19. Clothing For/Against Walking

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This chapter is about happy and less happy collaborations between people and (other) materials. In particular, it is about how people and materials work together in the act of walking. What happens when stuff does not operate as expected, and the walking breaks down? This is a phenomenological question that cannot be answered in the abstract. People in different times and places, with different physical and social make-ups, perform and experience walking and its breakdowns in very different ways. Our question, therefore, deserves historically, culturally, socially, and somatically sensitive analyses. This chapter makes a plea for such analyses and offers suggestions on how they might be performed, especially in historical cases, because these are arguably the hardest to retrieve. I offer two tools for such analyses. First, I will propose to distinguish between "helpful" *materials* and "unhelpful" *matter*. I suggest that when, in the experience of walkers, materials turn into matter, this has at least four phenomenological consequences: for the materials themselves, for the walker's body, the activity of walking, and the walking space. Second, I will suggest that we cannot discover what happens in these four phenomenological transitions from material to matter by looking at materials/matter only, but that we need to listen to humans' stories, too.

Let me start with two examples from my own mobility history.

A teenager on a school day, traversing a western-European town on foot. I am wearing new shoes: leather ballet flats. They look best without socks, and the weather is too warm for socks, anyhow. In the afternoon, I notice a sharp pain. The heels of my shoes have filled up with blood, and I need to go barefoot for the rest of the day. This has several consequences. That day, the city for me is reduced to pavement and asphalt: it is all I can see because I have to ensure I do not tread on broken glass or dog mess. At the same time, as I will explore in a moment, going barefoot feels liberating that afternoon, initiating new interactions between my skin, flesh, and bones and the materials surrounding me.

A second example. I am visiting a European city, wearing a new coat. It is long and wide, made of fairly thick woolen cloth lined with viscose. The lining is not attached at the hem, and both pieces of fabric have a deep split at the back and the front. They hang freely from my waist down, being fastened with only two buttons

at the height of my chest and stomach. I like how they dance about my legs and drape around my ankle when I climb the stairs at the station. The next moment, I fall flat on my face. From then on, I start discovering how much effort it takes me to walk safely in the coat. Obstacles at foot level are easily missed and tripped over because of its length and the movement of its fabrics. I need to pick up all the different strands of the coat whenever I take a step up. In addition, rain makes the coat even heavier than it already is.

These examples illustrate literary scholar Bill Brown's distinction between objects and things. This is a phenomenological distinction rather than an ontological one: it pertains to how humans *experience* physical entities. Brown calls physical entities objects when they have meaning to humans: when humans see their point, their use. Things, in contrast, comprise all physical entities in their undomesticated appearance. They do not need to be intelligible or useful to humans to exist. A specific subset of "things" consists of those things humans emphatically perceive as obstructive. They form so many obstacles to the ways people expect or hope to run their lives. This subset is pertinent to this chapter: when I tripped over my coat, it turned from an object into a thing, and this mattered for my walking.

In fact, this had a range of consequences for me as a human user of the coat. To understand these consequences, however, we need to look not only at things but also at materials. In the humanities, there is a renewed interest in phenomenology. Phenomenology entails the examination of experience, not in the sense of the store of knowledge a person gains over time, but in the sense of their feelings and thoughts about the world around them *as they occur*. In trying to learn more about these experiences, looking at materials is vital because materials form such a significant factor in creating them. Before I continue this argument, a clarification on how I conceptualize materials. Tim Ingold has rightly questioned the focus on artifacts in material culture studies. This privileges the self-contained, human-made object and its consumption to the neglect of non-object materials ("Toward an Ecology" 435). However, there is a more fundamental reason to focus not just on artifacts when we investigate experience. As anthropologists Adam Drazin and Susanne Küchler have shown, it is not always possible to distinguish between finished objects and materials. For one, the distinction depends partly on the history of these physical entities, a history not always known and also not always relevant to the person interacting with them. It does not always make sense to distinguish between, for instance, a rock in the landscape—a natural material—and a stone monument—a human-made object. For another, many entities are called a material in one professional discipline (for instance, design) but not in another (for example, engineering): Drazin calls these "thing-manifested materials" (xx–xxiv). In short, it does not always make sense to distinguish between form and substance, or object and material, especially when focusing on human experiences of them.

