SISTAS AND NATURE

Film still [09:40] The Sistas climb a hill in Pensford. The colours of their jackets are in stark contrast to the grey fog hugging the trees and fields. Their laughter and talking slowly crescendoes as the group approaches the camera.

The colours draw my eye first. It's as if they had collectively decided to wear bright coats. As if their intention was to be eye-catching. The coats, and other hiking gear, match the group's vibrant disposition today. A dense layer of grey mist has descended on the town and the rolling hills that stretch out behind it. I know

you cannot physically cut through fog, but the vibrancy on display seems to somehow do exactly that. Everyone is cheery. You can hear the laughter—or the 'hooting' in Diane's words—from miles away.

True to British pub culture, we started this second Bristol Steppin Sistas walk of the season in The Rising Sun pub with some stiff brandy; I stuck to a sour black coffee. Pensford is a historic town, located a relatively short and winding bus ride south from Bristol. Cutting across it, or rather high above it, looms a Grade II listed Viaduct—a disused railway bridge. Wikipedia tells me Pensford's population is about a 1000 people, and it's one of those towns where it feels as though all those people know each other. The Rising Sun pub has regular guests, as evidenced by the middle-aged men in work clothes with strong West Country accents who had a laugh with the hostesses behind the bar. There was a fire crackling. The old, dark-wooden beams on the ceiling were lined with paper money from all over the world.

Once the Sistas were all present and warmed-up, we stepped out into the foggy cold of the main road. As per BSS tradition, Sophie requested a group picture. Shortly after, I introduced myself and my intentions for that day. Nobody really seemed to bat an eye at the semi-professional-looking camera set-up that would be following them around on this walk. But everyone made me feel welcome, from individual introductions to shy nods to curiosity about where I'm from and the ins-and-outs of this thesis project. Then, an hour and a half behind on schedule, we took off.

Thursday, two days ago, I found this place so different from what I see now. The vast expanse of grass fields, the woods, the meandering Chew river, and the hills enclosing this valley are consumed by a thick fog. It's slightly eerie. There is no sun, and the sky is an impenetrable light grey instead of bright blue. The Viaduct looked red and orange two days ago, now it's a dull brown. The fields are not soppy, wet, and muddy but frozen solid. There is even a big slate of ice covering a relatively big portion of the third field we walk across.

I take some time to set up my camera, trying to get the perfect still shot of what is happening some 30 yards in front of me. The Sistas take to the ice like children finding a playground. Some are helping each other skate across it, others tread with a bit more hesitancy. Sabrina tries to break a patch by jumping up and down, whilst Sophie trails behind, trusty smartphone in hand to capture the scene that unfolds before her. Weeks later, when I interview Diane, she gives me her perspective on this moment:

> Even on the walk we did, there was that little patch of ice on the grass and a couple with their son and the woman would not look at us. She would not look at us, not give me eye contact. Cos I sort of went over to her and she wouldn't look at me and she was really cross that we were there and I could see that. It was her or her son's thing, I don't know.

I remember that couple and their son now. From where I was stood, I could not see their faces or read their body language; I was focussed on the Sistas. Perhaps it was the intrusion on the family's alone time that upset the mother rather than BSS's racial make-up. Yet, Diane continues "There's still 'That's not your place, that's not where you should be.' Still that perception that black women don't walk." I pose to her that perhaps actively challenging the notion that 'black women don't walk in nature' is part of the little revolution

she hopes to be a part of with BSS. "A 100% it is. It does, it's positively showing that 'We are here, this is our countryside' and that we are enjoying it and that we wanna see more. It's absolutely, positively doing that."

I am now standing on a hill, and I see the colourful dots in the distance down below, inching closer. The dots talk animatedly, whilst some Sistas walk in comfortable silence. Indeed, there is a remarkable 'we are here and we're not going anywhere'-factor to Bristol Steppin Sistas' presence on this walk. It's easy to be washed out against the expanse of grey, brown, and green—the almost imposing unique British landscape surrounding the group. But they are not. Nature doesn't seem to consume them, nor does it reject them. These paths, these hills, even the slate of ice belongs not to 'a happy few' but to them. Perhaps 'belonging' is a strong word. What I feel on this walk is a harmony between the Sistas and this landscape. A connection that feels right, but, as Diane said, to many British people still seems wrong.

An Act of Subversion

The UK outdoors is in this sense a contested space, a site "where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and resistance engage actors" (Low 2016:75). Indeed, the very presence of BSS in nature can be seen as an act of subversion, with the Sistas as engaged actors. Yet, politicising the group in this way—as existing with the sole purpose to actively challenge the injustices in nature—elicits varying reactions from the main interlocutors. Where Diane's rhetoric surrounding BSS's relation to the UK's grander political atmosphere has a clear activistic edge, Sophie errs on the side of caution, adamant that "[BSS is] a walking group, not a movement."

