

# Learning on the Go: Experiences Researching Urban Stewardship Practices Through Walking Interview

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## Abstract

The following paper offers an in-depth, experiential analysis of the walking interview, applied within a participatory action research context. I share both reflection and critique, analyzing my experience conducting two walking interviews with stewards of urban green spaces in Vancouver, Canada and Medellín, Colombia that explored practices of care in urban nature as well as relationships to local urban ecologies. Discussion is oriented towards two essential methodological questions: (1) how does the use of walking interview advance research towards deeper understandings of stewardship practices and the relationships between stewards and urban nature; and (2) what is the lived and affective experience of conducting a walking interview as a researcher? I adopt a reflective and narrative style to emphasize the role of embodiment in community-engaged work and make explicit the discomfort and uncertainty inherent to qualitative and relationship-centered approaches to inquiry. My intention is to share lessons learned with scholars interested in pursuing similar research approaches. First, I introduce my work, myself, and my relationship and orientation to place-based qualitative inquiry. Next, I share accounts from two walking interviews held with urban green space stewards in Vancouver, CA and Medellín, CO. My experiences with walking interview illuminate its capacity to invite in-depth, sensory connection to place on the part of both the researcher and interviewee. I demystify the dynamics present between researcher and interviewee in the context of action research – commenting on how I navigated fluctuations from outsider to insider researcher (and back) and how negotiation of research relationships influenced my interview practice. I end with reflection on several limitations of the walking interview method, focusing on the challenge of navigating personal attachment and mutual obligation within the container of walking interview.

## Keywords

walking interview, place-based interview, participatory action research, qualitative methods, environmental justice, recognitional justice

## Introduction

Among early career researchers — especially graduate students — who are eager to center social transformation and change-making within their work, identifying research methods that align with and complement justice-oriented ideologies can be challenging. While there exist several resources that introduce the practice of qualitative data collection and analysis, these tend to emphasize research design and implementation as opposed to offering reflections on the process and experience of *doing* qualitative research. Although such guidance has been foundational to my growth as a

scholar, it has often proven too rigid and made the implementation of a participatory action research (PAR) project seem inaccessible. In response to a desire for more narrative-

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based reflections on how to apply flexible qualitative research methodologies that support action-oriented scholarship, I share my experience creating and adapting place-based interview methods in support of a PAR project focused on the care practices and relationships to place among stewards of urban green spaces. Throughout the paper I blend narrative and argumentative voice, bringing literature and interview findings into conversation with the affective experience of doing qualitative research. To begin, I provide an overview of the broader project to which the interviews discussed contribute, review place-based research and interview methods, and ground my methodological approach within this theoretical foundation. This is followed by two stories that emerged from interview experiences and offer insight into the process of conducting walking interviews as well as reflection on the form and depth of narratives elicited through the practice. By sharing detailed accounts of select interview moments, it is my intention to infuse transparency into how qualitative methods are discussed and show that challenges and discomforts deserve as much attention as discoveries.

### *Project Context and Research Objectives*

My research seeks to increase recognition for the multiple ways in which stewardship of urban green spaces take place in cities, the diversity of actors involved, and the range of personal values enacted through this work. I focus specifically on the role of grassroots and community activists in stewarding local natural spaces and how this work can contribute to broader urban greening strategies. David Harvey (1996 as cited in (Creswell, 2004)) explains that although nature within cities “exists completely free of human will or consciousness” (Cresswell, 2004), contact between the natural world and people enters both parties into an ecological relationship (Buizer et al., 2016; Gonçalves et al., 2021). I view stewardship as a manifestation of this: what interests me is how people relate to spaces of naturalness within the container of the city — places wherein the natural world and urban residents co-exist and build relationships through mutual care. This has meant interrogating the diverse ways in which people relate themselves to and interact with urban natural spaces. I engage with the stewardship practices of those caring for a variety of urban green spaces in Vancouver, Canada and Medellín, Colombia, focusing specifically on how stewardship acts as an expression of environmental care and resistance as well as characterizing the relationships to place formed through care for public green spaces. Through my work I consider how the practices and perspectives of stewards contribute to an essential question for the future of cities: what might urban greening look like with an explicit orientation towards and intention to increase justice and equity? The project calls for a paradigm shift away from common approaches to greening that frame its benefits in terms of neoliberal concerns — e.g., economic feasibility, human-centered livability — and

instead heightens focus on the care work already occurring at the local and grassroots scale and the extent to which this stewardship promotes a holistic ethic of environmental care and responds directly to environmental injustices. The project is ongoing across both Vancouver and Medellín, informed by the urban stewardship efforts of research collaborators and community partners and featuring a suite of methods intended to bring local stewards into conversation in the name of story-sharing and solution-building. The insights produced through this work will influence novel approaches to urban greening that uplift justice-oriented grassroots greening efforts and inspire greater collaboration across diverse knowledge holders and stewards.

Walking interview is one method I use to engage with stewards, chosen for its capacity to connect simultaneously with lived experience and relationship to place (Pearsall et al., 2024). In this article, I focus on the walking interview as one piece of my broader research puzzle. My intention is to shed fresh light on the practice, moving beyond a theoretical perspective on the value of grounding interviews in place and additionally reflecting on my own experience applying the method within an action research context. As such, the primary questions explored through this work include: (1) how does the use of walking interview advance research towards deeper understandings of the relationships between people and urban nature; and (2) what is the lived and affective experience of conducting a walking interview? Beyond these explicit objectives, I hope to spark conversation about both the value of community-engaged scholarship as well as the collaboration, reflection, flexibility, and accountability required to facilitate successful relationship building and project implementation.