My own experience confirms this. The stiffness of the shoes that caused my feet to bleed was not simply part of the material, leather. The once supple hide from which my shoes were made was already stiffened in the production of the leather but only became so hard as to hurt my skin when they were turned into shoes. The leather thus assumed new properties once shaped as a shoe. Nor was this stiffness simply part of the form "shoe:" my cotton shoes are not stiff in the same way, for example. Moreover, my *old* leather shoes are no longer so stiff, either. So, the stiffness was part of a particular stage and form in the life of the material: my new-shoes-of-leather. It makes more sense, therefore, to regard both groups, objects *and* materials, as part of the same analytical category. This does not need to lead back to studying these materials-in-form only as cultural symbols or objects of economic exchange: my focus is still firmly on their physically experienced properties, such as their roughness/smoothness, their malleability/stiffness, or their insulative properties. These properties matter tremendously to their human users, and they are part and parcel of what users commonly perceive to be the materials of their tools, which is why we need to pay close attention to these.

Adding this insight to Brown's plea to distinguish objects from things, we might similarly distinguish materials from other matter. Drazin and Küchler reserve the term "materials" for categories of matter that have meaning to humans: when I put on my new shoes, the shiny leather appeared to me as beautiful and protective. "Matter," in contrast, is "material stuff in general," in Drazin's words (xxvi). In light of Brown's distinction, though, I would like to use the term "matter" in this essay more specifically for physical entities in their undomesticated, seemingly meaningless or useless appearance; entities that occasionally seem even to work against people's aims actively. This highlights the dramatically different relations that can exist between walkers and the materials with which they surround themselves. The leather that was a material to me when I put on my shoes suddenly became "matter" when it started hurting so much that I had to take the shoes off. The leather stopped playing the role I had wished, even forced it to play. This distinction between materials and matter should help us analyze what feels smooth and natural to people when they walk, and what does not. *Materials* are their taken-for-granted helpers. *Matter* is what resists their will or understanding. It is what they encounter when walking goes awry.

Studying this process of going awry is vital in current phenomenological endeavors. When, for walkers, elegant cloth and protective leather turn into obstinate matter, this profoundly impacts their mobility: where they can go, how much effort this takes, and *how* they walk, observe, and are in space. But why should we want to know exactly how this impact differs across time and between different people(s)? For one, the new phenomenology differs from the old in acknowledging the diversity of human experiences and no longer taking the present-day, privileged researcher as a model for all experience. Second, historical and anthropological claims about

the distinction between materials and matter need testing, for instance, the idea that people used to be more familiar with the materials they encountered in their day-to-day life and that their work therefore used to be easier than it has become since the start of the present revolution in materials (Drazin xxi). Materials were not necessarily more familiar to their users in the past, however, because labor specialization and leisured classes are both long-standing social phenomena. Eighteenth-century porters, for instance, treated their soles with wax and rosin in order not to slip (Dolan 134). Meanwhile, the wealthy travelers they carried around in their sedan chairs did not practice this technique and would therefore have had a harder time climbing steep rocky terrain. This is no isolated example: materials have always had their secrets, depending on their users' occupation or socioeconomic class (Geurts, "Travel"). A third reason for this kind of study lies outside the academy. Assumptions about mobility form the basis of governments' plans for future material landscapes. Such assumptions, like academic assumptions, have long started from "model" citizens. Mobility, however, comes about in the interplay of nonhuman and human physical, financial, and ideological possibilities and therefore works differently for different humans living in different environments. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to mobility obstacles. Nor—to emphasize the positive side—does an obstacle always need to be an obstacle, as my coat will soon show.

Experiments and Stories

First, however: how to research these different impacts that materials-turning-into-matter may have? Our initial impulse may be to reach for texts that create and reflect on the cultural meaning of materials: from news items about mobility to cultural commentaries or advertorials for hiking equipment. Yet most of these offer only armchair analyses. Instead, Ingold suggests "engaging quite directly with the stuff we want to understand: by sawing logs, building a wall, knapping a stone or rowing a boat" ("Materials" 2–3). Cultural and historical researchers might thus observe and experiment with items they buy in a shop, find in an archive or museum depot, or reconstruct themselves—and they have been doing so in abundance, especially archaeologists and anthropologists. One advantage is the richness of information collected this way; another is that it circumvents the usual bias for literate people. The coat in which I stumbled on the stairs, for example, which is of a fairly nineteenth-century European cut, might say something about the urban walking practices of many nineteenth-century Europeans: that these practices were slower, more laborious, and more physically risky than their twenty-first-century equivalents, perhaps.

