Together, alone? Performance, protest and digital proximities in India's Blank Noise feminist campaign

Dr Rebecca Savory Fuller

School of Media and Performance, Arts University Bournemouth, Bournemouth, United Kingdom

Email: becca.savory@gmail.com

ORCiD: 0000-0002-1446-9489

Together, alone? Performance, protest and digital proximities in India's Blank Noise feminist campaign

Abstract:

This article examines the performative digital practices of India's feminist campaign group Blank Noise, with a focus on their 2016 project #WalkAlone. The event sought to explore and challenge embodied notions of female safety and visibility in night-time urban public spaces, by inviting women to walk alone in a place of their choosing between 9pm and midnight. In doing so, Blank Noise called on participants to 'walk alone, together', utilising digital documentation tools and media platforms to network these dispersed embodied acts. Drawing on my participation in #WalkAlone from the remote position of the UK alongside online documentation of the project, I examine how these tools established 'digital proximities' between participants, transforming our solitary acts into collective embodied action. I argue that Blank Noise's project extends Butler's notion of 'plural performativity' (2015) into a digital public sphere, by constructing a mode of embodied assembly within media spaces. Here, digital proximities between dispersed participants forged a concerted enactment from the private and personal actions of individual women, walking on the stage of the nocturnal city.

Keywords: performativity, protest, social media, feminism, India, walking

#WalkAlone

On the 2nd of December 2016, a disparate group of women took to the streets together, to performatively occupy night-time urban public spaces; I was among them[1]. Moved

---

[1] The research for this article was conducted alongside my doctoral research project, constructing a cultural history of flash mob performance practices in India (Savory Fuller, 2018). The interdisciplinary project was funded by the UK-India Education and Research

by our own accumulated memories of harassment, anxiety, and the micro-management of our clothing, our actions, our modes of embodiment; moved by the call for safer spaces for women and by our complex relationship to public spaces at night, we sought to alter our embodied relationship to the nocturnal city. In many ways, this action shared common ground with other similar protest movements such as Reclaim the Night, Take back the Night, and Slutwalk: well-known protest marches staged in cities worldwide, with shared aims to protest a culture of victim-blaming and to challenge an emphasis on the curtailment of women's embodied experience as the means of preventing sexual violence. As recent protests in Australia[2] similarly demanded, these movements have shared an insistence that we shift our attention from women's behaviour in public spaces to that of men. They seek freedom for women to inhabit the city safely. They ask for a shift in the burden of responsibility for sexual violence.

The SlutWalk protest movement was famously launched in Toronto in 2011 (Millar, 2011) in response to a police officer's safety advice, given in a talk to university students, in which he cautioned: 'I've been told I'm not supposed to say this, however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimised' (Carr, 2013: 24). The movement quickly became internationalised, with SlutWalk protests

---

Initiative (UKIERI) and co-supervised across the fields of Performance Studies and Social Anthropology at the University of Exeter and the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru.

[2] The rape and murder of comedian Eurydice Dixon prompted wide protests in June 2018, after she was attacked walking home from a gig in Melbourne. Anger was fuelled by the subsequent police advice to women to take responsibility for their personal safety by making 'sure you have situational awareness, that you're aware of your surroundings' (Alcorn, 2018: n.p.).

staged across forty countries worldwide in 2011 alone, including India, Germany, South Korea, Mexico, South Africa, and the USA[3] (ibid: 25). Reclaim the Night and Take back the Night both emerged from the feminist movements of the 1970s and have been revived in global contexts at the start of the 21st Century (ibid: 29), with an emphasis (as their names suggest) on female occupation of night-time public spaces, alongside a critique of the social constraints imposed on women in relation to notions of safety and propriety. These protests and actions overlap in their shared mobilisation of performative female public embodiment – particularly walking – on the stage of the nocturnal city. However, in contrast to those collective marches staged in cities worldwide, at this event on the night of the 2nd of December participants walked independently, in our own cities and towns, alone.

Our actions formed one iteration of #WalkAlone, an activist performance project led by the Indian feminist campaign group Blank Noise.[4] This now-national network was founded and based in the South Indian city of Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) and has been growing steadily in strength and number since its initial project of 2003. Blank Noise's campaign activities centre on issues of sexual violence and harassment

---

[3] SlutWalks were independently organised in each location with no overarching organisation or format. However, they tended to be staged as mass protest marches, inviting women and allies to challenge 'slut-shaming' and to reclaim women's right to expressions of sexuality through slogans such as 'my dress is not a yes'. While some regional protests were characterised by women marching in bikinis and skimpy or 'provocative' clothing, more conservative countries such as India focused attention on the issue of consent, while debating the applicability of reclaiming the term 'slut' in their own context (Kapur, 2012; Taneja, 2019).

[4] For more information, see http://www.blanknoise.org/ [accessed 27 Feb. 2019].

toward women, and emerged from initial research and art-activism projects led by

founder Jasmeen Patheja, beginning while she was a student at the Srishti School of Art,

Bengaluru. Their campaigns are characterised by a performative use of images, public

spaces, individual testimony and online social media, and the network has grown to

hold an influential place in what Trishima Mitra-Khan describes as the 'emerging

cyberlife of feminist politics' in India (Mitra-Kahn, 2012: 108).