### *Literature Review*

My first exposure to qualitative methods was an academic revelation. As an introductory assignment in a graduate level course on research design, I was instructed to read Creswell’s (2018) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: choosing among five approaches*. Words like “inductive,” “flexible,” and “humble” began to reshape my conception of what research could be. Something that focused on process rather than outcome and allowed for findings to unfold rather than be proven. Up until this point, I had approached qualitative methods with hesitation. Everything I knew about research revolved around notions of classification, replicability, and generalizability — concepts that Smith (2021) reminds us are integral to colonial domination over knowledge production and the perpetuation of positivist orientations to research. Suddenly though, I was introduced to a novel methodological outlook, one that challenged how academics construct and identify meaning(s). I thus began a years-long (and ongoing) journey to reimagine my approach to research methodology and practice. As my understanding of qualitative methodology deepened, I was drawn to approaches that centered

collaboration and co-production as a means for social and ecological transformation (Chambers et al., 2022; Tengö et al., 2017; Turnhout et al., 2020). It was inspiring to see scholarship that prioritized the establishment of long-term, reciprocal relationships and evaluated itself based on how *useful* its outputs were for those with whom it engaged, rather than on its alignment with positivist expectations of quality (Prasad, 2017). What's more, these authors centered community-building in a way I had never seen — forging research partnerships beyond the academe and emphasizing that knowledge sharing is equally important to knowledge creation. My current orientation to research draws heavily on collaborative and participatory approaches. Below, I highlight these theoretical foundations as well as my arrival at the walking interview as a useful method to connect experiences of stewardship in cities to the diverse relationships formed between people, place, and the natural world.

*Foundations in Participatory Action Research (PAR).* PAR is an orientation to inquiry rooted in transformative intentions and an ethic of collaboration. It reorganizes the research process to disrupt traditional academic patterns, instead centering place-based knowledge and experience and situating community need at the core of research practice (Dutta et al., 2022). In doing so, PAR emphasizes the importance of recognitional and epistemic justices within research, giving heightened attention to the power dynamics present in academic research — i.e., who is involved in the establishment of research questions and parameters as well as the creation and dissemination of knowledge (Sultana, 2007). Torre (2009) explores this notion in depth, calling for PAR that is explicitly grounded in social justice and places research power in the hands of those with the most contextual understanding of the challenge under investigation. PAR decenters the researcher as the primary node of transformation, instead setting transformation as a goal towards which all involved are collectively advancing (Gergan & Smith, 2021). As I adjusted my own approach to reflect these principles, I felt the need to make space for the nuances of lived experience and imagine research pathways that permit participants to be dynamic in their identity, social positioning, and opinion. I had to recognize that the people with whom I work are not monoliths, and neither should be the solutions that emerge through PAR (Forsyth, 2008). Torre (2009) additionally encourages researchers to be attentive to place and context and the ways in which historical and spatial realities mediate participant experience. A central responsibility of PAR is to embed research in a deep understanding of place, integrating participant experience — i.e., the unique reality through which participants move through and experience their world — into the framing of the research challenge to be addressed. PAR encourages a research practice that interrogates power relations and establishes protocols that enact relevant change (Chambers et al., 2022). An immediate hurdle I faced when applying PAR literature to the case of urban stewardship, exploring how

people imbue meaning within the natural environment through care for urban nature, was that of moving from theory to practice. Specifically, I struggled to select research methods that could engage with the complexity invited by a PAR approach.

*The Walking Interview.* The interview emerged as a useful method to support my inquiry. However, the interview practices I had applied in the past — primarily static, semi-structured interview (Schensul et al., 1999) — failed to access the nuance of respondent relationships to their local communities and ecologies. In other words, semi-structured interview removed the respondent, physically and emotionally, from their environment, whereas what interested me was the nature of their connection to place. I began to search for different approaches to interview that emphasized the relationship between people and place and could offer insight into how and why people care for the natural world as well as the affective worlds accessed through their stewardship (Pearsall et al., 2024). It was then that I found place and movement-based interviewing, in particular walking and collaborative interview (King & Woodroffe, 2017; Riley & Holton, 2016). Both styles emphasize the value of spontaneous reflection and knowledge co-creation within the interview process. In doing so, they challenge the roles of *interviewer* and *respondent*, suggesting that an interview is an active negotiation between multiple ways of understanding and experiencing a place (Pearsall et al., 2024). Walking interviews are an inherently collaborative activity. Although the subject of discussion is consented to in advance, the goal as an interviewer is not to control the form and flow of conversation. There is no pre-determined destination; more important is the process of the interview and what its trajectory suggests about how the participant constructs their reality and creates meaning within it (Greenspan & Bolkosky, 2006). Gubrium and Holstein (2012) offer a theoretical explanation for this approach, writing that, “The interplay of narrative work and narrative environments — the constructive *hows* and substantive *whats* of the matter — provides interviews with a discernable range of possibilities for asking and responding to questions about what we are and what our worlds are like.” As an interviewer, I must embrace a certain degree of unpredictability to attune to the complex factors that influence how people walk through and understand their worlds. An interview should not be replicable nor uniform — what is of interest are the ways in which respondent narratives resist these traits and reflect unique perspectives.

Another essential aspect of interviewing is the way in which those participating influence one another — the interviewer through a flexible practice of questioning and the respondent through their connection of that question to experience and story. Only through this process of mutual impact can we move towards a shared understanding of one another's realities and collectively create meaning (Evans & Jones, 2011). Related to this, a collaborative interview approach

recognizes the gravity of context and place (King & Woodroffe, 2017; Riley & Holton, 2016). Embedding an interview in an environment meaningful to the participant invites greater depth and dimension in both the questions asked and responses given. While an interviewer feels emboldened to go ‘off-script’ and tailor their inquiry to place-specific elements, participants similarly can take ownership over the experience, guiding the interviewer through the space while integrating movement, memory, and story. As such, the interview touches on more than a participant’s lived experience; it questions how that experience is mediated by a particular environment and practice. It is not just the participant being interviewed, but their relationship to the location (Pearsall et al., 2024). These departures from traditional semi-structured interview formats promote a more natural *flow*, inspiring an experience that is, “[...] unhurried, somehow both orderly and organic, with an evolving life of its own” (Greenspan & Bolkosky, 2006). To me, the theory of walking interview presented an image of a comfortable and personal interview wherein inquiry melts into conversation. Achieving this in practice, however, has required a long process of refinement, reflection, and discomfort both within and outside the interview.