When I discussed this possibility with a friend, however, they told me how pleasant their hiking in the Crimean Mountains had been, despite wearing long and mid-

length A-line skirts of a fluid to moderate drape (rather than stiffer fabrics that stand out more from the body), comparable in effect to my coat. They had developed a habit of kicking the fabric ahead at each step before landing their foot on the ground, and, to them, this was no effort at all. Our respective interactions with comparable fabrics thus differed significantly. A plausible explanation for this difference would be my friend's lifelong skirt-wearing experience. Both of my own experiences of walking-gone-wrong, narrated above, involved purchases of a type of item to which I was unaccustomed. Perhaps only the inexperienced are hindered by long garments or painful shoes.

In nineteenth-century travel accounts, for instance, many skirt wearers—their skirts made of cloth, linen, cotton, or silk—indeed make nothing of their costume. However, my explanation fell apart when considering the accounts of some of the travelers who have become famous for wearing both skirts and trousers. These individuals frequently cite the impracticality of skirts, and globetrotter Ida Pfeiffer, for instance, tucked up their skirts on travel days (Heidhues 290). Their preferences, bodily capabilities, or (others') expectations about how to walk apparently led to different ways of experiencing fabrics from my friend's, despite their shared lifelong experience. This means there is no necessary correlation between a material-in-form and the experiences a person can have with it: the material and cut of a piece of travel clothing do not, on their own, determine travel experiences, and scholars' experiments with these materials can therefore offer only partial insights into specific people's experiences (see Corn 43). For if we were to argue exclusively from our own material observations and experiments, that would automatically also mean arguing only from our own standpoint, which may lead to cultural myopia and anachronism. Even if materials have certain tendencies, as Drazin writes, the properties noticed or employed by humans differ from use to use, from person to person. Different cultures or industries may even classify chemically and physically identical stuff as different materials altogether (xviii, xxvi). We, therefore, need to supplement their direct study with other sources.

Ingold offers a key to what these sources may be: "the properties of materials […] are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced [by humans]. In that sense, every property is a condensed story" ("Materials" 14). So, to find when, for walkers, materials turn into renegade matter, we have to find their stories. Elizabeth Shove and their colleagues have modeled such work from a sociological perspective. They collected interviews about, for instance, whether kitchens in British households "work" for those who have to live with them and which tools and materials are coveted and why—leading indeed to different degrees and forms of (dis)satisfaction (22–39). Historians can find similar stories by examining first-person writing, for instance, travel diaries.

What we find there is an astounding range of preferences. An example: while present-day Europeans may find it perfectly obvious that different left- and right-

hand shoes are best for walking on foot, nineteenth-century European women often wore straights: pairs of identically shaped shoes (Swallow). Nothing in the diaries of Dorothy Wordsworth, to name one avid walker, has suggested to me so far that this hindered their 30-kilometer day treks. Of course, when feet bleed, as mine did, this may be taken as an obvious sign of discomfort, but the body does not always speak so clearly or independently. That is, the influence of cultural normality is enormous, both on the body and the mind. People tend to prefer the familiar (Geurts, *Travel and Space*), and differently cultured limbs are also literally shaped differently because they have been wearing different clothing or doing different work. For example, feet are partly shaped by the shoes in which they have been enclosed. The same goes for the other body parts people use to walk: legs, arms, hands, and so on, depending on one's way of walking, on wheels, hands, feet, or knees. Discomfort and pain are culturally and individually specific as well: they can be ignored, overpowered by distractions, or dealt with in various more positive ways (Andrews), all of which mechanisms are culturally inflected. As a result, uncomfortable clothes can still take people on euphoric hikes. These examples show the importance of finding the sources that speak of this rich variety in human interactions with clothing. Once we have found them, what kinds of discoveries can we make?

What Matter Reveals

We discover that when walkers see material turn into matter, this has a surprisingly wide range of consequences. Brown writes that objects—in our case: materials—form a window onto life, nonintrusive and faithful to human intentions as they are, and therefore, as it were, transparent (4). I want to argue that matter forms a possibly even bigger "window": it offers a view onto at least four things.

First, it offers a view onto materials and matter themselves. Precisely because matter is untransparent, visible, and noticeable (Brown 4), it forces humans to look at it. That is, the breakdowns of my ordinary walking practice foregrounded the stiff leather of my shoes and the unpredictably flowing wool of my coat. In a sense, these breakdowns even *created* these matters for me because I ascribed different properties to them while I was still happy with them (that is, when they were still materials to me). Simultaneously, such stories about breakdowns help humans recognize what materials, in their more faithful guise, are doing for them. Therefore, by detailing specific people's estrangement from materials as these turn into matter, these stories enable both their protagonists and researchers to see the cultural meanings that these materials typically had at a given time and place.