The 2nd December 2016 Walk Alone event, like others before it, called on

participants to 'walk alone, together' (Patheja, 2016a). In promotional call-outs, Blank

Noise invited women to reflect on the everyday micro-behaviours through which we

embody and enact collective fears for our safety in public spaces. They asked:

> Have you walked, not having to think twice about the width of your smile, the
> length of your blouse, skirt, tee neck, sleeve.
> Have you clenched your fist so hard, worn a frown, sharpened elbows out?
> Does your daily list of every place, person, garment you 'avoid'/ deny reveal a
> larger something - that you decide where to go, how to go, what time to go, what
> clothes to go in, with whom to go based on your safety?
> Have you too been warned, just like me, about places, our bodies, our clothes, our
> cities, our streets? (Patheja, 2016a)

#WalkAlone invited participants to walk alone in a place of our choosing between 9pm

and midnight. The project asked us to document and to reflect on our walk, and to share

that experience both privately with each other and publicly, if we chose to, through

social media. We were invited to photograph the walk and to write reflectively on it, to

post publicly on Twitter or Facebook if willing, and to post updates in a private group

chat shared by participants on WhatsApp. During the process of registering our interest

to participate in the event, we were asked to give consent to submit this documentation

to Blank Noise's administrative team afterwards, with personal reflective text collated

via a Google Doc questionnaire and photographic and video documentation sent by

participants to the team via email[5]. Twenty-six women responded to the call to walk alone, together, in sites that clustered within and across India (with participants in Allahabad, Bengaluru, Chhattisgarh, Jaipur, Kolkata, Lucknow, Mumbai, Pune, and towns across Goa[6]) but which also extended internationally, with two participants in Germany, one in Colombia, and myself in the UK.

Through their invitation to 'walk alone, together', Blank Noise re-conceived Sherry Turkle's renowned turn of phrase captured in the title of her book *Alone Together* (2011). For her part, Turkle deploys this contradictory coupling to express her argument that the insertion of digital devices into everyday life has created a blurring of the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. Turkle's concern is that our devices distance us in many ways from the intimacies of inter-personal connection. In solitude arrive new intimacies, in the form of robotic technologies of care, companionship, or sex; while in spaces of intimacy and togetherness, Turkle perceives new solitudes expressed in the distracted lives of the digitally tethered and the always on. By contrast, in their project to 'walk alone, together' Blank Noise take a different stance, arguing that we can catalyse our solitary embodied experiences into a form of shared, collective action, through the mediating capabilities of digital documentation and the networked device (see figure 1).

---

[5] This written reflective documentation, which I return to in the sections below, was used to compile an account of the December 2nd event as a blog post on Blank Noise's public website (see Patheja 2016b).

[6] Participants' locations were shared informally between the group on WhatsApp during the event and also published by Blank Noise on their blog post documenting the action.

This harnessing of quotidian digital technologies such as smartphones and social media platforms in order to transform dispersed individual actions into collective, performative acts, lies at the heart of Blank Noise's activism. In the Walk Alone campaign, as well as several of their other performance interventions including Meet To Sleep, I Never Ask For It, and Hahaha Sangha[7], Blank Noise use photography, social media, written personal reflections and online documentation as a means to transform ephemeral and dispersed participant experiences into concerted, politicised action. This article examines Blank Noise's use of digital media in interaction with the embodied, critical spatial practices of their performances, arguing that their media practices are more than just a tool for promotion, public engagement, and participant mobilisation. Instead, I highlight how their methods establish what I refer to as digital proximities between participants, borrowing the term from Michael LeVan (2013) among others (see Lewis, 2017; Dunlop, 2017; Oudshoorn, 2009). I explore how these digital proximities transform diffused individual experiences into collective, embodied performance acts, drawing on Judith Butler's theories of plural performativity while arguing that Blank Noise's practices have extended the notion of plural performativity into a digital sphere.

---

[7] Meet To Sleep invites women to gather in groups in public parks, to bring a book and a blanket, and to share an experience of dozing or sleeping in public for an agreed time period. I Never Ask For It gathers photographic images of the clothes women were wearing when they were sexually harassed or assaulted. Hahaha Sangha invites women to create a laughter group and share a collective experience of loud, bold laughter in public spaces. Each also employ digital media tactics in similar ways to those examined here.

Figure 1. Poster released by Blank Noise for the December 2016 #WalkAlone event (Patheja, 2016a).

Blank Noise

The Blank Noise group's tactics, and their wider umbrella of campaigns and actions aimed at protesting gendered violence and harassment, sit within a broader emergence of Indian protest movements staged in and enabled via social media that has gathered pace since the late 2000s and early 2010s. The rise of these frequently performative protests and their use of social media to reach participants and spectators has provoked celebration but also criticism among scholars and commentators. Writing in the *Economic & Political Weekly* shortly after the wave of protests prompted by the brutal gang-rape of Jyoti Singh in Delhi 2012, journalist Pamela Philipose argued that they marked a turning point in the role played by social media in both facilitating and reporting on social protest. She praised these developments, describing the protests as 'a media moment that showcased the country's young creative talent which revisited the familiar theme of patriarchy's many avatars, in new and compelling ways, through

song, dance, poetry and theatre' (Philipose, 2013: 21). At the same time however, such social media-enabled protests and campaigns emerging in India over the past decade have drawn criticism for their middle-class participant base, and for the limits to broader social access or engagement engendered by their use of digital media platforms[8] (e.g. Jha, 2018; Mitra-Kahn, 2012; Gupta, 2016).

Critics such as Ratna Kapur have expressed concern over whether these forms of activism constitute a promising direction for contemporary feminism, suggesting instead that they represent a co-opted and watered down version of feminist politics. Kapur describes the politics of protests such as the 2011 SlutWalk events staged in India and the 2009 Pink Chaddi[9] campaign as an example of 'feminism "lite"', in that

---

[8] It is worth noting that in India the term 'middle class' is applied to a broadly visible but proportionately narrow elite minority of the national population, rather than the wider 'middle-income' demographic implied in other global regions (see Baviskar and Ray, 2011). Emerging within this social group are those who Kenniston describes as India's 'digerati': those with the education, resources, cultural capital, and English-language skills to confidently navigate new media technologies and platforms, who are likewise disproportionately visible in the media and public sphere in comparison to the total population (Keniston, 2004: 17). Access to and engagement with social media-enabled protest is therefore predominantly urban and middle class, although certainly not limited to feminist or left-wing liberal politics (see e.g. Mohan, 2015).

