

Renée Newman

Escape Velocity Walks the City:

**Kindness and intimacy in public space in the transgender and
gender diverse teen experience**



Fig. 1. Rosana Cade, *Walking: Holding*, 2011. Glasgow.

I'm sitting uncomfortably in a plastic chair, loud beats through a sound system pumping through my blood, oversized fronds for flowers and my hair tugged into bleached foils. It is 2020 and almost 11 months since I held hands with several young performance makers. It feels an eternity ago that we walked arm in arm through the inner city of Melbourne. I'm in a hair salon in Perth, reeling at the news that POTUS, days after tax revelations, has been diagnosed with COVID-19. I think of the subject of this paper, radical kindness, and my gut threatens to spill out of my body.

The ghost town of Melbourne, only just now emerging from its eighth month of lockdown, will barely hold the traces of that day in 2019 where I held hands with these young people. From the surreal zone of semi-isolation (mid COVID-19 pandemic), this paper is a memory of a performance that I was privileged to participate in, a short moment of intimacy and empathy; of sharing, caring and holding (hands; space; time).

Escape Velocity Walks the City took place 23rd-26th October 2019 as part of the Future Echoes Festival in Melbourne, Australia. Created by Rosana Cade with Ivor MacAskill, Laurie Brown and St Martins Youth Theatre, audience and performer walk and talk together through the inner city of Melbourne. Walking and sitting, often hand in hand with transgender and gender diverse teens, the performance was often silent, uneasy and kind. In fact, its kindness was an unexpected gift and yet I am reminded by Sarah Burton and Vikki Turbine that “Kindness is not a bonus. It is our core, our humanity, our revolutionary weapon” (2019). *Escape Velocity Walks the City* was fragile yet powerful – a gentle expectation to open my heart and mind. I clutch on to the memory of the moments of touch, of laughter and of catching a stranger’s eye; a radical intimacy and a type of kin-making (Haraway, 2015).



Fig. 2. Rosana Cade, *Walking: Holding*, 2011. Glasgow.

***Walking: Holding* in 2011**

Escape Velocity Walks the City was created specifically for the Future Echoes Festival and St Martins Youth Theatre, but is an iteration of the much earlier work by Cade’s call *Walking: Holding*. *Walking: Holding* was first made in 2011 in Glasgow by Rosana Cade about queer visibility to capture how she felt in different spaces. Cade was interested in sharing a moment with a stranger in public space and how this could be a form of queer activism. In conversation

in 2019, after I participated in *Escape Velocity Walks the City*, Cade talked about being invested in the boundaries of spaces — public and private, proximity, intimacy and distance (or what is a "stranger"). Playing around with "walking experiments" (Cade, n.d) the original *Walking: Holding* involved one audience member walking through an urban public space holding hands with a series of people (usually six or seven people for about five minutes each lasting 40 minutes). Since 2011, it has played 40 times, including in numerous cities across the UK, Copenhagen, Zurich, Lisbon, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Vienna, Basel and Hong Kong. The "actors" are all different ages, races, genders, sometimes older people, sometimes young children, but all people with an investment in story, place, visibility and sharing a moment in time with another human being. In conversation, Cade spoke of being:

...very interested in the act of intimacy between two strangers...and what that can offer...[a type of] political action against the anonymity of cities, against the messages that tell us not to talk to strangers... I feel myself look at people differently, and with that openness ... a sense of possibility (personal interview, 2019).



Fig. 3. Performers from *Escape Velocity Walks the City*, 2019. Future Echoes Festival, Arts Centre, Melbourne.

Escape Velocity Walks the City in 2019

When Cade co-created *Escape Velocity Walks the City* in Melbourne based on *Walking: Holding*, this time the work was made with a specific group of "performers" (for want of a better word, because there is no performing per se just "being," and a type of facilitation of a performance process) — a group of transgender and gender diverse youth (although the term used in the description at the time was gender non-conforming). I should note from the start that the route we took from the Arts Centre — across the bridge, on the streets next to the train station, in Federation Square and across the bridge — was highly public. These are common places of

walking to and from inner city Melbourne for both tourists and locals. Thus, not only are these areas public, but also hyper-visible. This is, indeed, a central requirement of the work — to question visibility and privilege.