"When you see any group of black women– They always label it as a movement," she tells me with a slight frown. "It's sad to think people label us as a movement. We're just a group of women of colour walking. And people give us these political labels. And we're not."

I remember making a mental note in that moment of Sophie's sit-down interview to contrast this with Diane's words. When I ask Diane if she sees BSS as activism, her response—given her obvious high-spirited activistic disposition—did not surprise me.

"Yes, it is." She looks at me intently. "There's been a point where people put barriers and it's just like 'Get used to us, we're right here." At the beginning of the interview she said a similar thing, in very direct words, telling of her character. "I don't really feel like being quiet anymore. I'm fed up of people who say they represent me but don't." I think of the UK's government and its historic and contemporary failure to mitigate or even address the racist sentiments that run deep in the country's national identity. Diane's voice stops my mind from wandering further, "I feel a bit radical actually," she laughs. "Where's the revolution? I want a revolution."

Building from this tension between Sophie's and Diane's perspective on BSS as an intentionally subversive actor, I argue that the existence of BSS is *inherently* political but it is political in different ways to different people. BSS does not walk in a vacuum: it walks in the post-Colston statue toppling context, it walks in rural places populated by a majority white demographic, it walks *and talks* and laughs and jokes and

sings in nature where quietude and pondering was, and often still is, the norm. In Rebecca Solnit's (2002:138) words, "To *pretend* that the world is a garden is an essentially apolitical act, a turning away from the woes that keep it from being one. But to *try to make* the world a garden is often a political endeavour, and it is this taste that the more activist walking clubs around the world have taken up [emphasis added]". Indeed, idealising the British countryside as a classless, raceless, non-discriminatory playground for all to visit is understandable but unrealistic. It undermines the very fact that history and culturally learned norms loom over these spaces, keeping those who do not conform out.

Trying to make the world a garden is a plight that the early changemakers in UK walking history, such as the Manchester ramblers, and the Steppin Sistas share. Much like trespassing privatised lands in the early 20th century, the Sistas making the very same land safe for Black women and women of colour is a political act. Sophie's alarm at BSS being seen as a movement, whilst understandable, might stem from the very same root that enthuses Diane about the group: making a bold statement and attracting attention to yourself in order to normalise your presence as a predominantly Black female group.

These tensions illustrate how the Sistas experience double consciousness, or, in its original formulation, "[the] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others …" (Du Bois 1903:16-17). Whilst I find this formulation too reductive to fully describe the group's experience in nature, it does directly speak to the doubleness that BSS experience of not being an intentional activist group, of not wanting to be stereotyped as a movement—of activism by doing rather than telling. Challenging the historical white British sensibilities around walking nature by simply existing is, whether the Sistas agree with it or not, intertwined with a diasporic double consciousness. The fracturing of the subject—diasporic persons—by being 'pulled apart' between self-defining as a group (re: Sophie's "We're just a group of women of colour walking.") and being defined through the eyes of the beholder—the spatial culture present in British nature spaces—is a reality (Dayal 1996:47).

On a metaphysical level, then, the Sistas find harmony between themselves and between the group and nature precisely by reclaiming the spaces that were previously demarcated or defined by others. They challenge the perceived disharmony between Black women and women of colour and the UK outdoors, hereby generating a sense of belonging to one's locality (Miller 2006:217).

Film still [00:45] Steppin Sista Fleur loudly sings Julie Andrew's *The Hills Are Alive*. The other Sistas follow suit with Bob Marley's *One Love*, making their presence big in the vast fields of Pensford.

FRESH AIR

The sense of belonging to one's locality is, I argue, equally found on a more physical, sensorial level. Back behind my camera, in the foggy fields of Pensford, the Sistas are very much not philosophising about their politics or their harmony with nature. They are there to have a good walk and breathe in the crisp non-city air. I overhear snippets of discussions about imported beauty products from Jamaica, reflections on previous walks, intimate conversations about family life, and I can't help *but* hear a Sistas' cover of Minnie Riperton's seminal *Loving You* towards the end of the walk (which I am pretty sure is reverberated by the arches of the Viaduct).

Something nagged at me though: there was a quality to spending the day in the company of this walking group I could not quite capture. And, yes, something might always be lost in written or audiovisual translation when trying to capture these walks. Like a bodily sensation only felt just there and *only* there in the moment, on location. Anyone who has stood on a quiet riverbank or looked out to the sea from a windy shore or stamped on crunchy leaves in fragrant woods knows this feeling: the 'ungraspability' of nature. This experiencing of British nature combined with the being in the presence of the Sistas on this walk is a unique thing—one that is not simply described but *felt*.