[9] The Pink Chaddi campaign launched online in 2009 in response to an attack on women in a pub in Mangalore. The attack was led by members of right-wing Hindu nationalist group the Sri Ram Sena (SRS), who followed up these events by announcing further planned attacks on unmarried couples found together on Valentine's Day. Campaigners called on women to protest by posting pink *chaddi* – knickers – to the SRS headquarters as a Valentine's Day

they are 'not revolutionary moments, but hold within them powerful critiques of dominant feminist positions' (Kapur, 2012: 3). She argues that these forms of protest are not in themselves politically transformative, but suggests that they may operate as 'space clearing mechanisms', allowing marginalised analytical possibilities to emerge. Hemangini Gupta takes this argument further by framing these protests, exemplified by Blank Noise's digital campaigns and their designation of participant activists as 'Action Heroes', as examples of neoliberal feminism in India. She foregrounds a shift of focus away from explicit appeals to state interventions and towards forms of 'entrepreneurial activism' (Gupta, 2016: 164) that demand self-cultivation of the activist as an 'enterprising consumer citizen' (ibid).

Both authors raise important questions about the political impact of these recent forms of protest. Certainly, criticisms regarding the class dimensions and accessibility of emerging cyberfeminist campaigns in India have not been overlooked by campaigners themselves (Kurian, 2018: 34-35; Ray Murray, 2016; Phadke et al., 2009). However, in this article I aim to shift focus away from debates over political efficacy in relation to state policy, legislature and broader social impact, and instead to consider how these form of activism operate as digitally-mediated performance practices. Their use of digital tools only partly seeks to foster solidarity between dispersed participants and their methods are not aimed toward traditional forms of political engagement with state mechanisms, as critics rightly observe. Instead, their performative methods represent a form of critical embodiment, and in the case of Walk Alone particularly, they mobilise digital tools in order to transform individual embodied actions into

---

gift, using social media to mobilise participants and spread their campaign (see Susan, 2009; Kapur, 2012).

dispersed but collective performance acts. In this approach, I build on the work of K. Frances Lieder (2018), who analyses the critical embodiment enacted by women participating in the Why Loiter campaign (inspired by the work of Phadke, Ranade and Khan in Mumbai, as set out in their book of the same title: Phadke et al., 2009). Why Loiter overlaps with Walk Alone in its concerted engagement with female visibility and modes of embodiment in public urban spaces. In fact, *Why Loiter* author Sameera Khan was also an active participant in the December 2016 Walk Alone event (see Patheja, 2016b). As Lieder argues, by reading Why Loiter and Blank Noise's campaigns as performances, not merely political protests, we can begin to understand how they mobilise the affective potential of the performance act as a political tool: provoking embodied, critical reflection on the part of the participants, while simultaneously enacting utopian visions of a city in which female access to public spaces is less constrained. She explains, 'the women of groups like Why Loiter, then, are not only loitering as a performative tactic to normalize the sight of women lazing in public space but also to change their own individual relationships to the act of loitering in public space' (Lieder, 2018: 154).

In a similar mode to Why Loiter's acts of concerted loitering[10], Blank Noise's Walk Alone event sought to expand the forms of visibility women enact in the public sphere by embodying a form of public presence – walking alone at night – that in India can be highly restricted for women (while shaped by contours of class and caste). In the other global regions where participants walked (Germany, Colombia, UK) solitary public walking is also constrained by social perceptions of female safety as well as

---

[10] Also echoed in Blank Noise's early performance intervention 'Being Idle', staged between 2006-2009. See: http://www.blanknoise.org/being-idle [accessed 15 Aug. 2019].

internalised, gendered relationships to concepts of pleasure, solitude, safety and purposelessness. Of course, it is important to not conflate these differing global contexts within the Walk Alone event, or the varied cultural backgrounds of the women who took part. As performance scholar Sharanya has argued, we must also stay alert to the raced and gendered genealogies that have shaped walking cultural practices (Sharanya, 2017). And so, while aligning these walks with Lieder's description of performative tactics aimed at normalising the sight and presence of female embodiment in public spaces, I resist the implication that the forms of visibility performed in Walk Alone were interchangeable across the differing contexts of the event. In fact, the incorporation of differing contexts and individual narratives is one of the features of Blank Noise's mode of performance activism, which Mitra-Khan (drawing on Mary E. John) describes as an 'autobiographical' politics (2012: 118).

However, emerging from the Indian context and operating in direct relationship to other feminist critical spatial practices within India (such as Why Loiter), Walk Alone was particularly informed by the notion of female in/visibility performed in Indian cities. Reflecting on this typically gendered nature of non-productive loitering in Indian urban spaces, particularly at night, one participant in Blank Noise's 2016 Walk Alone event described how her solo walk in Mumbai led her to a shop with a group of around ten men congregated outside. She commented that, 'I didn't feel threatened, it just struck me how I'd never see a group of women like that' (Patheja, 2016b: n.p.). Another participant noted the few encounters she had with women on her walk in Mumbai, and wrote afterwards that:

> The places were so dominated by the presence of men that the absence of women
> was perceptibly felt. At Five gardens, there was an open air gymnasium in one
> corner of a large maidan and it was packed with men working out at close to
> midnight. No women here. (Ibid.)

She continued by reflecting that:

> This experiment to access the night in my city alone was challenging but also quite
> a learning experience. Afterwards, I felt slightly elated, my mind full of the
> possibilities of what a new city of the future could look like if more women
> accessed public space in the city and accessed the night in particular. How
> different my walk could have been if instead of just men, I had also met many
> other women loitering/walking alone. It would have made it a more inclusive city!
> (Ibid.)