Fig. 4. Performers from *Escape Velocity Walks the City*, 2019. Future Echoes Festival, Arts Centre, Melbourne.

Beginning at the Melbourne Arts Centre, the audience is taken, individually, to a spot overlooking the river. I was approached by a young man (we are introduced with and share pronouns). Smiling, he gave me a head set and asked me to listen. The audio asked me take in the city and all its people as part of this performance. With a set of instructions that included us holding hands or walking arm in arm, I was asked not to enquire about the body of the person I was temporary interlinked with because they often face enough of these questions in daily life and were not interested in being my educator. It was an important reminder and clue to what I understand is a sense of surveillance or public scrutiny, which many trans and non-binary people experience. When asked in the audio — “What do I see?” — I turned to look at myself in a reflective glass panel: a cis woman in her forties, nothing out of the ordinary, which is of course the point. I blended in. I was uncontroversial; invisible, even. We take off across the river on a footbridge where I met another performer. I was given an earpiece and together we listened to a song they had chosen, a song they listen to when they need to feel strong — from memory it was an Elton John number. We walk through the city, and bolt through the Flinders Street train station crowd. I struggle when I pass two kids dressed as young mod skin heads. What were they thinking, I wonder — this is a uniform of violent racism, do they not know this? I bounced into the pathway of a middle-aged white man who looked me in the eye, shifting his gaze to settle on our arms entangled, only to divert his eyes again. This was the first moment where our intimacy was questioned. The first moment where I felt challenged. Confronted. Unsafe. (Hyper)visible.

We walked into Federation Square and met with two other actors and another participant/audience, and as a group we sit. We introduced ourselves but mainly sat in a somewhat comfortable quiet. The actors shared their pronouns and talked about graduating from school. I had an ambivalent sense of comfort. It was slightly uneasy to sit so publicly doing nothing but chat; to sit as a group and internally recall what it was like to sit in public space, to occupy a patch of concrete quite randomly, and in the safety of numbers sit and laugh, led me to become aware of my comfortable loitering. It is what many teenagers do so well, but not something I had done for years; I probably should do it more often. Loitering is neither anti-social nor anti-productive but an essential outcome of idleness, and idleness, to take up Bertrand Russell (*In Praise of Idleness*), is an essential yet often neglected state of being. He was writing about idleness in 1932. What would Russell have thought of late stage capitalism's relentless pursuit of work, productivity and consumerism? What would Russell have thought of all this being challenged by COVID-19 forcing these same economies to alter this relentlessness. That is me thinking on these things in 2020. In 2019, at the close of the work when I am watching, and crying, listening to the stories of these and other teens telling us about their experiences in an instalment of the powerful *Escape Velocity* films which ends the work, I began to understand that the pack serves as necessary protection. To travel in a group is safer. In hindsight, the fabulous casual loitering, as a group of teens takes on a new and arguably more urgent meaning.

In that moment in Federation Square, they had granted me permission to recall a sense of memory of being young. Soon after, the four of us linked arms and crossed the bridge. We took up space. People move to pass us. There were more diverting eyes, but for the most part, I was invisible. So invisible that I felt the need to mention this to the others. I immediately regretted saying it, because that was precisely the privilege of being cis, or cis-passing; the capacity to move through public space without drawing unwanted attention. Of course, not all individuals need this or want this right to pass undetected, but surely everyone deserves the right to be whoever they are on the streets of their city without fear for their safety. Across the bridge, we separated again for a final moment to look at the city from across the river. I have a short conversation with the performers about hope and listen to a final audio piece on what the group, as individuals, hope for: safety to walk in the city at night, to be reunited with their family (some of whom still struggle with accepting the gender of their young person), the power to make decisions about their own bodies and their future. It is simple and moving. We are then encouraged to move into the Arts Centre and watch the latest instalment in the *Escape Velocity* films created by trans and gender diverse young people through a partnership between St Martins and Minus 18. These films explore their fears, and their dreams; the fear of the pubescent changing body, safety on the street, the desire to be at peace with family. The love, the hope, the generosity (in sharing their stories) — it is heart bursting (not breaking) and deeply satisfying. I broke back out into the city scape, deeply moved at the fragile and simple moment in time I shared with a group of deeply courageous individuals.

