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OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WOMEN & WATER : CALLING



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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Ann Raiho with a canoe, is courtesy of Natalie Warren.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE (PEER REVIEW)

# CO-CREATING A LEARNING REFUGIA BY WALKING ALONE AND TOGETHER

By Marijke Hecht, Michelle King, and Shimira Williams

*Editor's note: This Teaching & Practice article has been peer reviewed.*

## Walking Alone and Together Headwaters

We three are women educators, playmakers, learning instigators, and earth troublemakers. Nearly every week since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have met via video

to talk and dream of how we might transform ourselves as individuals and grow and strengthen our relationships with each other and the more-than-human world. During this period of deep

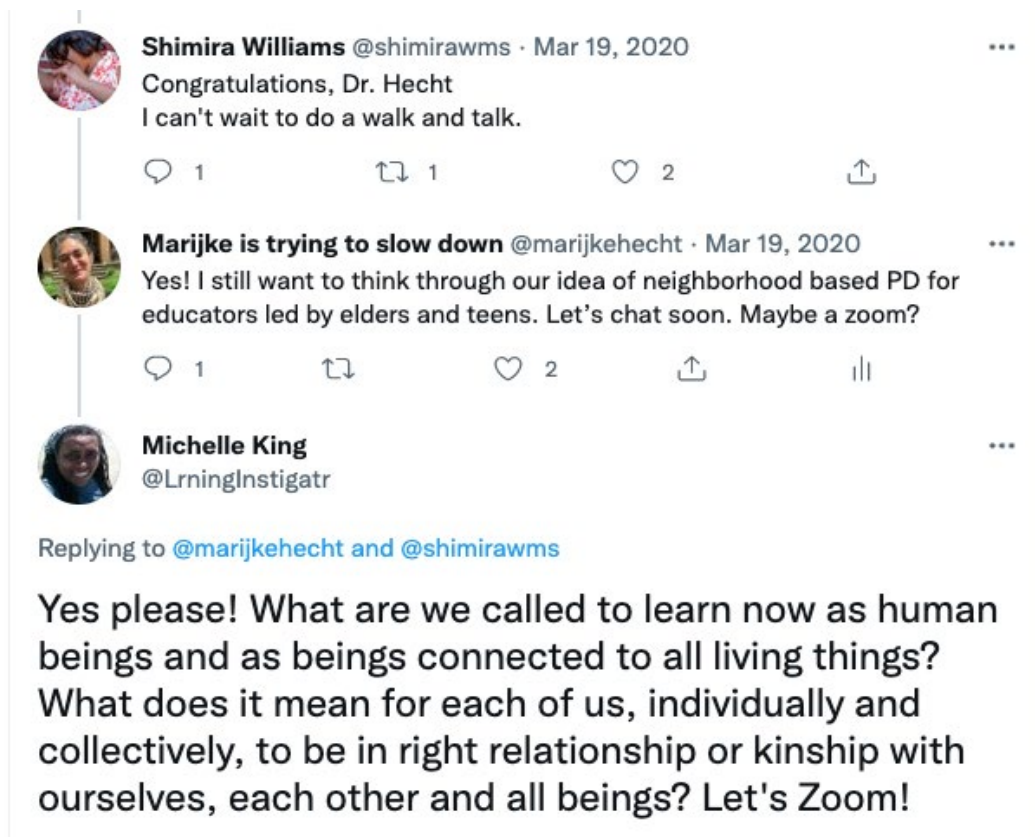


*The authors on a walk to hear Robin Wall Kimmerer speak as part of the Pittsburgh Arts & Lecture Series. Image courtesy of the authors.*

study, we have connected to lineages across time and place to develop practices that allow us to care for and be cared for by our nearby and far away communities. Our collaborative work began through a Twitter exchange in March of 2020, though our relationships with one another—both virtually and in real life—extend back farther than that. In that initial Twitter exchange, we wondered how neighborhood-based walks might be a vehicle for professional development that deepened educators’ relationships with the communities they work within. Given the constraints of the suddenly emerging COVID-19 outbreak, we decided to meet on Zoom to talk over ideas. During that first discussion, we each

pledged to walk in our respective neighborhoods, observe nearby nature, document our experiences through journaling and photography, and come back the following week to share what we had discovered.