## Methods

### Approach

The two interviews selected as part of this methodological exploration occurred in April and September of 2024 in Medellín, Colombia and Vancouver, Canada. All research participants are environmental activists and stewards who I met before the outset of the research project and recruited due to our pre-existing relationship and their passion for stewardship and ecological advocacy. The decision to focus on just two of the many ( $n = 23$ ) interviews conducted as part of this research project reflects my intention to analyze in-depth the practice and experience of walking interview. As opposed to gleaning broad lessons across a wide range of interviews, I share two detailed accounts of walking interview and give attention to each significant moment that emerged from them. The interview schedule was designed to encourage a narrative, conversational interview (Hay & Cope, 2021), with topics organized thematically to explore participant relationship to place and stewardship and the ways in which these elements influenced one another (see Appendix A). Three foci guided development of the schedule: (i) how stewardship manifests at the community and/or grassroots scale in urban green spaces; (ii) how and to what extent stewards respond to environmental justice concerns through their environmental care; and (iii) what social and political barriers to practice do stewards face? Interview participants were invited to select the walking interview location — an urban green space that was meaningful to them and, ideally, one in which they took an active stewardship role.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded following an adapted *oral coding* framework (Bernauer, 2022) in order to emphasize the experiential and reflective intention of the walking interviews. The transcripts were complemented by field notes taken following each interview and throughout the research process. Since this paper is a methodological reflection as opposed to a write-up of interview findings and themes, analysis focused on returning to the experience of the interview through listening back, reviewing field notes, and noting burgeoning observations and reflections. Emphasis was placed on understanding the experience of the walking interview as well as interpreting the content of what was discussed. The stories produced were reviewed and discussed with interviewees to ensure alignment in how each interview was represented and to address any anonymity concerns.

### Positionality

*Who Am I?* I am a fourth-generation settler of Eastern European, Ashkenazi descent living on unceded Coast Salish territory — specifically, that of the Sk̓wxwú7mesh, Selilwiltulh, and x̓m̓əθk̓w̓əy̓əm Nations — and raised on the stolen lands of the Mohican people of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. As a PhD candidate, I study how urban greening can foster knowledge-sharing, community-building, and more just cities. I approach this work with both excitement and caution, aware of how sustainability narratives have been shaped by capitalist and individualist logics (Kotsila et al., 2021; Lang & Rothenberg, 2017; Langhorst, 2015). These concerns draw me toward participatory, co-creative approaches that center equity and collaboration.

*Who Am I to Do This Work?* This question has stayed with me throughout the project. It asks not about my credentials, but about the relationship between my identity, values, and research practice. I am often an outsider, encountering perspectives and histories unfamiliar to me. Early on, this made me question my capacity to do the work well. Over time, I’ve come to see the value of decentering myself as the researcher and recognizing this project as a shared endeavor. Accountability, then, lies not only in acting with care, but in fostering a community of mutual support. While my outsider status may persist, rooting the work in relationships helps shift the locus of expertise from the individual to the collective.

### Findings

Below I share two stories that emerged from walking interviews conducted with stewards of the Chénchenstway Healing Garden and Food Forest in Vancouver, Canada and El Eco-parque Comuna 13 in Medellín, Colombia. Each retelling interweaves my narrative voice as interviewer with the experience of being in each of these places and the words of

interviewees. Names and place names have been anonymized where requested by interviewees.

### *Tending the Healing Garden and Food Forest at Chénchenstway*

Though on time, I feel rushed as I make my way along Wall Street towards the Chénchenstway Healing Garden and Food Forest. This is a place I have been many times before, so I am not quite sure what my nervous system is trying to communicate through my skipping heart and sweaty palms. As I turn the corner and the garden comes into view, I hear the message: slow down. My steps soften and my body relaxes. It is one of those days when I need to be in a garden. Purples and yellows draw my eye as I meander up the hill, mulch soft beneath my feet. By the time I see Lori, examining a collection of Douglas aster that is to be pulled and transplanted to a nearby garden, my body is at equilibrium. We share a hug, and my attention is pulled towards two bags holding freshly harvested plants. I only recognized the shape of one: sweetgrass. Lori expresses her joy that, after only two years of stewardship, the garden is vibrant enough to support other projects across the city and that the gifts of Chénchenstway are spreading. Focus then turns to the matter at hand, the interview. I carefully connect Lori's lavalier mic, test the sound levels, and hit record. The red light begins to flash and suddenly I am a researcher.

I am not sure I will ever find comfort in the moment when an interview begins. Even after having engaged with the method in theory and practice for years, I am destabilized by assuming the role of researcher. Nothing substantive about my demeanor changes, but I notice an affective shift between myself and the person with whom I am speaking. It is akin to the change in air pressure that precedes a storm; something sensed before it is felt. We become aware that what will be said will reach beyond our relationship. This is further pronounced when interviewing a friend and even more so when engaging in a place-based and collaborative interview method. My practice eschews strict schedules and preconceived trajectories, instead leaving space for reflections and experiences to unfold naturally. Organic discussion relies heavily on a sense of safety and comfort: *can I trust you with my story?* Regardless of whether Lori and I had built a foundation of trust in the past, the relationship must be reaffirmed and negotiated through the new dynamic into which we are stepping. Tacitly, I am making a promise to care for and respect the knowledge shared during our discussion. To communicate that I will be a good steward not through words, but through the process of interview itself.

