

Dog(s) walking: darkness, agency, and sensory negotiation

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Abstract

Dog walking is typically cast as an ordinary health-oriented routine, yet such narratives obscure the relational, sensory, and political complexities through which multispecies life is organized. This article reexamines dog walking by analyzing nocturnal walks in a private field, drawing on a year-long practice-based research project undertaken with two canine companions. Combining photography, embodied movement, and situated reflection, this study investigates how darkness reconfigures perception, spatial relations, and agency within human-canine encounters.

Engaging with scholarship on darkness, more-than-human agency, and creative walking methodologies, the article conceptualizes darkness not as mere absence but as a spatial-sensory condition that disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies of vision. Limited human visibility foregrounds canine sensory capacities and renders agency legible through movement, traces, and environmental effects rather than through stabilized visual forms. Blurred images, LED trails, and vegetal entanglements operate as methodological artefacts that make distributed agency perceptible while also exposing the technological and embodied mediations through which encounters are recorded. The analysis further situates private dog fields within broader political and infrastructural regimes that shape contemporary dog walking practices. Enclosures, paths, illumination devices, and waste management systems organize responsibility and care, while darkness unsettles these routines, shifting attention from surveillance to embodied familiarity. By centering nocturnal walking practices as both method and phenomenon, the article contributes to innovative humanities approaches that integrate creative practice, multispecies studies, and spatial theory. It shows how walking dogs in the dark distributes agency as relational and emergent and redefines an everyday practice as a site of continual multispecies negotiation.

Keywords: canine-human relationships; multispecies agency; darkness; practice-based research; walking; dog

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Introduction

Dog walking is now a familiar and everyday practice with a long history that emerges from ongoing reconfigurations of human-canine relations. These changing dynamics have produced a correlative web of practices, technologies, regimes, routines, and affects that have shaped how dogs and humans move together. Historically, early hunting and protection practices established and normalized humans and dogs moving together through space as a shared act. Indeed, such was the importance of this relationship between human and canine that, according to Xenophon in *The Sportsman*, careful attention to dogs and hunting was regarded as not only morally formative but a route to personal excellence. By the nineteenth century, however, shifts in human-animal relations reframed canines as domestic companions and the dog walk was transformed into an institutionalized set of practices intertwined with discourses of exercise, health, management, training, care, and the signaling of social class (Pearson, 2024; Ritvo, 1987). In addition, technologies of control such as collars, leads, and harnesses and other materials including specialized clothing for both humans and dogs became standardized elements as the affective and relational dynamics of dog walking changed. In the UK, more recent developments, including an increasing number of companion dogs in urban environments, the expansion of canine legislation, and regulations relating to dog fighting, breed control, dog fouling, and straying, and shifting ideas about what constitutes “good canine welfare” have all impacted how, when, where, and why dogs and humans walk together (Parkinson, 2026). This article focuses on a specific and underexamined form of the practice: nocturnal dog walking in a private field. Through this lens it explores how darkness becomes a condition that reshapes relations, makes distributed agency visible, and transforms familiar human-canine routines into sites of sensory negotiation.

Dog walking

Within contemporary scholarly discourses, dog walking is recognized as a popular leisure activity (Iwasaki, 2017) and widely framed as a positive activity for both humans and canines, with health benefits for humans being frequently cited as a key justification (Carr, et al., 2021; Johnson & Meadows, 2010; Lentino, et al., 2012; Westgarth, et al., 2014). Yet this framing does not hold consistently across all dog-owning or dog-handling populations. For a variety of personal, social, and environmental reasons which are shaped by differences in country, region, and local context, many individuals do not routinely walk the dogs in their care (Koohsari, et al., 2022). Even among those who do, dog walking is far from uniform, with research pointing to considerable variation, including sporadic or inconsistent routines (Westgarth, et al., 2022).

Reflecting variation in the practice, scholars have also differentiated between functional and recreational forms of dog walking. Functional walks are typically shorter and less enjoyable for the human, often motivated by a sense of responsibility or guilt, and tend to occur close to home. In contrast, recreational walks are usually longer, more pleasurable for the human, and likely to take place in less urban environments (Westgarth, et al., 2021). The former are frequently oriented around fulfilling the dog’s immediate bodily needs, while the latter are associated with broader experiential rewards, including enjoyment of the environment and a heightened sense of connection between human and dog (Westgarth, et al., 2021).