Yet this window does not only offer a view onto material and matter, but onto other important aspects of walking as well. For, second, matter turns people's attention to their bodies while changing them at the same time. As philosopher Drew

Leder writes, people tend not to notice most of their body until part of it seems to dysfunction: then, they suddenly become aware of it. This "dys-appearance" of the body has been analyzed through a cultural lens by Madeleine Akrich and Bernike Pasveer, among others, but much work is yet to be done, especially historically. When a body part "dys-appears"—the skin on my heel, for example—this may be due to a faulty interface between materials—as caused by my failure to wear stockings or soften the leather first—and this may transform the material leather into matter. However, I also feel pained and perhaps annoyed by or alienated from the skin on my heel itself. The dys-appearance of my skin can thus be strong enough for the skin to turn from a material into matter (this is akin to but not the same as Ingold's argument that organic beings are also materials: "Materials" 4).

Third, these stories can teach us a great amount about the activity of walking. A first thing they can tell us is what walking with material-turned-matter feels like. My new coat and shoes turned my usually easy walking practice into an effort: I had to keep a constant eye on the ground, raising the fabric of my coat when needed, avoiding too-sharp objects while accepting stepping on others, and I moved along more slowly than usual. However, observing the effects of these breakdowns in walking also reveals positive transformations. Going barefoot added several welcome aspects to my walking experience. It was fun for me to shake this everyday necessity up a little. I felt like I was boiling walking down to its essentials, learning that this was feasible even in a busy European city, both socially and physically. This gave me, at that moment, a sense of freedom. These two observations raise important questions about the relationship between normality and discomfort or pain. What forms of routine discomfort, whether having always been normal or normalized over time, are accepted by the people who suffer from them or even cease to hurt altogether? And what forms remain painful or a cause for complaint? For me, a temporary lack of shoes had positive as well as negative effects. Some people prefer permanently to forgo shoes. For many others, however, a lack of shoes is not a choice at all but a source of pain. For many others again, wearing no shoes is only normal: they have different ways of making the interface between skin and ground workable and unobtrusive. Ironically, this is similar to how, for many of the dwellers of the European town in which I was walking, the unquestioned norm was *always* to wear shoes. And so, a final form of knowledge that matter can offer us about walking is to make explicit how specific groups of people usually do it and with what rationale. Breakdowns reveal what people take for granted. Many routinely expect their bodies and the materials around them to cooperate in smooth human-nonhuman assemblages. Moments of breakdown show how complicated these assemblages are and how interdependent human bodies and other materials are. Each is adapted to the others. Moreover, how they are adapted differs tremendously between individuals with different bodies and material means and between different cultures. The rubber-soled shoes that I wear are only worn in some places. *My* skin and *my* city's littered pave-

ments usually work together well because I have learned to put these rubber soles between them. I do not know whether my skin and feet would have been capable of this experiment in wintertime or in a city without separate pavements for pedestrians. Also, on a social level, my going barefoot raised some eyebrows—though no more than that. Had, say, a police officer done the same thing, the social effects would have been far greater.

Fourth and last, materials-turned-matter change walkers' relationship to the surrounding space. Sociologist Mike Michael already wrote about how painful boots can disturb the connection that hikers try to establish with nature. My own walking had a similarly significant impact on my relationship with the city. It redirected my attention from the events at eye level—people, traffic, shopfronts: the things I usually pay the most attention to—to what was happening on the pavement. Again, the effects were a mixture of discomfort and pleasure. I was on the lookout for broken glass, another material-turned-matter, but I saw much more than that: different makes of pavement or maintenance-hole cover, urban plants, and animals. In addition, I could not only see but also feel more. The paving slabs were of a smooth texture, while the asphalt I had to cross every now and then was more porous, though still pleasant to my feet. The slabs also transferred the heat of the sun to my feet. Furthermore, as a seeing person, I was reminded more than usual of the tactile paving put in place to guide walkers with partial or no sight, with my soles perceiving its shapes as sharp ridges and troughs.

Thus, materials turning into matter may cause hindrance to walkers and so reveal what they expect their walking to be like, but it may also bring about new experiences, including positive ones: of the material or matter itself, the activity of walking, the walker's body, and the world around them, depending on who, when, and where they are. Next to engaging deeply with mobility-related materials and matter themselves, researchers interested in these questions, therefore, need to listen to the stories people across human history have to tell about what happens to them when an activity such as walking breaks down.

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