Those early walks evolved into an ongoing conversation that we dubbed #WalkingAloneAndTogether (#WAAT). The charge we gave ourselves that first week was to take a daily walk where we deliberately slowed down in order to notice and wonder about what was around and within us. Our collaborative practice, which continues to this day, includes walking individually in our urban communities and then coming together—mostly via Zoom and



*Figure 1. Part of the original Twitter thread from March 2020 that led to the Walking Alone and Together project. Image courtesy of the authors.*

occasionally in person—to share thoughts, readings, listenings, photographs, and experiences that both are inspired by and inspire our learning together. We have explored and been inspired by scholars and creators including Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Audre Lorde, Doreen Massey, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and so many other intellects we have connected with because of our own interests, professional lives, and individual ways of knowing. From Anishinaabe grandmothers’ water walks to the flâneurs of the Situationist movement in France to the pilgrimage walkers headed

to Mecca, we recognize that walking is part of a long human tradition that includes spiritual and activist practices. Our work is a constant source of discovery in connecting older practices with our own newer collective practice.

Through the discipline of showing up week after week, we have created *refugia*, an area in which a population of organisms can survive through a period of unfavorable conditions. Our *learning refugia* is an emergent space, centering our complex identities of race, gender,



Figure 2. A screenshot from a *Walking Alone and Together* Zoom conversation. Image courtesy of the authors.



class, spirituality, and geographies and is inspired by Afrofuturism, SolarPunk, and Indigeneity. We have worked to create space for learning about self and community, both human and more-than-human. By more-than-human beings, we mean all the creatures, lands, waters, and elements that exist in the world alongside us. For this project, we have focused on three more-than-human mentors: trees, mushrooms, and water. Our thinking draws on North American Indigenous education scholars such as Gregory Cajete and Sandra Styres. We recognize that humans are not the only beings that have awareness

and that we can learn from attuning ourselves to the awareness of other more-than-human beings.

We share our practice here in the hopes that formal and informal educators who work with children, youth, and adult community members might develop their own practices to listen to and care for people and place. With more-than-human mentors as teachers and guides, we ask of ourselves, and each of you readers: What does it mean to know a place deeply? How might we co-create learning that engages elders and youth as the storytellers of the natural and cultural histories of the land?

## **Walking Alone & Together:**

A Journal of walking gratitude and joy

## **Let's do an experiment!**

## **Spend one week doing a daily walk with a journal entry.**

### **Week 1 - Loitering**

- **Photo or doodle of the walk**
- **Notice and record what you are grateful for in your community**
- **Noticings of 'time beings' (visual, auditory, all senses)**
  - a person in community
  - More than human creature
  - Element (air, water, etc)
  - What do you hear when you sit still outside your house
- **Wonderings**
  - What do we think that these other time beings might notice and wonder about?

**"Enjoy your walks, be patient with yourself, take notice"**

- Marijke Hecht & Michelle King & Shimira Williams

*Figure 3. The initial card that we developed to guide our practice. Image courtesy of the authors.*

# Water as mentor

Our Walking Alone and Together practice centers working towards reciprocal relationships with each other and the human and more-than-human communities we are part of. From the outset, water has been a guide for our work and is a thread that connects us with our other more-than-human mentors. Our walks take place in Dionde:gâ, the homelands of the Seneca Nation, in what is now called Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is a place of three rivers—the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio—that drain into the Mississippi River watershed. We live in a city of bridges, pushing us to consider how the rivers

connect our communities through the flow of water and also separate us by reinforcing human-constructed neighborhood segregation. Even with the abundance of the three rivers in Pittsburgh, there are many people who do not have access to these waters due to constraints of transportation and/or the imagination. Our region is rich in water and receives an average of 40 inches of precipitation a year. However, many watersheds and sewersheds are polluted by industrial, post-industrial, and nonpoint source pollutants. This pollution is too easily ignored because of the ways that once visible surface



## Week 22: Challenge - construct something this week.

### Noticing the rain...How do we make a living curriculum?

- 12:27 pm  in HP ||, 12:30 pm  in HP and  picks up in LL, 12:34 pm it starts  in Wilkinsburg. At 12:39  in Wilkinsburg.

### Pondering what are we disciplined to love into existence?

- We need to pay attention to grief, to joy, and to the sounds that are life-giving
- The fine details of life.

### Wondering how many times do we pass by refugia?

Discussing the work and practices of:

- Mindy Fullilove - Books "Root Shock" and "Urban Alchemy" and her TED Talk "Why you should learn about the city you live in"
  - <https://youtu.be/J1FVI-MbDGA>
- Dear Data by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec
  - <http://www.dear-data.com/theproject>
- Capoeira - they were practicing, playing, and preparing
  - <https://bit.ly/3jrEHV9>

### Challenge CREATE a data selfie of refugia

- Keep track of the making and noticing of refugia.
- To learn more read "How to draw your own selfie – using your personal data" by James Freitas via IDEAS.TED.COM. - <https://bit.ly/3hTHypm>



heavy rain



light rain

HP - Highland Park

LL - Lincoln - Lemington

Figure 4. Our Week 22 card, which reflects the way that our practice—including resources, questions, and observations—deepened over time. Image courtesy of the authors.



waters have been made invisible, culverted in concrete channels or buried in underground storm and sewer lines.