Beyond physical health outcomes, dog walking is also associated with a range of social benefits for humans, while offering opportunities for interaction and socialization for dogs themselves. Sonja Žakula argues that moving through space with a companion dog

involves a particular form of embodied attentiveness, shaping how walkers relate to their surroundings (Žakula, 2023). Drawing on their experiences of walking during COVID-19 lockdowns, Žakula (2023, p. 101) suggests that dogs can function as a form of “social lubricant,” making it easier to initiate conversations with strangers that might otherwise feel uncomfortable or unlikely. In this way, dog walking can foster forms of community that are specifically organized around shared practices of walking with dogs (Žakula 2023, p. 101). Related findings are presented by Katie Potter, et al. (2019), who show that dog ownership increases opportunities for casual social encounters, including interactions with neighbors. They note that such encounters may help to mitigate aspects of social isolation, particularly among older adults. Similarly, Dawn Carr, et al. (2021) found that during the pandemic, older adults who walked a dog daily did not experience the same increases in loneliness widely reported elsewhere. Thus, living with a dog offers more than animal companionship. The everyday practices associated with canine companions, especially walking, can also generate meaningful forms of social connection between people. Extending this argument, Jessica Amberson (2022) frames these interactions in terms of identity, suggesting that identifying as a “dog person” can enable forms of belonging and community participation for individuals who might otherwise feel marginalized.

Whilst not insignificant, such framings risk narrowing the practices of dog walking to an instrumentalized and human-centered wellbeing narrative. In response, this article focuses on the affective, relational, and situated dimensions of dog walking, exploring the ways that dog-human movements co-produce shared spaces and forms of distributed agency. In doing so, it addresses what others have identified as a relative lack of attention to animal agency within the scholarship on dog walking (Włodarczyk, 2021). Moreover, this article explores a second underexamined aspect of the everyday practices of dog walking: walking with dogs in the dark. Although there is a large body of scholarly work on the subject of walking as an (auto)ethnographic method for exploring the relationships between human and landscape (Macpherson, 2016; O'Neill, 2026, Hall, et al., 2017), there is comparatively little written on walking at night (Griffiths, et al., 2023) and even less on nocturnal dog walking.

This discussion centers on photographic images produced during a year-long practice-based research project on walking in private dog fields. These spaces differ significantly from public parks, which are typically free, fenced environments used simultaneously by multiple dogs and humans, often within urban or suburban contexts. Private dog fields, by contrast, are securely enclosed spaces located in rural or semi-rural areas and hired on an hourly (or part-hour) basis to facilitate exclusive access to a space for dog walking and recreation. In the UK, growth in the number of these types of spaces from a couple of hundred to over 1200 (British Dog Fields, 2024) is directly linked to diversification of land-use after 2017 following the UK's departure from the European Union when landowner subsidies provided under the Common Agricultural Policy were replaced with new domestic schemes (Black, 2022). In response, landowners sought new income streams, one of which has been the widespread establishment of private dog fields (Dunne, 2020; Farming UK, 2024). These spaces therefore represent not only a reconfiguration of the rural landscape driven by political and economic change, but they also reflect a major shift in dog walking practices in the UK over the course of a decade.

The spatial context in which dog walking takes place is not inconsequential as space actively mediates relations of power, visibility, risk, and care, each of which shape how dog and human agency are enacted. Existing studies suggest that access to safe, open green spaces enhances the experience of dog walking, and for many urban dog walkers, the pleasures of a

walk include seeing a dog running off-lead (Westgarth, 2021; Westgarth, 2022). Such narratives of dog walking rely on normative assumptions about safety, visibility and control which presume that the spaces in which walks take place are well-lit and “safe,” both in terms of the place being free from environmental hazards and that other dogs will not pose a threat. Private dog fields, at first glance, appear to offer opportunities for safe, contained off-lead exercise in green spaces without the risks associated with encountering unfamiliar dogs and humans, and, in general terms, meet many of the criteria that constitute the ideal space for dog walking and recreation. However, walking with dogs in private dog fields at night fundamentally unsettles these assumptions. Under conditions of darkness, normalized expectations of visibility, control, and risk that structure narratives of dog walking in well-illuminated spaces are reconfigured. In other words, private dog fields at night invite different forms of interspecies negotiations and affective orientation. I propose here that darkness operates as a critical spatial and sensory condition that disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies of perception, privileges canine sensory capacities and can make apparent the distribution of agency during the walk. Attending to dog walking as a situated practice in this way reveals that it is not a universal or singular activity but instead is a contingent and spatially differentiated practice in which human and canine bodies, technologies and environments co-constitute one another.

Cultural meanings of darkness

Jeffrey Burton Russell observes that, historically, darkness has been persistently associated with evil, encompassing “death, the underworld, blindness [...] depression, stupidity, sin, despair, dirt, poison and plague” (1988, p. 17). Indeed, a quick glance at contemporary Western popular culture finds myriad examples of darkness being associated with threat, melancholy, secrecy, death, crime, and moral decay through genres such as horror, Gothic fiction, crime, and noir, as well as slasher films, folklore, and fantasy narratives. Film noir’s characteristic chiaroscuro cinematography for example draws on techniques from German Expressionism where low-key lighting, deep shadows, and silhouettes fragment space and obscure visibility such that, culturally, noir’s visual language aligns darkness with secrecy, corruption, and compromised agency (Dixon, 2009; Keating, 2024). Gothic films use visual signifiers and narratives codes associated with the uncanny such as imagery of darkness, fog, shadows, and soft lighting to create a sense of “perpetual night” (Edwards and Hoglund, 2018, p. 17) whilst darkness pervades the visual language of the horror genre with its associations of threat, instability, death, and the unknown (Wells, 2019). Indeed, what popular culture tells us about darkness is that walking in it is risky, transgressive, and charged with vulnerability, uncertainty, and fear.