While Walk Alone, much like Why Loiter events, enacted a utopian performance of

unaccompanied female presence in 'risky' urban spaces, what is also central to Blank

Noise's activist campaigns and particularly prominent in this event is the way that – as

Lieder argues – they operate performatively at the level of personal experience (Lieder,

2018: 151-152). It is for this reason that the autobiographical nature of Blank Noise's

politics is central to their campaigns. Their actions seek to produce the kinds of

embodied affects which enable participants to privately challenge their own scripted

modes of engagement within public space, thus seeking a performative shift in their

own relationship to public spaces and modes of embodiment. For example, participants

in the 2016 Walk Alone event described how the action of walking alone at night

prompted them to reflect on their internalised relationship to notions of fear and risk.

For some, the stark reminder of this gendered, embodied experience of public spaces

demanded a 'rethink' about their own perception of personal safety. In reflective

documentation shared on the Blank Noise blog, one participant noted:

> Initially I was not comfortable walking around an area so close to my house. I felt
> sceptical and alert. My phone battery had died and that made me quite nervous, I
> clutched on to the only pseudo weapon that I had which were a pair of keys. As I
> kept walking I did start feeling a bit okay, but that feeling quickly washed away
> due to several bad experiences of catcalling on that particular road. But as I moved
> forward I saw a few women nearby which made me feel safe. At the end of my

> Walk Alone I felt relieved, proud, independent. I feel the need to rethink about
> how safe the place was and not just assume something bad was always going to
> happen. I felt better in a way and felt more free to get out at night. (Ibid.)

Her words indicate the ways that Walk Alone invited participants, through its framing and through the structure of the online form used to gather reflective statements at the end, to engage at a personal and performative level with their own individual relationships to public spaces and the nocturnal city. The embodied act of walking alone at night prompted participants to examine, and in some cases to begin to alter, their own felt relationship to public spaces and a gendered perception of safety and risk, in ways that are similar to Lieder's analysis of the embodied act of loitering performed by women as part of the Why Loiter campaign. From here, I therefore want to build on Lieder's work in order to analyse the function of digital media technologies and platforms in relation to these critical, embodied performance practices within Blank Noise's activism.

Digital proximities in #WalkAlone

Writing on political protest in her recent book *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Judith Butler argues that when bodies assemble in public spaces, they speak even when they are silent; they speak in excess of any verbalised political demands. She describes these significations as a 'concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity' (Butler, 2015: 8), and goes on to explain:

> It matters that bodies assemble, and that the political meanings enacted by
> demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse, whether written or
> vocalized. Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly
> speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, forms of assembly

already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make. (Ibid:
7-8).

Butler centres her attention on recent large-scale protests such as those under the
umbrella of the Occupy movement, as well as the 2011 Egyptian uprising: specifically,
forms of protest that are manifested through physical public assembly in streets and
squares.

However, the Walk Alone project demonstrates some of the ways that activists
are beginning to deploy digitally-mediated modes of assembly to create the kinds of
concerted bodily enactments that Butler describes. This is the plural performativity of
diffused bodies, digitally assembled through media documentation and hashtagging, to
enact their claims for bodily freedoms within a digital public sphere. Butler's notion of
plural performativity enables us to better understand how events such as Blank Noise's
Walk Alone remain politically charged, despite criticisms that dismiss this emergent
Indian feminism as a neoliberal politics of individual rights of pleasure and risk.
Through the amplification created by digital modes of assembly, the actions of
individuals and small groups – which at an individual level may be framed as risk- and
pleasure-seeking – enter into a plurality with the embodied acts of other participants.
Through digital proximities, their embodied actions are reframed as a form of assembly
signifying their wider demands for female social and bodily freedoms.

While so-called 'hashtag activism' has at times attracted criticism that it remains
at the level of virtuality, for Butler – and for myself – the material and the virtual are
interdependent. Though she speaks of streets and squares, arguing that 'showing up,
standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech and silence are all aspects of a
sudden assembly' (ibid: 18), Butler also insists that it is through media that such
gatherings become constituted as political assemblies. She writes that 'there is an

indexical force of the body that arrives with other bodies in a zone visible to media

coverage: it is *this* body, and *these* bodies that require employment, shelter, health care,

and food' (ibid: 9-10) – or, in this case, the social freedoms to inhabit the city without

judgement or harassment. Blank Noise make use of physical urban public spaces as the

stage on which bodies enact their demands for a life free from gendered violence and

constraint. However, through media documentation and online spaces, they are able to

forge digital assemblies across diffused physical sites. Here, plural performativity is not

only enacted by crowds in the historic centres of our global capitals: it can be enacted in

your neighbourhood, on your pavements, in your parks and your own streets[11]. This

brings us to the crux of the challenge posed by Blank Noise to that tone of detachment

and loneliness that runs through Turkle's pairing of the phrase 'alone, together'. For,

where Turkle views our devices as distancing objects, Blank Noise view them as a

gateway to digital sites of performance. Where Turkle views us as alone in a crowd,

Blank Noise suggest that we can be united even in the solitary act of opening ones own

door and stepping out into the night.

Writing in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, Michael LeVan argues that:

> Digital spaces allow for the creation of intimacy, proximity, and interactivity.
> Rather than replacing live performance, [they produce] a mode of experiential
> engagement that we might call ''digital aliveness''. (LeVan, 2013: 247)

LeVan proposes the term 'digital proximities' (ibid: 246) to describe these forms of

---

[11] A recent set of anti-rape protests initiated in Bengaluru also applied this approach, through the

hashtag #MyStreetMyProtest (Thomas 2018).

digitally-mediated performance interactions, and in the #WalkAlone event we can see how Blank Noise established digital proximities between participants across multiple sites of performance-media. Firstly, the December 2016 Walk Alone event invited participants to use the hashtag #WalkAlone to connect public posts on social media platforms, particularly Twitter. A handful of the December participants used the hashtag to share photos and posts during or after their walks, while the Twitter accounts for Blank Noise and its director Jasmeen Patheja were used to repost many of these individual contributions, acting to collate participants' posts into a centralised story of the event. The usage of social media here helped to amplify and promote the Walk Alone campaign as it was occurring, while also acting as a form of documentation by entering these posts into the online archive of Blank Noise's social media accounts. In this sense, the use of hashtagging, posting and retweeting in social media helped to document and frame these disparate solo journeys as a form of collective performance for an online audience, while also (to a more limited extent) connecting dispersed participants.