*"We have a lot of strawberries here [...] I'm trying to keep them from going too far into the grass. What a beautiful gift."* Lori drives a pitchfork into the soil and gently leans the handle back, lifting the earth beneath. From the mass of leaf and vine, she pulls a strand of strawberries with thick roots and instructs me to begin doing the same. We work along the edge of the

patch, Lori loosening the soil, and me retrieving strawberries to transplant. Meanwhile, our interview has gotten underway. *"[...] how beautiful that we can now start the conversation with, wow, I live on the lands of these incredible, strong, vibrant, thriving people that have shown us that with all that adversity, we can still be here. And we can do the good work and we can put our hands in the earth [...]"* Lori is a Métis herbalist and educator as well as land steward and co-creator with the Vancouver Urban Food Forest Foundation (VUFFF). Her love and passion for this work is palpable. As our tray fills with strawberry transplants, we discuss the importance of Chénchenstway and the practices of stewardship now taking place in what had been, two years earlier, turf grass in Vancouver's Hastings-Sunrise neighborhood. *"We're bringing back not just the native plants, [but] hopefully the native language [...] this [garden] is referred to as Chénchenstway, which is from the Skwxwú7mesh sníchim, the Squamish language [...] the translation would be 'hold each other up.'"* The garden is more than a place of stewardship, it is a call to action. A portal through which Indigenous residents can connect with and reclaim traditional practice while visitors support this process and fortify their own relationships to both the land and the greater community that calls Chénchenstway home. *"Who shows up when we change the landscape and we bring that diversity in? The insects show up, the birds show up, the spiders show up. Everybody gets to celebrate and go, 'Hey, thank you, I get fed and nourished. And here, let me share my song with you.'"* As Lori says this, my attention widens, absorbing the low hum of life radiating throughout the garden. Chénchenstway is more than a place of meeting and learning, it is a community unto itself.

I see clearly the value in integrating place and movement into interview practice. Distinct from past instances wherein I have relied solely on intellect to make sense of interview, I am able to connect Lori's words with my sensory world and *feel* the diversity of life present in the garden. It is as if we are welcoming Chénchenstway into our conversation, allowing it to show its impact as a home and place of gathering. Further, the garden acts as a translator, whispering throughout the interview and helping me to understand the connections and relationships that Lori experiences through her stewardship. Kusenbach (2024) alludes to this advantage of context-conscious approaches to interviewing, writing that sit-down interviews risk overlooking, *"[...] aspects of lived experience [that] may either remain invisible, or, if they are noticed, unintelligible"* (57). Where an interview takes place is an essential aspect of meaning-making — as Lori shares her own understanding and relationship to the garden, she mediates my embodied experience and through this I can connect with her narrative. The aspect of movement invited by place-based interview is also worth noting. As our conversation progresses, I am increasingly influenced by how Lori navigates and interacts with Chénchenstway. I am not simply learning about the garden; I am connecting to the story and rhythm of Lori's stewardship and way of *being in* the garden.

We have finished collecting strawberry plants and are strolling through the garden pathways. Our discussion stalls as Lori bends to examine a plant and consider whether a new location in the garden might better serve it. *“For me, every plant has a gift to offer. So what I need to do is to find out who it is and what gift that might be.”* I am captivated by the elegance and simplicity of this statement. To steward Chénchenstway is to know its inhabitants as neighbors and recognize the role they play within the broader community. It is to challenge the notion that the garden serves people, instead embracing that it is a web of mutual care. Lori continues surveying the garden bed and calls my attention to a collection of dandelions that has made its way into the garden. *“I love that [we have] not only in this diversity wild native plants, we have the wild weeds.”* A friend will come soon to harvest it, she explains, preparing medicines to keep and share. I notice that throughout our discussion of biodiversity, the concept is never communicated through goals or targets, but rather as an invitation. Intricate planning established the layout of Chénchenstway, of course, but the relationships that emerged as a result were not forced, they were nurtured. Furthermore, space was made to allow for interaction between people and nature; for people to care for the plants and recognize how the plants care for them. Lori continues, *“[from] an Indigenous point of view or worldview [...] we were taught that these are our relatives [...] if I can understand that, if I can bring that into my awareness, can I start to embody that? How can I not take care of what’s taking care of me?”* As she shares, looking over the breadth of life in front of us, there is a tenderness in her gaze. It is one thing to learn of reciprocity, but something totally different to witness it embodied in stewardship. Lori is listening to the garden. Expressing care through the motions of her hands – brushing the foliage and noticing how the garden replies: *“[...] life is about observation. For us to witness. What are we seeing? What are we not seeing?”*

As our interview draws to a close, we bask in the vitality and resilience of the young forest around us. Lori remains vigilant, noting where water is needed and what work should be done in the coming weeks. She continues to communicate her obligation to Chénchenstway – to be a good steward. I disconnect Lori’s mic and consider how much of what we communicated during our interview had nothing to do with the device. The times our experience transcended the verbal and motion supplemented words. When practicing interviews in the past, it has often felt that the meaning behind stories shared was trapped within the container of conversation – inaccessible or simply not communicable within the format. With Lori, however, I was able to connect words to motion, affect, and meaning. This proved especially potent when communicating across distinct worldviews. Lori’s stewardship is informed by an Indigenous relationality that, although I comprehend cognitively, draws on a connection and accountability to land separate from my own.<sup>1</sup> Tending to Chénchenstway together, however, provided space for us to co-steward the garden, our practices of care aligning through a

common goal and intention (Liboiron, 2021). I gather my belongings and prepare to leave Chénchenstway. I take a last look at the tray of strawberries Lori and I have collected. They are grouped with a constellation of other plants, packed and ready to be transplanted into other gardens and food forests across Vancouver. Imbued in their roots are stories from this garden and the care of countless hands that have contributed to their growth. They will carry this past with them as they set seed across the city. In the weeks following this interview, I have regularly returned to the image of these plants, enamored of the similarity in our paths. In holding the teachings and experiences that Lori shared with me, I have adopted the responsibility to tell the story of Chénchenstway and contribute to the continued success of its vision. To sow the seeds of what I have learned but never forget the place from which they came.

