

Slow Marathon 2018: Creating New Narratives through a Walk at a Distance

by Blake Morris

On 22 April 2018 at 06:45 GMT seventy walker's gathered in Huntly Town Square in Scotland.

Two hours earlier, forty walkers gathered on the Gaza Strip in Palestine. The walkers, numbering over one hundred and separated by over three-thousand miles, were embarking together on a 26 mile walk as part of Deveron Project's seventh annual Slow Marathon. From Huntly we were chauffeured by bus to Dufftown, where a bagpiper greeted us to signal the marathon's traditional start. From that point forward we were reliant on our feet to get us back to Huntly, following a route that zigged and zagged through the landscape to achieve the marathon's required miles.

Slow Marathon 2018 was the culmination of *Walking Without Walls* (2017-2018), a yearlong collaboration between Huntly based artist Rachel Ashton and May Murad, an artist living in Gaza. The project coincided with the centenary celebrations of the end of World War I, as well as the British partition of Palestine; it explored peace, friendship and boundaries through a digital dialogue. Over the course of a year, Ashton and Murad chatted through Skype, WhatsApp and FaceTime, went on simultaneous walks together (when the connection was strong enough for digital exchange), and painted each other's landscape, which they captured on screenshots from their phone. Though they never met in person, over time they developed a friendship at a distance.

The barriers and boundaries to collaboration required Ashton and Murad to paint each other's digital landscapes without ever actually stepping foot inside them. In many ways, the seventh Slow Marathon was a return to the event's originary concept, created in collaboration with Ethiopian artist Mihret Kebede. The first version of the project, *Slow Marathon: From Addis to Huntly and Back* (2012), looked to 'to connect people through art [. . .] without the usual paper and bureaucracy, but with the free will of the people.' It connected global spaces through simultaneous local walks that interrogated borders and boundaries. As we simultaneously walked through Scotland and Gaza, we connected two sets of walkers restricted from walking together.

Unlike Kebede's version of the project, which she developed during a residency in Huntly, the reality of Murad's situation forced her collaboration to remain at a distance.

Palestine is an open air prison, and the people in it born prisoners.

So spoke Mick Napier, a member of the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign, at the Pathmakers' Gathering the evening before the walk. Walkers and members of the community gathered in Huntly's Scout Hall to hear about walking, art, politics and Palestine, in an event that contextualised our walk the following day. I was one of the speakers, and in my presentation I stressed the importance of context in relation to political walking. Walking in Huntly and [walking in Kabul](#) are not the same thing.¹ My discussion was followed by Napier's, who spoke passionately about the plight of the Palestinian people and his experience organising and advocating for their rights. His emotionally charged presentation intertwined his personal experiences with the history of the territory and its residents. He brought a distinctly Scottish perspective to a situation that often feels very distant and made clear there were things that could be done on the ground, in Scotland, to advocate for this population. The evening ended with a presentation by the artists who shared their process and how the project had developed over their year of collaboration. Through these presentations and conversations, the abstract ideas of the Slow Marathon were made tangible; they prepared us for our embodied experience the next day.

My presence in Huntly, the privilege of my American passport and tier four UK visa, contrasted sharply with Murad's inability to visit. Her distance residency was the result of her birth in an unacknowledged country where freedom of movement is entirely restricted. Even within the boundaries of Gaza her movement wasn't free, and up to a few days before the event the team in Palestine worried they wouldn't have the necessary permissions for the walk. Though Kebede had designed Slow Marathon to connect people without red-tape and bureaucracy, the reality of the geopolitical situation in Gaza made it a requirement. In Huntly, where there is 'room to roam', the possibilities for Slow Marathon routes are almost endless; in Gaza the options are limited, with the strip itself being the exact length of a marathon and tensions in the territory make walking the

entirety of its length untenable. The map that shows [the route in Gaza](#) highlights the fact that 'since 2007 [the Gaza Strip's] residents have only been able to exit and enter it in exceptional cases.' The route runs mainly along Gaza's east coast and several sections are repeated to accumulate the required miles; it avoids the contested border zone entirely. Despite this, it still wasn't possible to walk the entire route, which had to be broken up by bus journeys through sections they couldn't walk for one reason or another. In Huntly we experienced our own borders, boundaries and barriers to our right to roam. At times the route stretched along uninviting tarmac, the result of farmers disinclined to let seventy marathoners walk through their land during lambing season. Though ostensibly we had the 'right', dictates of neighbourliness required the planners to choose a different route. In other locations our rights were challenged by signs that said 'no entry' or 'private road', psychological barriers to the public access enshrined in law. With a single enforcement officer managing a wide swathe of land, contesting access restrictions can be a long process. Regardless, our barriers were limited and our inconveniences minor in comparison to the challenges facing the walkers in Gaza.