Media scholars such as Mikko Villi refer to such use of camera phone photography and media communication as a means of establishing 'mediated presence' between communicators (Villi, 2015). In my view, however, the notion of proximity allows for a broader spectrum of relational positionalities than notions of presence or co-presence imply. As a participant in Walk Alone, I used Twitter to 'perform' my involvement in the project to an online spectatorship, by visually and textually documenting some of the moments along my journey. The ease and familiarity of camera phone technology allowed for a form of documentation that was unobtrusive on the nocturnal streets, and the visual record of images posted by participants on Twitter evoked an atmosphere of night time solitary exploration through darkly-lit selfies,

17

shadows cast in street lights, individual pairs of feet, and illuminated streetscapes. It is this functionality of social media as a space for the performance of self which has led some critics to view the use of hashtag campaigns in digital activism as little more than virtue-signalling, and to question their efficacy for provoking change (e.g. Hampton, 2015). However, in this case the Twitter platform and the hashtag #WalkAlone were used sporadically by participants, as a supplement to other forms of digital documentation and performance. Only seven women out of twenty-six participants actively used the hashtag on Twitter during or at the end of their walks, although the Blank Noise account was used to share additional photos from participants who were either not Twitter users or not actively posting their own images using the hashtag. Thus in terms of proximity, the use of the hashtag in this case only created a diffused proxemics between a subset of the performance participants. Participants tended to use this platform to post a small selection of images rather than an ongoing documentation, thus gesturing to their presence in the event rather than seeking to create a live and ongoing experience of co-presence with other performers.

A more active site for establishing digital proximities between the dispersed Walk Alone participants, and one that felt more moving and more personal from my perspective as a participant, utilised the messaging service WhatsApp. Here, Blank Noise project organisers created a temporary chat group for the Walk Alone participants, who shared messages in an ongoing exchange over the course of that evening. Having submitted our mobile phone numbers when we registered to participate in the walk (along with our locations and social media details), Blank Noise's Bengaluru-based project team added our WhatsApp accounts to a shared, private group chat, a few hours before the walk began. While Twitter felt

comparatively diffused and public-facing, the WhatsApp group chat more firmly established a sense of a shared endeavour and private conversation between participants, reaching across our dispersed locations and differing time zones. Here, group members shared photos and videos from their walks, as well as messages of greeting and individual updates. Women used the group chat to exchange details about the cities and neighbourhoods they were walking in, often either expressing a sense of anxiety about their chosen route, or acknowledging their own caution by commenting that their chosen location was not considered particularly risky. [12]

'Thanks for the add,' wrote one participant, 'I just changed my walk from a walk alone to a walk with a friend for the bit of road that I was anyway feeling nervous about. Will document it. Leaving in 10 minutes'[13]. 'I'm going to put my son to bed and sneak out after 10', another group member added: 'will walk around the neighbourhood and beyond. Not scary or intimidating (yet) but I've never done it before and that needs to change!' The tone of the group messages grew increasingly supportive when one participant explained that she was struggling with disagreement from family members about her intentions to walk alone. She wrote:

---

[12] As noted in the opening section above, participants were predominantly based in cities across India (Allahabad, Bengaluru, Chhattisgarh, Jaipur, Kolkata, Lucknow, Mumbai, Pune, and three towns and cities in Goa), and walked at individual times between 9pm and midnight. Four participants including myself participated remotely from other global locations, and chose to walk or run during the same night-time hours within our own time zones. Thus the walks were clustered around the evening of December 2nd rather than synchronised to an exact, shared temporal moment.

[13] Participant messages cited here were posted by members of the 'Walk Alone' WhatsApp group to the shared group chat (set up by Blank Noise organisers), 2-3 December 2016.

> Going walking now. But not before having an argument with my mother about what I'm doing – I live in one of the nicest neighbourhoods in the city but she still doesn't think it's safe.

One of the event organisers responded by asking: 'would you like to invite your mum to walk with you for a bit? Or later in the week?', and I felt touched to recognise the malleability of the intended performance structure. Participants were not obliged to perform their walk alone (although of course this was encouraged) – some opted to walk with other women or a male companion; one participant ran, on a different day – and organisers clearly prioritised the accessibility of the event as a personal experience shared by women exploring their night-time cities in individual ways, over any kind of rigorous adherence to the intended performance action. As the flow of chat messages started to die down, an organiser wrote: 'hope everyone is home safe and sound', and a participant responded by quoting from one of Blank Noise's promotional posters: 'Yes, it is, sleep well – it is a beautiful night' (see figure 2).