As a learning refugia, we have intentionally looked to water as a more-than-human mentor. This tension between our region's abundance of life-giving water and the ongoing mistreatment of water as a vehicle for waste compels us to look to and listen to water more closely. Our earliest conversations built on the metaphor of floating and buoyancy as feelings we worked to carry into our walking practice. Water makes up much of our bodies, our planet, and our atmosphere. For

each of us, this has different implications because of our different backgrounds and life experiences. However, together we feel the impact of water on our collective identity. Like water, the way that we engage with each other, place, and time allows us to change and be changed by trusting the rhythm of water, trusting fluidity of identity, and trusting the power of repetition. Water teaches us how to think across the spatial and temporal scales needed to affect transformation. What might we learn from water about the process of transformation through our own little lives?



*Figure 5. (L-R) Shimira, Marijke, and Michelle in front of a large tip-up on a mushroom walk in Highland Park in April 2021, one year after our experiment first launched. Image courtesy of the authors.*



In our practice, we explored questions such as: How is floating in water an act of freedom? How does trust in our bodies, and trust in our bodies' connection with our environment, invoke joy? How might we find strength in letting go? As we explored the role of water and its relationship to freedom, we also confronted how water may restrict where we go. In our region, natural watershed boundaries have morphed into neighborhood lines that continue to reinforce racial segregation. Observation and attention to water help us examine the links between our individual bodies, histories, and the communities we inhabit and visit.

## Creating refugia tributaries

After reflecting on our accidental experiment, we are now more attuned to the conditions that helped us create a learning refugia. The generative processes of our synchronous and asynchronous conversations and our artifact creation might be tools for new refugia to form. These new refugia may remain virtual or may include people in close proximity to one another, working alone and together. Either way, our hope is that educators and learners develop ideas and tools that they can carry over into their own professional and personal practices, just as we three have. Here is what we found that could be applied purposefully to create new learning refugia:

Explore thinkers from different media that inspire and provoke thought.

Examine your own lives as rich, lived experiences that are worthy of being studied to help us make sense of the world.

Our practice of looking to water also led us to reflect on the stability of this molecule. It has three parts—two hydrogen and one oxygen atom—and our own group of three was a triad that mirrored this shape, providing strength and stability while also being flexible and able to take multiple functional forms. Water is also a powerful force for change. As we considered the need for radical transformation of ourselves and society, we also recognized the need to embrace decay as a path towards transformation and liberation. Water is able to transform and decay stone. How might we be able to transform and decay those parts of ourselves that need to be unlearned and of our society that need to be undone?

Re-create or re-envision how learning refugia may take other forms, for example, doing collaborative writing asynchronously.

We hope that new groups, like our own triad, might also be “mixed flocks,” like the groups of different species that play, migrate, and learn together in community. By using a playful approach, refugia can be a series of ongoing experiments. Also, like rivers, each learning refugia is unique to the land it inhabits. As you develop your own refugia, remember to enjoy your walks, be patient with yourself, and take notice.

To learn more about the *Walking Alone and Together* project and processes, listen to our [presentation at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment \(ASLE\) 2021 conference](#).

A link to our complete list of evolving resources can be found on our webpage: <https://www.walkingaloneandtogetherpgh.com>

## Recommended Citation

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## About the Authors

Marijke Hecht is an assistant professor in Recreation Park & Tourism Management at Penn State Greater Allegheny. She works with urban communities to understand and expand the potential for local greenspaces to support learning, advocacy, and stewardship. Her research and teaching draw on her background in environmental education, community-based ecological design, learning sciences, and naturalist practices.

Michelle King is a learning instigator, love activist and beloved community-architect. A true production of US foreign policy, she was born in 1968 to an African American father and an Ethiopian immigrant mother. Her father was a serviceman in the US Army, and she spent half her childhood in West Germany and the other half split amongst army bases in California, Colorado, and North Carolina. She has long been fascinated by the ideas and values around identity. Michelle grapples with this life-long inquiry of being raised an "American" outside of her country and reconciling what that actually means now living in America. All of her intersectional identities and lived experiences have deeply informed her practice as a middle school social science teacher for over 22 years. Currently, she is seeking to create dynamic learning experiences and opportunities that inspire wonder, discovery, contradictions, frustrations, and joy. Ultimately, all of this visible and invisible labor and creativity is in service of co-building the Beloved Community.

Shimira Williams is a grassroots innovator working as a social entrepreneur to build digital citizens of all ages through play and productivity. Williams is the founder of Productive Play, a data management and digital literacy consultancy. She utilizes 20 years of experience to help businesses retool their operations and extend learning opportunities with the power of technology.