### *Caminata por El Ecoparque Comuna 13*

I sit with a coffee outside the San Javier metro station, mesmerized by the bustling street and melody of Medellín. It takes me a moment to notice Javier and Valentina as they wave from the opposite sidewalk. I smile as they approach and join me at my table. We have barely settled into conversation when two passersby rush over to wish us good morning and catch up with Javier and Valentina. They are central to environmental advocacy and organizing efforts in Comuna 13, so this is not an uncommon occurrence when we are out together. Valentina gives me a hug goodbye and wishes me well for the morning’s walk – it will just be me and Javier today. I sidle through the crowd to keep pace with Javier. We walk a few blocks further and find a bus to take us up the mountainside towards the outer edge of Comuna 13. We reach the final stop, step out of the bus, and continue on foot, walking a gravel path along the slopes above the city. Our view of the valley widens and I hear the whirr of machinery from a nearby quarry cutting through the buzz of Medellín below. Javier notices it too, disdain in his eyes as he gazes towards the bare mountainside. As our interview begins, I ask Javier to tell me about where we are, where he is taking me.

We have now entered an area known as *La Escombrera*. I take a moment as the gravity of the place settles over me. In the year I have known Javier, we have spoken often of *La Escombrera* and its importance to the residents of Comuna 13 — a legacy of war, grief, and resilience radiates from the landscape. Throughout the turmoil of Colombia’s internal armed conflict, Comuna 13 remained a contested territory, experiencing myriad waves of violence between 1980 and 2014<sup>2</sup> (Gabriel Ignacio Rodríguez et al., 2021; Zapata Tamayo & Villa Martínez, 2017). In total, 463 forced disappearances have been reported in Comuna 13 (Zapata Tamayo & Villa Martínez, 2017). Many who never returned are known to be buried in the hillside outside the neighborhood — today known as *La Escombrera*. As violence began to abate in 2016, the Colombian government sought to reconcile with

its past through reparations and truth commissions. Meanwhile, Comuna 13 embraced a culture of care and mutual support as residents unified their community and reclaimed their territory (Grisales et al., 2023). La Escombrera remains as a memorial to the disappeared and a reminder of the community's fortitude. Our destination, *El Ecoparque Comuna 13*, is a project Javier co-founded in 2019 with the multi-faceted mission to foster connection between residents of Comuna 13 and their natural surroundings, conserve the neighborhood's resources, celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the region, and honor the collective history of Medellín and Comuna 13.

Soon *El Ecoparque Comuna 13* comes into view. The boundary of the park is lined with cattle fencing behind which runs a stream, dammed in multiple places to create a series of pools. I trace the path of the stream and lose sight of it in the slopes above. With each step, I am reminded that the soil on which I step holds the pain of decades of violence and the memories of countless lives. For me, however, this is pain that I have only come to know through books, stories, and museum exhibitions — I did not live through the suffering of this community and the memories feature faces I do not recognize. I feel the weight of their loss through testimony and narrative, but to me the names are of victims, not family. Doubt seeps to the forefront of my mind. I am an outsider here, not of this place and a visitor to the history of La Escombrera. What right do I have to be here? To record Javier's story of this place? I feel myself toeing the line of extractive research (Smith, 2021), unsure where my next steps will take me. I take a breath and open my gaze, trying to see the full picture. The first thing I notice is that Javier does not walk with sorrow, but with pride. I am jolted back to the present moment. This place holds a dark past, but also a hopeful future. I was invited here not to dwell on what has been, but to learn so that I might better understand the passion and resilience that Javier's stewardship displays. What's more, to be welcomed here is a sign of trust. Although this place is not my home, there is much for Javier and me to share and see together. I document this internal journey not to discount or run from the truth of my apprehensions but rather to reflect on the value of sharing across difference and welcoming the uncertainty it brings into the research process. I am simultaneously outside the history of this place and inside a relationship that bids me welcome to witness it. I am here to be a good guest. As we progress through our interview, Javier and I are collectively constructing a new narrative of La Escombrera, with the promise that it will be shared beyond the boundaries of Comuna 13 to teach a broader audience the lessons of the territory.

We push through a slatted wooden gate and step onto one of the concrete dams spanning the stream. Three staff members chat casually in front of us as they scrub and organize crates of carrots — food for the animals. After brief introductions, we continue into the park joined by Julián, the other co-founder. The park spans 180 hectares, Julián

explains. We pass a bright yellow sign with arrows directing visitors across the park to a variety of activities: cabanas, a market and restaurant, natural pools, horse stables, riding and walking trails. Everything the park offers has evolved over time, informed by an obligation to the community and land. *"We never had the intention of creating an eco-park. Our intention was to take back this space that had been lost to our community. Along the way, as we recovered the pools and the walking trails, other needs emerged [...] And what you see here today is the product of what we saw as the needs of the community"* (B1).<sup>3</sup> Javier and Julián are guided by a desire to reclaim and restore natural spaces that had been integral to the identity of Comuna 13 but were stolen from their community. This mission has been complicated, however, by the legacy of La Escombrera and the history the land holds. *"This farm is well known because people talk about La Escombrera [...] so we started [the ecopark] with the intention of bringing back the paseos de olla [...] activities that people from the community would do, even those who wouldn't have the resources to go to a beach or an aquatics park"* (B2). *Paseos de olla* — a Colombian tradition during which families and friends gather in nature, typically near water, to spend time cooking and socializing. A tradition that was interrupted by violence in the natural areas surrounding Comuna 13 and became inaccessible to those unable to shift their gathering to safer places. In creating a space for residents to reconnect with land-based traditions, such as the *paseos de olla*, *El Ecoparque Comuna 13* invites the community to rewrite the narrative of La Escombrera as a place not defined by violence, but resilience.