It is a beautiful night.
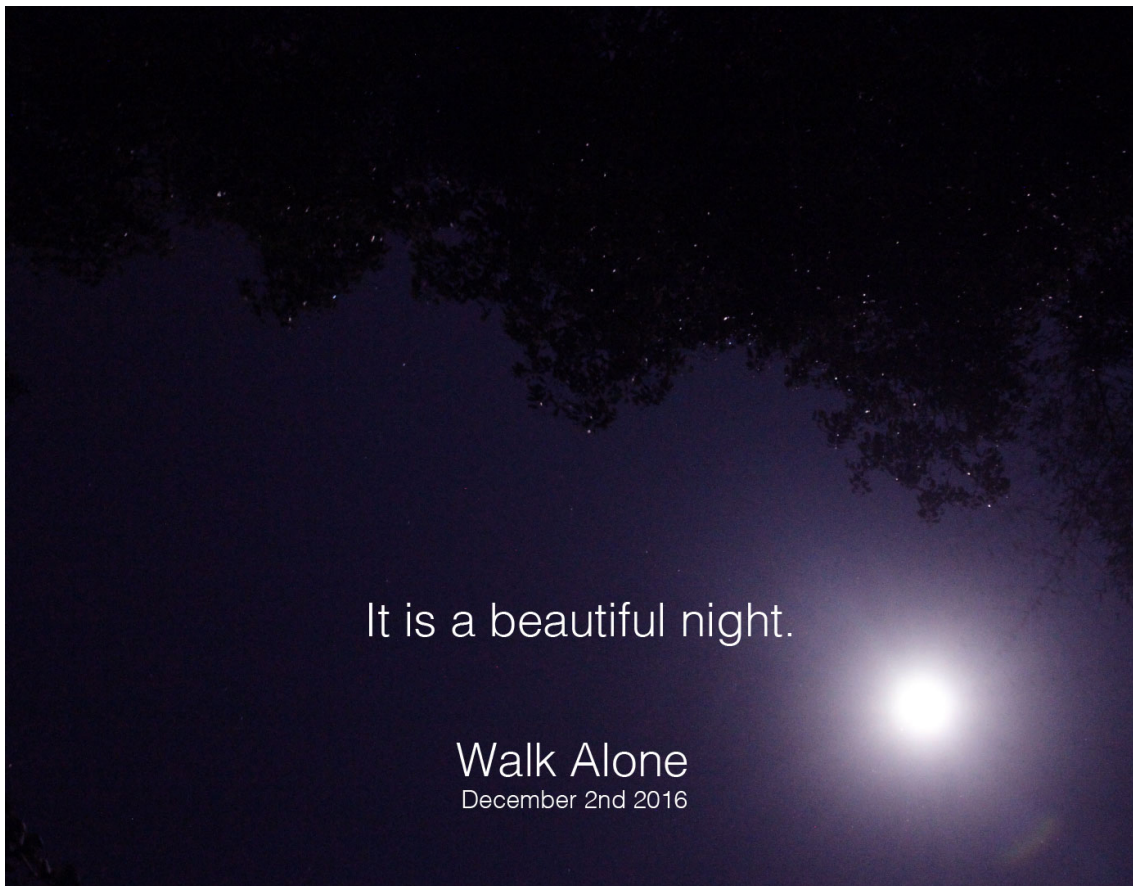
Walk Alone
December 2nd 2016

Figure 2. Poster released by Blank Noise for the December 2016 #WalkAlone event. (Patheja, 2016a)

In these examples from social media, particularly in the closed group chat on the WhatsApp platform, we can see how, as LeVan argues, digital space allowed for the creation of intimacy, proximity, and interactivity between the dispersed participants of this embodied performance action. Digital space created a tension between aloneness and togetherness, in and around the moments of our walks. In reflective writing shared after the event, some participants' comments not only responded to their embodied experience of walking alone, but also to their sense of connection to other participants and the wider political aims of the event. These women observed:

> After walking, I felt calm, happy and a part of something big. Is there a word for that?

> By the end of my walk I felt empowered, fearless and free. I also felt connected to all the other women on similar journeys.
> I also felt excited, proud, solidarity before doing the Walk Alone. After the walk I felt happy, buzzed, solidarity. I got home and didn't sleep until later... I was a bit buzzed with excitement!
> Afterwards, I felt awake, refreshed, a little healthier. After the walk I slept like a dead person right after checking online who else had shared some insights in their walk.
> After the walk, I felt observant, reflective, curious I got back feeling that there were others doing the same thing...that I was a part of a group of women doing the same thing, across cities. (WalkAlone participants, cited in Patheja, 2016b)

This sense of solidarity and connection between participants was of course a temporary and ephemeral one, occurring within a relative temporal proximity for those who were walking in India, but further distanced for those of us walking at night in other time zones. My participation in the live exchange of messages on WhatsApp occurred during a sunny afternoon while I was running errands in my local neighbourhood, and by the time I set off on my own walk at around 9.30pm in the UK, the live unfolding of comments and messages had largely concluded. Emphasising the sense of togetherness experienced by participants across diffused locations here is not to make claims for the kind of direct intimacy and human connection that Turkle fears to have been impeded by communications technologies. However, as participants' reflections reveal, our interactivity and sense of shared participation helped to elevate the experience from a solitary to a shared act. While reflecting on our own experiences of solitary walking at night, in Blank Noise's words we were 'not alone'.

Beyond this experience of 'digital aliveness' shared between participants online during the event itself, the final space where we can see the mobilisation of digital proximities

as a means to transform our individual actions into a form of plural, concerted bodily enactment is on Blank Noise's own blog, cited above and throughout this paper. Participants in the Walk Alone intervention were asked to submit written reflections on our experiences through a semi-structured online form (the Google Doc questionnaire noted in the opening section, above), allowing Blank Noise project organisers to gather textual participant accounts of the event. We also shared photographic and video documentation of our journeys with the organisers via email. Within this documentation process, participants were asked to specify what kinds of permissions we gave for our words, images and names to be used in the public dissemination of the project; our photographic images and written reflections were then compiled by Blank Noise as a blog post on the organisation's website, forming a record of this particular event within the wider Walk Alone campaign[14].