Walking without purpose; walking and touching

During the work, two things took me by surprise. The mid-morning foot traffic was fast-going with purpose and with little eye contact and this raised questions for me of the everyday. It must have been confronting to see people simply walking or occasionally stopping and looking out at

the river and the city behind us, linked arms and comfortable in our appreciation of that moment. The second surprise was the people passing us while not sustaining eye contact, would divert their eyes, and it occurred to me they were looking at the age difference. That is when I realised, we were troubling a social rule about the perceived appropriateness of adults and teens touching. What was more affronting to those passers-by — a younger and older adult arm in arm, or encountering intimacy in a public setting more generally? Was it both these things? Linking arms may be playful but holding hands is suggestive of a deeper intimacy. The delicate significance of this work was in sharing a space with vulnerable yet strong individuals who were asking for a world of greater inclusion, kindness and hope. Our short time together occupying space — whether sitting as a group of teens in a square or walking arm in arm across a populated bridge — involved a radical kindness, a radical solidarity, a radical intimacy.

In 2020, the benefit of hindsight in thinking of the empty streets of pandemic shutdown Melbourne, the grief of the loss of this kind of everyday touch is palpable. The need to touch has never been so important; never so radical.



Fig. 6. Rosana Cade, *Walking: Holding*, 2011. Glasgow.

Visibility

Cade spoke to me of a vulnerability that comes with visibility. This work attempts to break into this visibility and share vulnerability as an act of solidarity. I am drawn to the ever-popular Donna Haraway's conceptualising of making kind or kin-making. Haraway's interrogation of the epoch we find ourselves in (Anthropocene versus Chthulucene) is urgent and confronting mass

ecological devastation is necessary — “the edge of extinction is not just a just a metaphor; system collapse is not a thriller. Ask any refugee of any species (2015, 161).”¹ However, it is Haraway’s discussion of kin as a generative and radical way of being in touch with others, which makes so much sense in not only the context of my 2019 experience of *Escape Velocity Walks the City* but also my 2020 perception of intimacy in COVID-19 states of being:

My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along. Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans. I was moved in college by Shakespeare’s punning between kin and kind — the kindest were not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story....all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages...
(Haraway 2015, 161-162)

Radical kindness can be a weapon of affirmation, love, generosity, and hope. Radical intimacy asks us to be open. To be kinder. All I want for my kin is to live a long life of holding on to as many human (and the ‘more than human’) species as is possible — “all earthlings.” All I want for me and my kin is the capacity to be intimate with strangers. Performance is the commune of togetherness; sharing of stories in a togetherness. We can do that 1.5 metres a part. But one day, and that day will come, we will need to hold hands across our differences like we have never wanted to before.

My blonde locks of extraordinary privilege get yanked and I giggle at the irony of touch. At this point any kind will do, don’t you think? This work has sat with me for a year (at the point of writing) and my lasting impression is that while it was asking for a greater empathic connection with gender diverse young people, it was also demanding a remarkably timely engagement and rethink about intimacy in public space. The latter has me thinking more broadly that any future of any performance in a post-COVID-19 landscape will need to explore what intimacy for our audiences and makers means and how it is practised, whether that be in a black-box, arena theatre or in public space. *Escape Velocity Walks the City* did things to me I did not expect: I felt awkward, I was watched, I became uncomfortable, I was moved, I felt protected. I knew I was immensely privileged to know these young people through this short encounter for a moment in time. I had the chance to hold hands with a stranger and through that to learn their story and just a little of their place in the world. Now, more than ever, we need this if we are to heal and to become kinder, resilient and just.

Notes

¹ When I participated in *Escape Velocity Walks the City*, the bushfires of the East Coast of Australia were in its third of what would be six months of burning.

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