For Julián, this is an essential story to tell. He explains that the eco-park is redesigning its logo seeking to better capture the spirit of the land and what it has come to represent. *"We have been working with the themes of mother earth and the soul [...] because we feel a lot of paranormal activity from the victims in this area [...] We are transforming the logo a bit to make it resemble more the Virgin [...] and making the space a place for meeting, for prayer to help save the souls that are lost here"* (B3). Apart from mending relationships with nature and tradition, the eco-park gives residents a place to both mourn the past and experience present joy. The eco-park tells a story of rebirth and forges new relationships to place, built alongside the memory of those lost. For Javier, this goal is complemented by a vision to connect young people to the legacy of their territory: *"There are horses to ride. We have trails to walk that are similar to those our grandparents traversed. And there's so much beauty and nature [...] so that people can connect with our environment"* (B4). It is far more than the land that Javier and Julián steward through their work. They are tending to a fractured relationship between their community and nature and, in doing so, normalizing an ethic of environmental care that was once definitive of connections to the territory. *El Ecoparque Comuna 13* does not shy away from its history, rather it challenges those who visit to confront that narrative and take part in telling a new story.

We walk further into the park, traversing a series of trails on the mountainside above the natural pools and main entrance. Ecoparque Comuna 13 officially opens for the day. Families set up around the picnic tables and water – the sounds of splashing and laughter wash over me as Javier and Julián’s words circulate in my mind. I am witnessing first-hand a process of repair facilitated through play, joy, and contact with nature. Moreover, I have been welcomed into the act of collective storytelling to learn from and share the lessons of legacy and mutual care infused in the landscape. The walking interview has been an ideal container through which to explore the complexity of El Ecoparque Comuna 13. Throughout my time with Javier and Julián, I have felt an overwhelming sense of presence, drawing direct and immediate connections between their intentions as organizers and the experience of being in the park. The sensory landscape is immersive and walking interview has encouraged me to stay within it. I connect to the history and story of the eco-park through the passion Javier and Julián display in their stewardship and the physical environment surrounding us. With this invitation, however, comes responsibility and accountability – to continue to show up as a researcher and advocate and to not end my involvement when the recording stops.

Just beyond the fence line, the slow grinding of machinery serves as a reminder that El Ecoparque Comuna 13 remains a site of contestation. As development pressures in the region mount, Julián and Javier have had to continually adjust their approach to protect the eco-park from encroachment. The expansion of a nearby quarry — the same that Javier and I passed earlier in the day — is a major threat to their efforts. They are confident, however, having won many battles in the past and developed a reputation for their environmental advocacy. “*We are the thorn in the side of the expansion of the quarry [...] this is why they [other developers] aren’t looking for a way to get rid of us*” (B5). Another point of strength is the network of community activists that have coalesced through the work of the eco-park. “[...] *we also meet with other people who are creating protected areas or eco-parks. [...] we want to make sure that whoever is doing this work does it with a vision to protect the environment. This is why we call them eco-parks, because we are fostering a culture of ecological care*” (B6). Javier and Julián support a constellation of environmental organizers throughout Medellín, sharing the story of El Ecoparque Comuna 13 as a model for positive change. They see a movement forming — a series of parks throughout the city rebuilding relationships with local ecosystems and reconnecting residents with the natural world. Over the years getting to know Javier, I have become further enmeshed in this movement and seen firsthand the influence of spaces like the eco-park in creating cultures of ecological care and repair throughout Medellín. As our interview ends, one question lingers, *how do I continue to support the mission and network of El Ecoparque Comuna 13?* We fall quiet as we traverse the slopes and meander along the stream, heading back towards the park entrance. I take this moment to share my gratitude for

having been welcomed to take part in this conversation and explore the complex intersection of history and hope present in the eco-park. To witness the power of stewardship to cultivate spaces that celebrate the land while also inviting reflection and healing for what the land has seen.

## Discussion

Drawing on the stories shared, I use this section to discuss how walking interview has been useful as a method to connect with stewards as well as their practices of care and relationships to place. First, I consider how my findings speak to the current state of walking interview methodology. Then, I explore the affective experience of doing walking interview, reflecting on my own experience as a researcher and the complexity of applying the method. Finally, I explore several limitations I encountered with the method and consider future directions for both my own research practice and other qualitative researchers interested in pursuing walking interview as a method.

### *Walking Interviews Immerse Researchers in Context and Place*

Riley & Holton, in their 2016 review of walking interview practice, introduce the notion of *serendipity* as an essential element of how place influences an interview. They explain that subtle features of the environment in which an interview occurs elicit unique stories that speak to potentially unseen — from the perspective of the interviewer — histories as well as reveal the nuance behind a respondent’s relationship to place. In the case of El Ecoparque Comuna 13, numerous *unintended encounters* (Riley & Holton, 2016) were foundational to the interview with discussion as much inspired by what we were observing as the narrative thread my questions invited. For example, the presence of the neighboring quarry offered both a visual and auditory stimulus that influenced the tone of the interview as it came into and out of focus. Although at times it felt intrusive, the quarry’s presence became a focal point for discussion around themes of extraction and pollution and the importance of the eco-park as a beacon of change. Its intrusion became essential to my understanding of why the eco-park, and its mission of repair, is important to the local community. I was similarly impacted by the sounds of families enjoying the natural pools that grounded Javier and Julián’s reflections on the eco-park’s role reconnecting youth to their local waterways and green spaces. Relative to past experiences with qualitative interviews wherein I strove to control the ambient environment in which the interview took place (Schensul et al., 1999), the walking interview embraced ambient sound and place as an active research participant. It encouraged me to remain present and frame external stimuli not as interruptions, but rather as direct connections between interviewee perspective, lived experience, and local context