Here in particular, the use of digital tools and shared documentation became the means through which shared but everyday actions were transformed into performance acts. This occurred in part because the act of documentation framed our actions *as* performance. In this sense, the Walk Alone project echoes Philip Auslander's observations on the performativity of performance documentation, in which he argues that 'the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such.' As Auslander goes on to emphasise: 'documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurred: it produces an event as a performance' (Auslander, 2006: 5). However, in this case I

---

[14] Text and images included on the Walk Alone blog post were therefore shared with consent to be made public. Blank Noise included the names of participants where consent was given, while some participants opted to remain anonymous in the online record.

argue that digital documentation achieved more than simply framing Walk Alone as a form of activist-performance, rendering it legible for a wider audience. More importantly, the act of documentation itself – enfolded within the act of solo, night-time walking – drew participants into the kind of reflective, self-aware mode of embodied experience that Diana Taylor has described as 'reiterated behaviour' (2003: 2) and which characterises the performance act.

In other words: by actively reflecting on our experiences as they occurred, and by seeking to capture and communicate those experiences to a diffused but digitally proximate audience of the Blank Noise organisers and other Walk Alone participants, this process of documentation and the creation of digital proximities between participants transformed our embodied experiences of walking from an everyday behaviour to a self-reflexive performance act; one that we might think of as a form of critical reflection-in-action. The notion of digital proximities between participants therefore goes beyond the assemblage of images and text via hashtagging, to create a form of embodied collective performance which can be deterritorialised and diffused. Here the digital proximities between participants effected a blurring between notions of the private and public, by drawing personal self-reflection and individual everyday experience into a collective, public act[15].

Performance practices that occur across what Kluitenburg (2006) has described as the 'hybrid spaces' of online-offline digital and physical locations – or in Thomas Steinmaurer's terms across hybrid multilocalities (2014: 100) – inevitably engage and

---

[15] This observation echoes the findings of Pramod K. Nayar, whose work on personal blogging literacies in India highlights the hybrid public-private nature of this form of digital performance-of-self (Nayar, 2008).

interact with several different audience groups, and thus the varied forms of digital proximity established between elements of the performance are also reflected in differing ways across the varied sites of performance. John Muse (2010) elucidates this in relation to flash mob performance practices of the early 2010s, in particular the genre of flash mob performance which evolved in the context of YouTube and other video-sharing sites, exemplified by the work of New York-based performance group Improv Everywhere. Muse draws on Ambercrombie and Longhurst's theory of the 'diffused audience' (1998) to explore how Improv Everywhere's flash mob performances engage with a diffusion of audiences across the hybrid multilocalities of their staging.

While Blank Noise's Walk Alone event differs in significant ways from the kinds of public pranks or 'missions' that Improv Everywhere became renowned for, in some aspects – particularly in their staging across offline and online public spaces – these performance events share commonality. Participants in both groups pre-plan an agreed performance action and enact it in urban public spaces, without explicitly framing the action as performance or explaining it as such to members of the public. At the same time, both sets of actions are digitally documented and later constructed and narrativised for online audiences: in a blog format in the case of Walk Alone, and as video (with accompanying text and images) in the case of Improv Everywhere. The Walk Alone event therefore shares some of the features of the diffused audience that Muse identifies in his analysis of flash mob performance which, at a first level, includes the immediate spectators of the public who act as witnesses to the event's performance action. In my discussion of the performance of visibility enacted by Walk Alone participants, above, we can identify this level of immediate spectatorship, in which other occupants of our night-time public spaces became inadvertent witnesses to our

walking acts. At this level, the Walk Alone event operated as a form of invisible theatre, performing utopia (in Lieder's terms) for an unsuspecting public (2018: 159).

In Muse's analysis of flash mob practices, the immediate audience occupying public spaces are then reframed as actors in the remediated narrative of the event constructed via online video. Their befuddled reactions help to perform the notion of surprise that was central to the flash mob video genre at that time. A second key group in this framework of diffused audience are therefore the online spectators, who occupy an 'in-the-know' position in relationship to the event. Whereas the physical, accidental audience in the vicinity of the flash mob performance are typically surprised by its occurrence, the mediated flash mob audience online are given contextual narrative and behind-the-scenes footage that position them as informed insiders. In the case of Walk Alone, digital documentation was assembled and presented on the Blank Noise blog to construct a single coherent narrative of the event through the collation of individual images and reflections. This documentation and its online curation help to perform Walk Alone-as-event for an online spectatorship. Where immediate spectators were not necessarily informed that the walk constituted a political performance or that it included other (dispersed) performers, online spectators are positioned in an informed relationship to the wider contexts of the event. Significantly, Muse identifies a third key audience group, the flash mob participants themselves, who operate as 'artist-spectators' to their own performance act. As I have sought to demonstrate above, in the Walk Alone event the closed WhatsApp chat group became a key site in which we observed the performance event unfolding, and experienced a sense of digital aliveness in proximity to our co-performers as spectators.

Conclusion

In India, feminist campaign groups such as Blank Noise, who are concerned with the

embodied experiences of women in public spaces, have advanced Butler's notion of plural performativity into a digital public sphere. Using social media, these activists are blurring the boundaries between private and public by transforming individual embodied experiences into collective, concerted acts, through modes of digital assembly which call for greater social freedoms for women. This article has sought to demonstrate how the use of hybrid physical and mediated performance sites in the 2016 Walk Alone event established a range of digital proximities between dispersed participants, arguing that the effect of these practices is not only to create solidarity, or to establish forms of documentation that performatively frame these everyday acts as activism, although these were both aspects of the event. In addition to these outcomes, the acts of digital documentation and mediated interactivity in themselves transformed an everyday quotidian action – walking – into a mode of critical embodiment; a reflexive, collective performance act.

Of course, this argument does not entirely refute Sherry Turkle's concerns about the isolating effects of digital connectivity. Turkle might question the authenticity or depth of human connection between participants in projects like these, and certainly I make no claims that socially mediated forms of protest might replace the power of concerted physical assembly in public spaces. However, this case demonstrates the potentiality for digital performance sites to connect and mobilise dispersed participants, drawing a politics of the personal, the embodied, and the autobiographical into a public sphere. In the darkness of a December night, we walked alone to reflect on the accumulated bodily memories of our lived experience. We walked alone, together.