Outside of the intellectual musings on spatial politics, this sensorial physicality of being in the field with BSS is essential to grasping what the group is actually doing and why its existence is so important. As Doughty (2013:141) states, "[A] shared walk can be generative of a supportive sociality that is embodied through movement [which] can result in particular mobile therapeutic practice, which is produced and experienced intersubjectively." It is again emphasised that it is not only the communication people in nature might share that defines 'the social', it is the bodily activity of, in the case of this thesis, walking itself that affects peoples' psyche (Doughty 2013:144). In this vein, the mental benefits the Sistas gain from group walking are not only tied to the sense of community, but also to the physicality of being in nature—to the way a walking body engages with its surroundings.

Sophie elevates this point, explaining how nature is a medicine for her and how "you need to *feel* nature as well as just see it," because of the unique energy it exudes. Diane reigns in this mysticality, instead praising nature's "sounds of flowing water or crisp leaves" for its ability to ground her when she feels out of control. "It's important for me to have a connection with nature," she muses, "because it calms me down." Sabrina, in turn, speaks to how these sensorial connections between a walker and nature have motivated her. "[T]he actual [BSS] walks made me realise how much I need to go outside […] of the four walls that were confining me. And just taking that step to allow myself to say "You need fresh air," has made all the difference to my mental health."

Being a part of the Sistas is thus also, inherently, a deeply sensorial experience, benefitting the physique and mind alike. Reminiscent of Willerslev's and Suhr's (2012:293) 'invisible'—that which is seen but not readily felt or noticed—the thesis film allows the viewer to experience these senses, to feel or observe the Sistas as fully as possible. Reflexive and embodied knowledge come together, laying bare the intricate form of engagement between person and nature Bristol Steppin Sistas cultivates (Ingold 2010:122).

OUR OWN PACE

'Unique' feels right, good even. The Steppin Sistas are unique. In many ways. I noticed it the very first time I met them, I missed it the moment I left Bristol. In this thesis I have argued that 1) the Sistas experience a sense of belonging in the group, that helps them strengthen their individual identity; 2) Bristol Steppin Sistas, in doing rather than telling, challenges the enduring race and gender stigmas present in British rural and open nature spaces; 3) members of the group—the Sistas—benefit physically and mentally from walking and talking in nature with the group. Taken together, the group enables personal and collective healing for Black British women.

If we, like I certainly have come to believe and experience during fieldwork, believe that "belonging is a condition of the self'—and ontological matter that is a part of who we are and deeply influenced by one's community, history, and locality—the Steppin Sistas are a group that encompasses this philosophy entirely (Miller 2006:219). The emphasis on the creation and sustainability of a community being an active process—a continuous journey to a form of liberation is key in Bristol Steppin Sistas' existence. Activity in a physical sense is also, of course, the foundation of the group's *modus operandus*.

Much like walking and talking, storytelling is a living 'thing' (Maggio 2014:91). In the case of this thesis, Sophie, Diane, Sabrina, and the Sistas telling me their stories and me, as an ethnographer, telling their story through my personal lens, are two sides of the same coin. The Sistas live different lives, in different places all over Bristol, but they share deep-rooted and precious similarities, or rather, shared histories and recognisable signposts. Having a safe space to be at peace with their lived experiences is the start of collective healing for Black British women.

THE FINAL WALK

The Ladies Mile walk, named after the road that connects Durdham Downs to Clifton Downs, was the final BSS big group-walk I joined. The Downs are enclosed on two sides by incredibly posh neighbourhoods and on one side by the Lower Avon river and the Suspension Bridge. The Avon has carved out a winding path for itself in between cliff-like rockfaces.

I wait on the Sistas arrival at the Clifton Downs café. An hour passes by and they slowly start to gather on the café's terrace. One Steppin Sista has brought three tubs of KFC chicken with her. In response, 20 or so Sistas cheer in delight. I like these pre-walk moments with the group. Everybody chats with each other, laughs, jokes, and, in this case, eats. It is an essential part of the walks, the part where no one walks but everyone talks and enjoys the camaraderie. Some women I know already so we have a quick catch-up, others ask me about the thesis project, some nod politely in my direction.

Just before we start the walk I realise I left my TASCAM audio-recorder on a table in the middle of the group for 20 minutes. When I eventually, months later, listen to this recording it turns out to be a 20 minute-long audioscape of ebbing and flowing laughter, muffled conversations, voices floating in and out of earshot. It is quite literally the 'sound of the Steppin Sistas.' Without it being interview audio where I ask

questions about the comfortability of sharing a space with someone who shares your lived experiences, the soundscape conveys exactly that.

From the moment the walk starts, I am once again frantically running around the group trying to get some adequate static long take shots. But then, around the walk's halfway-mark, something happens in front of my camera that is far better than all my planned shots. Cameo's *Candy* blasts from Sophie's JBL speaker on the ground and about 15 Sistas start a synchronised dance routine led by Leigh-Anne, one of the walk marshals for the day.