(King & Woodroffe, 2017). Scholars have noted that walking interviews vastly alter the scope of perspective and knowledge shared during an interview due to their attention to context and connection to everyday activity (King & Woodroffe, 2017; Pearsall et al., 2024). My experience in the eco-park reinforces this methodological strength and additionally suggests that the environment itself plays a profound role in how the walking interview is processed by both the researcher and interviewee. The product of my interview with Javier and Julián was a layered picture of more than just stewardship in El Ecoparque Comuna 13. Additionally, it highlighted how their practice impacts and is informed by the legacy of La Escombrera and a vision of future rooted in ecological care and conscience. The movement and place-based aspects of the walking interview were more than a means to invite conversation and understand La Escombrera, but also a lens into the role of the eco-park itself in influencing how residents relate to and experience the place.

My interview experiences additionally suggest that the content and texture of stories elicited during a walking interview depend on the scale of environment being experienced at any given moment. In the case of my walking interview in Chénchenstway, Lori and I regularly shifted between the micro and macro scale — some moments we spent crouched in garden beds interacting with individual plants while in others we stood above, looking across the entire garden ecosystem. Each unique vista within the food forest led to a distinct interview outcome. This translated, as well, into the realm of physical interaction with the garden. Working in the strawberry patch drove discussion towards the ecology of the site and the nuances of Lori’s stewardship practice whereas moments of walking the pathways invited more holistic discussion of the garden’s broader influence as a place of gathering, community building, and knowledge sharing. It was not any single activity, but rather the combination of each mode of being in the garden that facilitated my understanding of the relationships linking Lori to the place and her stewardship practice. This suggests an important re-framing of the walking interview method itself, shifting emphasis away from movement *through* space as the primary focus of interview (Evans & Jones, 2011; Pearsall et al., 2024) and instead encouraging a more diverse engagement *with* the interview environment. The walking interview is not an observational exercise but rather an immersive one, inviting a process of collective relationship-building and emotional attachment that links participant, interviewer, and environment. Again, this reinforces the notion that the role of place within a walking interview is not passive, but that a walking interview’s strength is rooted in the embodied experience invited through the method (King & Woodroffe, 2017).

### *Affective Experience of Walking Interview, Inside and Out*

A thread that unites both interview accounts is the need to navigate a shifting positionality between inside and outside

researcher. Throughout my formation working within the realm of qualitative research and participatory methods, I have returned regularly to the notion of insider/outsider research, striving to understand exactly what it is that brings someone near to or far from a particular research context. Of course, this question is not new within the realm of qualitative methods scholarship. Sultana (2015) writes on the complexity of identity and the ways it alters a researcher’s position relative to the communities with whom they work: “The borders that I crossed, I feel, are always here within me, negotiating the various locations and subjectivities I simultaneously feel a part of and apart from. [...] the contradictions in my positionality and in-between status had to be constantly reworked as I undertook fieldwork” (377). Sultana’s reflection pinpoints a central facet of my own experience during walking interviews: being inside or outside is a process of continuous *negotiation*. When walking with Lori, part of me did so as a settler, socialized to see myself as removed from the natural world. Another part, striving to decolonize my relationship to place, walked humbly in the recognition that, although my and Lori’s experiences of being in Chénchenstway were informed by distinct worldviews and orientations to the food forest, I could appreciate her care and feel the vibrancy of life around us. This sensation was complemented by moments of feeling inside, for instance when tending to the strawberry patch. Physically interacting with the food forest gave me a sense of familiarity and comfort — I knew what to do and could communicate this through my actions. There were, as well, times when the notion of inside/outside melted away, when I was simply walking with a friend through a burgeoning food forest and experiencing the joy of being there.

A walking interview is a relational experience. The method was developed to explore the connections linking people, place, and experience (Pearsall et al., 2024); however, overlooked in walking interview literature is the influence of interpersonal connection on interview process and outcome. My research has occurred over a timeline of four years, much of that time spent building research relationships and connections in the cities where I work. As a result, when the time came to begin walking interviews I was not talking with strangers, but colleagues and friends. I was invested in the stories of interviewees and, beyond this, had often developed personal connections to the work they were doing. The intention of the interview went beyond cataloguing experience, rather I wanted to support stewardship and use this research as a vessel through which to uplift grassroots efforts. This, too, impacted how I positioned myself along the inside/outside researcher spectrum. As relationships deepened, I found myself more invested and involved as an advocate and ally. Fine & Torre’s (2006) account of conducting participatory research with incarcerated women in the United States sheds light on this theme. They discuss the importance of obligation in research — i.e., the ways in which the intentions of action research evolve in alignment with research partners. Although all may arrive from diverse perspectives and lived experiences,

the organic strengthening of relationships re-orient research from an objective-guided process towards the fulfillment of mutual obligations (see, as well, Dutta et al., 2022). In the case of my walking interview in El Ecoparque Comuna 13, this speaks to the challenge of remaining flexible in my approach as well as open to how the interview environment influences the experience. Javier's invitation to the eco-park was predicated on a shared obligation and desire to tell the story of the site. As noted in my account of the interview, I moved through a variety of affective responses to being there: an initial nervousness and apprehension that gave way to a sense of deepened connection to Javier and the mission of the eco-park. The interview evolved into what Fontana and Frey (2005) characterize as empathetic and politically involved, eschewing the neutrality once considered the gold standard of qualitative research in favor of direct involvement and advocacy facilitated through the interview. The advantage of the walking interview method in this context was that it permitted me to feel through the *embodied discomfort* of being in El Ecoparque Comuna 13 and acknowledge that the connection to collective grief I felt as an interviewer was essential to my obligation as a researcher. Beyond noting shifts in my positionality relative to Javier and Julián, I could give awareness to my relationships to the eco-park, its mission, and the stories held by the land itself. I had never before considered the notion of *inside* research through this lens: connection became more than my relationship to the experiences of an interviewee, but to the landscape.