As we walked through the Scottish countryside, occasionally a drone buzzed overhead, part of Deveron Projects' documentation for the event. Every time I heard it I wondered about the different resonance of that sound in Palestine. I associate drones with artistic documentation, or as toys for the technically inclined. The Slow Marathon walkers in Palestine likely have different associations with that sound. As the *Washington Post* reported in 2011, drones in Gaza have an association with 'an imminent blast'. Put more simply, 'drones mean death' ([Wilson, 2011](#)). A month before the Slow Marathon an Israeli drone was reported to have dropped tear gas on protesters in Gaza ([Wadi, 2018](#)); a new technique in crowd control used for the first time. The walkers in Gaza had a drone as well, capturing gorgeous footage of their trek along the coast; in contrast to the Israeli drones that sometimes dominate the landscape, this drone was contributing to a dialogue of pacifism and peace and helping to connect local experiences globally. Despite their use of a drone as well, whenever I heard it buzzing above me I thought, 'I've never had a drone drop tear-gas on my city, or had its presence make me fear for my family's lives'. It's a

reality I can hardly imagine. The people with whom I walked concurred, their experience of drones was novel, not nefarious.

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Napier's refrain echoed in my ears, but my exposure to Gaza during the Slow Marathon was one of jubilation. The film documenting the walk displays an upbeat, vibrant atmosphere. The walkers, in matching white t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan 'Never give up on your dreams', written in both English and Arabic, are in high-spirits, singing, clapping and laughing as they walk together. When I arrived back in London, however, the footage that dominated my vision of Gaza was of a different nature: tear gas, bloodshed, rocks versus rockets. On 14 May the United States officially opened its new embassy in Jerusalem in a delegation led by Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump. That same day the Israeli army was reported to have attacked Palestinian protesters on the Gaza border. If the numbers reported by Palestinian health officials are correct, fifty-eight residents of Gaza were killed that day (The Guardian, 2018), more than had walked with us during the Slow Marathon. Thousands more were injured. Like all the news out of Gaza, facts are hazy and interpretations conflict. Regardless, one thing is certain: Murad didn't choose to be part of this conflict, she was born into it.

For the most part, my day walking the Slow Marathon was characterised by fantastic weather, good company and lovely scenery. As I walked through the Scottish countryside, I chatted with people from all around the world: a Huntly local who is the only person to have walked all seven marathons; a Fulbright scholar visiting from New York City researching a book on walking art; a French-Canadian munro-bagger who had emigrated to Scotland; a group of friends from Edinburgh who had driven in to do the walk together; a member of the Deveron Projects team, who is working to turn the town into a garden. Along the way we stopped in a felled forest for lunch, ate treats in a yurt, and drank cordial from the Community Crockery. Though the walk was long (after mile twenty, I would have been happy for the end at any time) it never felt like a slog. As scholar and artist Dee Heddon (2014) asserts, walking is 'a convivial activity, if you're not

doing it own your own'. This might not be true in every circumstance—the forced walks of genocidal regimes, or the flight of displaced refugees come to mind—but conviviality characterised my Slow Marathon as I shared stories in and of the landscape with my fellow walkers. Rather than an activist protest against the borders and boundaries that organise Huntly and Gaza, Slow Marathon 2018 created new links between them and highlighted the distance, interrelatedness and differing mobilities of their residents. It brought my attention to Gaza through a different lens, one based on hope and joy, rather than continual conflict. In doing so, it made my experience of Gaza personal, even if at a distance.

French theorist Michel de Certeau (2011, p. 98) positions the walk as 'a space of enunciation.' Walking, he argues, requires one to learn a spatial language and act out that language through movement; it facilitates an exchange between the space and the self. If walking is akin to a speech act, then it can also function as a storytelling mechanism. For de Certeau (*ibid.*, p. 81), the 'story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It makes it'. He argues the only way to understand a story is 'if one enters into this movement oneself' (*ibid.*). This resonates with another oft quoted figure in the history of walking, Walter Benjamin. In 'The Storyteller', Benjamin (1968, sec. iv) argues that storytelling privileges experience over information, it 'does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report.' For Benjamin (*ibid.*), a story's counsel is received when the listener is transformed *into* the storyteller. A walk offers us our own stories; it personalises our experience and provides an entry point for storytelling, to our friends, our families and potentially wider audiences. In this case, that story was in relation to Gaza.

Walking through the Scottish landscape, I shaped my own story, while simultaneously immersed in the stories of Murad, Ashton and my fellow marathoners. As I talked and walked, I shared my experience not just with those whom I walked locally, but with the international cohort of walkers in Gaza as well. My experience of Gaza is generally dominated by media-driven narratives of the conflict, and though unlikely I will ever be able to visit myself, the shared experience of walking

the Slow Marathon offered me a different entry to Gaza—more personal, more human, more jubilant. This story is a counter-point to conflict, one on which future action can be built.

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ⁱ In 2015 Afghani artist Kubra Khademi walked down a street in Kabul where she had experienced street harassment donning a custom made suit of armor. The piece, titled *Armor* (2015), was originally scheduled to last twenty-minutes, but due to increasing danger to the artist she stopped after only eight minutes. After the performance Khademi was the recipient of death threats, which ultimately forced her to flee Afghanistan by foot. She is currently living and working as a refugee in Paris.