As per usual, Sophie captures everything on her selfie stick-attached smartphone, enthusiastically bopping along. Other Sistas remain onlookers, smiling in encouragement.. When one Sista shouts "Big up Bristol Steppin Sistas!," Leigh-Anne shouts back,"We're steppin'!"

The dance eventually comes to a natural conclusion and the Sistas run euphorically toward my camera, hooting "Wheeheeey!" The moment is serendipitous and perfect. My thoughts briefly drift to something Sophie said during her interview: "[I]t's time to put [our] scars to bed and just be okay." And as long as Bristol Steppin Sistas can make its members walk and laugh and dance and talk and heal, I think to myself, they will be okay.

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APPENDICES

INTERLOCUTOR MEDIA RELEASE FORM

Research Media Records Release Form

As part of the "*Our Own Pace: stories of Black British women walking and talking in nature*" research project conducted by "*Tamar van Steijn*", a student of Leiden University, I will make photographic, audio, and/or video recordings of you while you participate in the research.

This thesis explores how *Bristol Steppin Sistas* functions and how it influences the relationship of Black women and women of colour that are members of the group with the rural landscape/nature in the Southwest region of the UK. The main thesis statement is: Bristol Steppin Sistas enables personal and collective healing for Black British women.

From the knowledge I gather during the research period, I will create a 30 min.-long documentary and a written thesis.

This research study involves participating in various scheduled and unscheduled interviews varying in duration from 10 min.-2 hours. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study for any and all reason. If you want to contact the researcher to discuss this study, please e-mail [redacted]

I will make an audio-recording and a video-recording of the interview(s) and transcribe all that has been said during the interview on the basis of these recordings. In this written version of the interview and in my personal notes, your name will be used. These documents will not be shared with anyone else. When sharing the final written paper and other information, your personal data will not be anonymised, unless this is specifically requested.

There are no foreseeable risks with participating in this research. Your participation will help to attain the stated purposes of this research. Your participation will not be financially compensated.

You have the right to access all information collected about you as part of this research. Upon request, I will send you the information collected about you. After the research is completed, the final written report and film will be shared with the examinators and, potentially, university colleagues. Sharing it with broader circles will not be done without your approval. Your personal information collected for this research will be destroyed by June 27th, 2024.

Please indicate below by initialising what uses of these records you consent to. This is completely up to you. We will only use the records in the way(s) that you agree to.

1. The records can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

Photo _____ Audio _____ Video _____
initials initials initials

2. The records can be used for scientific publications.

Photo _____ Audio _____ Video _____
initials initials initials

4. The records can be shown at meetings of scientists interested in the study of anthropology.

Photo _____ Audio _____ Video _____
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5. The records can be shown in classrooms to students.

Photo _____ Audio _____ Video _____
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6. The records can be shown in public presentations to non-scientific groups.

Photo _____ Audio _____ Video _____
initials initials initials

7. The records can be used on internet, television and radio.

Photo _____ Audio _____ Video _____
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I have read this form and give my consent for use of the records as indicated above.

Name _____ Signature _____

Outreach E-Mail

Dear Bristol Steppin Sistas team,

I hope you all are well! My name is Tamar van Steijn, I'm 22 years old, and I'm a Visual Ethnography(/Anthropology) Master's student from Leiden University in the Netherlands.

For my thesis, I aim to do fieldwork and from this research period create a documentary. My academic and personal interests lie mainly in identity formation for people with a migration background, their intergenerational relations, their connection to the land they currently live in, and the history of the 'right to roam' movement in the UK. I have a specific interest in these topics, as I'm a third-generation Indonesian-Dutch person who is in the process of figuring out her identity in relation to her migration background. Also, having grown up near the sea, from a young age I have always loved going outside to hike or roam in nature.

I came across your organisation when looking for women of colour hiking groups in the UK, and was immediately intrigued. Your approach to connecting local women of colour and black women to nature and rural areas very much intersects with my personal and academic interests. I aim to pursue a thesis on how women with a migration background (BIPOC women) experience their connection (physical and mental) to the UK and its nature and how this relationship influences their communities and individual identities.
Moreover, I want to do my thesis fieldwork in UK, as its landscapes inspire me artistically and I hope to live there one day; while I always aim to be conscious not to over-romanticise the countryside.

My fieldwork period begins roughly at the beginning of January and ends March 15th. I was therefore wondering whether you see any opportunity to work together on this thesis and documentary during this period. It would be wonderful and much appreciated to have a conversation about possibilities and/or if you could help me further with finding an appropriate fieldwork site.

Kind regards and looking forward to your response :),

Tamar van Steijn
MSc student Visual Ethnography at Leiden University