### Complexities and Limitations of Walking Interviews

Conducting a walking interview is a messy process – it requires a researcher to navigate countless complexities and entanglements — but it is useful precisely because it permits messiness. For my own interview practice, it was essential that I find comfort in the uncertainty of the process (Greenspan & Bolkosky, 2006). The format of the walking interview permitted me to remain present as stewards' stories unraveled organically. I could release the pressure to direct conversation knowing that the experience of moving through and interacting with a place meaningful to them was itself a boundary of our conversation. My role as an interviewer was not to control the experience but to facilitate an environment in which stewards felt invited to express themselves and guide our path forward (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). My practice of walking interview lacked prescription and because of this it was a strong tool for exploring the stories people tell to make sense of their lived experiences and justify their actions; however, this flexibility also invites limitations.

Behind each walking interview I have conducted is a dense record of experience, perspective, and memory. In the aftermath, it falls on me to distill that information and determine what to share. This, of course, is the case for any interview but in dealing with the depth of a walking interview the challenge feels more pronounced. Walking interviews offer adaptability, but with this comes the tradeoff that finding the meaning behind the

message becomes an interpretive process. What's more, my own participation is woven into the record and recollection of each interview, further complicating my role as a communicator of the encounter. Walking interviews invite the researcher to play an active part in the process of knowledge creation (Pearsall et al., 2024), but this introduces the added responsibility to be explicit about the ways in which my own interpretive lens influences the retelling of the story. Writing up the above interviews at times felt like an auto-ethnographic exercise, and it was a challenge to strike a balance between sharing the lessons imbued within the words and actions of stewards with an honest recognition of how those lessons were filtered through my experience. This tension was exacerbated by the pressure to frame the interviews in terms of *findings* that a broader academic community could appreciate. Since the accounts of stewards are inseparable from the interview context and my reflections as the interviewer, findings are only sensible when reported as part of the greater story of both the interview and the place where it was conducted. This meant that any analysis of the interviews would need to bridge audio recordings, photos, and field notes, each offering a different perspective on the experience. Throughout all of this, though, was the concern that the *moment* of the interview was impossible to capture after it had passed. My records of the event called me back to the interview, but the feeling of *being there* remained elusive. The limitation to be gleaned from this is that although walking interviews are useful because of the detail and feeling they capture, the challenge remains of expressing this complexity through traditional academic channels. This calls for the exploration of new forms of sharing interview experiences – those that permit researchers to connect to the depth of nuance present in immersive methods such as walking interviews.

### Conclusion

To close this methodological exploration, I want to reflect on one question: *where do the interview experiences recounted above leave me in my qualitative methods journey?*

I have found immense value in practicing a method that gives attention to stories of place and lived experiences, paying attention to how stewards connect to the context and history of green spaces meaningful to them. In the case of the two interviews shared in this paper, such a practice revealed relationships of care and connection to the land that I otherwise may have overlooked. More was required than attention to the words of Lori, Javier, and Julián; rather the depth of the interviews was communicated through movement, through feeling, and through relationships to place. Perhaps the most potent lesson I drew from my methodological experiment is that an *interview requires perception beyond the intellectual*. Although reason has its place as an interpretive tool, the most powerful moments from my interviews were grounded in senses that connected me physically and emotionally to the places to which I was invited and the stories held there. It is not novel to claim that trusting oneself as a research

instrument is essential to conducting qualitative methods (Creswell, 2018), but probing my own practice in detail is a powerful reminder of my responsibility to continue refining my research senses. Moving forward, my intention is twofold. To better tune into my intuition as a legitimate source of insight and to explore novel forms of knowledge sharing and co-creation that allow space for the depth of such research to shine through. Further, I hope to continue encouraging discussion surrounding the ways in which academics do qualitative research. To advance cultures of reflection surrounding research practice and contribute to the generation of new perspectives on the role place-based methodologies can play in the pursuit of rich, contextually grounded insights.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. The third chapter of Max Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism* offers useful insight into this complexity. While discussing research approaches implemented in their academic lab that include Indigenous and non-Indigenous lab members, Liboiron writes that, "[...] some lab members are engaging in good Land relations according to traditional Indigenous teachings, instructions, and obligations, and some are engaging in good land relations as environmentalists, ecologists, ecofeminists, and Nature lovers. Sometimes those obligations overlap, and sometimes they are at odds" (Liboiron, 2021, p. 127). This does not suggest that the research practices and perspectives of lab members are unintelligible to one another, rather that members are constantly in a process of negotiating knowledges and co-creating approaches that make space for the expression of diverse L/land relations.
2. Detailed elaboration on the complexities of the armed conflict in Colombia and its impact on Medellín and Comuna 13 is beyond the scope of this paper; however, for those interested in learning

more, I recommend the following resources produced, in part, through *La Comisión de la Verdad* following the signing of peace accords in 2016:

- <https://www.comisiondelaverdad.co/>.
  - <https://www.museocasadelamemoria.gov.co/>.
  - Zapata Tamayo, P., & Villa Martínez, M. Inés. (2017). *Medellín: Memorias de una guerra urbana* (Primera edición). Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.
3. For quotes in original Spanish, see [Appendix B](#).

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