References

Abercrombie, Nicholas and Longhurst, Brian (1998) *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Alcorn, Gay (2018) Eurydice Dixon: how one woman's death put focus on 'male rage' in Australia. *The Guardian,* 19 June.

Auslander, Philip (2006) The performativity of performance documentation. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28(3): 1-10.

Baviskar, Amita and Ray, Raka (eds) (2011) *Elite and Everyman: the cultural politics of the Indian middle classes.* New Delhi: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (2015) *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Carr, Joetta L (2013) The SlutWalk Movement: A Study in Transnational Feminist Activism. *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 4(4): 24-38.

Dunlop, Jane Frances (2017) Proximity and Dissonance in Internet-situated Performance. *Performance Research* 22(3): 89-97.

Gupta, Hemangini (2016) Taking Action: The Desiring Subjects of Neoliberal Feminism in India. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17(1): 152-168.

Hampton, Claire (2015) #nomakeupselfies: the Face of Hashtag Slacktivism. *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 8(6): 1-14.

Jha, Sonora (2018) Gathering Online, Loitering Offline: Hashtag Activism and the Claim for Public Space by Women in India Through the #WhyLoiter Campaign. In: Jha S and Kurian A (eds) *New feminisms in South Asia: Disrupting the discourse through social media, film, and literature.* New York & Abingdon: Routledge.

Kapur, Ratna (2012) Pink Chaddis and SlutWalk Couture: The Postcolonial Politics of Feminism Lite. *Feminist Legal Studies* 20(1): 1-20.

Keniston, Kenneth (2004) Introduction: The four digital divides. In: Keniston K and Kumar D (eds) *IT experience in India: Bridging the digital divide.* New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Kluitenberg, Eric (2006) The network of waves: Living and acting in a hybrid space. *Open* 11 Hybrid Space 6-16.

Kurian, Alka (2018) Decolonizing the body: Theoretical imaginings on the fourth wave feminism in India. In: Jha S and Kurian A (eds) *New feminisms in South Asia: Disrupting the discourse through social media, film, and literature.* New York & Abingdon: Routledge.

LeVan, Michael (2013) Digital Proximities. *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33(3): 246–247.

Lewis, William W. (2017) Performing 'Posthuman' Spectatorship. *Performance Research* 22(3): 7-14.

Lieder, K. Frances (2018) Performing loitering: Feminist protest in the Indiancity. *TDR/The Drama Review* 62(3): 145-161.

Millar, Sarah (2011) Police officer's remarks at York inspire 'SlutWalk'. *Toronto Star,* 17 March 2011.

Mitra-Kahn, Trishima (2012) Offline issues, online lives? The emerging cyberlife of feminist politics in urban India. In: Roy S (ed) *New South Asian feminisms: Paradoxes and possibilities.* London & New York: Zed Books.

Mohan, S. (2015) Locating the "Internet Hindu": Political Speech and Performance in Indian Cyberspace. *Television & New Media* 16(4): 339-345.

Muse, John H. (2010) Flash Mobs and the Diffusion of Audience. *Theater* 40(3): 9-23.

Nayar, Pramod K. (2008) India goes to the blogs: cyberspace, community, identity. In: Gokulsing KM and Dissanayake W (eds) *Popular culture in a globalised India.* Abingdon: Routledge, 207-222.

Oudshoorn, Nelly (2009) Physical and digital proximity: emerging ways of health care in face-to-face and telemonitoring of heart-failure patients. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 31(3): 390-405.

Patheja, Jasmeen (2016a) Walk Alone. Akeli Awaara Azaad (Alone / Wanderer / Free): Register. *Blank Noise* [blog], 23 November. Available at: http://blog.blanknoise.org/2016/11/walk-alone-akeli-awaara-azaad-alone.html. [Accessed: 15 August 2019].

Patheja, Jasmeen (2016b) Action Heroes Walk Alone December 2nd: Akeli Awaara Azaad. *Blank Noise* [blog], 28 December. Available at: http://blog.blanknoise.org/2016/12/action-heroes-walk-alone-december-2nd.html. [Accessed: 15 August 2019].

Phadke, Shilpa, Ranade, Shilpa and Khan, Sameera (2009) Why loiter? Radical possibilities for gendered dissent. In: Butcher M and Velayutham S (eds)

Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

Philipose, Pamela (2013) Anxieties in the Republic Media Metamorphosis and Popular Protest. *Economic & Political Weekly,* February 2 2013.

Ray Murray, Padmini (2016) Bringing up the bodies: the visceral, the virtual, and the visible. Paper presented at: *Diginaka International Seminar of the School of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS.*

Savory Fuller, Rebecca (2018) *Embodying 'new India' through remixed global performance: Flash mobs redefined in contemporary urban India, 2003-15*. PhD Thesis, University of Exeter.

Sharanya (2017) A Manifesto to Decolonise Walking. *Performance Research* 22(3): 85-88.

Steinmaurer, Thomas (2014) Mediatized connectivity: Historical traits of telephony and theoretical considerations about a new dispositive of communication. In: Hepp A and Krotz F (eds) *Mediatized worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age.* Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 91-106.

Susan, Nisha (2009) Valentine's Warriors The Pink Chaddi Campaign: why it began and how. *Tehelka Magazine,* February 2 2009.

Taneja, Mahima (2019) From Slutwalks to Nirbhaya: Shifts in the Indian women's movement. *Women's Studies International Forum* 74179-187.

Taylor, Diana (2003) *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas,* USA: Duke University Press.

Turkle, Sherry (2011) *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other,* New York: Basic Books.

Villi, Mikko (2015) "Hey, I'm here Right Now": Camera phone photographs and mediated presence. *Photographies* 8(1): 3-22.