Tim Edensor and Nick Dunn examine why Western culture has long assigned such negative connotations to darkness, arguing that Christian orthodoxies elevated light to a divine and moral status while casting darkness as malign (2021, p. 26). These religious associations were later reinforced through Enlightenment narratives that aligned reason, visibility, and illumination as markers of progress, framing the so-called Dark Ages as a period of regression. As Robert Hensey argues, darkness is considered the opposite of illumination and other light-oriented terms; “the dark is where the unseen, unformed and misunderstood things abide, that which has not been examined in the cold hard light of day” (Hensey in Dowd and Hensey, 2016, p. 23). Colonial discourse further entrenched these hierarchies through racialized metaphors such as the designation of Africa as “the Dark Continent,” a term that allied darkness with primitivism, danger, and moral inadequacy. Taken together, these histories contribute to what Edensor and Dunn describe as a lingering

cultural logic in which “darkness remains synonymous with the malevolent, sinister and backward” (2021, pp. 26-27).

However, Edensor and Dunn stress that this dominant framing has never been historically or geographically universal and they argue that darkness is always mediated by cultural practices and social values rather than possessing an inherent moral meaning (2021, p. 28). Drawing on Robert Williams, they contend that dark spaces are “constituted by social struggles about what should and should not happen in certain places during the dark of the night” (Williams in Edensor and Dunn, 2021, p. 28), positioning darkness as a spatial and political condition shaped through contestation. Accordingly, projects of illumination do not simply eradicate darkness but instead they generate new forms of regulation and surveillance, resulting in what Michel de Certeau describes as the continual production of “opacities and ambiguities” and “spaces of darkness and trickery” within urban life (1988, p. 18). According to de Certeau, spaces of darkness do not emerge outside of regulation but in response to it and, moreover, this is where everyday practices rework forms of urban control. However, these spaces do not resist directly but rather they mark the everyday ways in which regulation is negotiated. In this sense, darkness has long enabled alternative forms of sociability, spirituality, resistance, and transgression, particularly for marginalized groups for whom night-time offers forms of refuge from labor, scrutiny, and normative control (Edensor and Dunn 2021, p. 28; Edensor, 2015 pp. 428-30).

Nina Edwards (2018) also complicates the dominant pejorative narratives of darkness by tracing a longer and more ambivalent cultural history. Edwards argues that there are many examples of cultural narratives in which darkness frequently precedes and enables light. In many creation myths, for example, darkness is not absence but a generative condition. She notes that “darkness is first comer” (Edwards, 2018) and functions as a powerful initiator from which order and life emerge. In classical Greek thought, light was synonymous with life and visibility such that “to live is to look and to die is to be overcome by darkness,” yet darkness and blindness were simultaneously associated with insight, prophecy, and understanding (Edwards, 2018). For Edwards, figures such as Tiresias and Homer exemplify how “when sight was not present to see the outside world, insight was thought to increase” (Edwards, 2018). For this reason, darkness can be understood to operate as both a condition of loss and a site of heightened perceptual and epistemic capacity.

Darkness and spatial conditions

Tim Edensor’s (2015) work on nocturnal space explores how darkness beyond the city has historically been understood as both a material and imagined threat. Accounts of medieval and early modern night outside urban confines show that darkness was widely understood as a condition in which supernatural forces were activated and moral boundaries were dissolved (Edensor, 2015, p. 424). Rural and peri-urban landscapes were imagined to be populated by demons, spirits, fairies, and tricksters, with folklore such as will-o’-the-wisp casting marshes and moorland as actively deceptive terrains. These imagined geographies were reinforced by the material dangers of unlit environments such as uneven ground, dense vegetation, waste pits, and open trenches that rendered movement after dark as physically hazardous. In this context, darkness did not merely obscure the landscape but transformed it into an unstable and unpredictable space in which familiar routes became uncertain and human bodies were vulnerable (Edensor, 2015, pp. 424-5).

While material risks continue to exist for human bodies walking in in unlit spaces, in contrast to earlier associations of dark landscapes with danger and uncertainty, contemporary

engagements with darkness are also increasingly shaped by concerns about excessive illumination and its effects (Edensor, 2015, p. 433; Dunn and Edensor, 2024; Jones and Lockett, 2023). As Jones and Lockett argue, light pollution is a multispecies problem rather than a purely human one because artificial light disturbs nocturnal environments and disrupts the behaviors of animals and plants (Jones and Lockett, 2023). Moreover, Dunn and Edensor (2024) argue that although darkness is still imagined as a site of danger, criminality, ignorance, and decline, it is increasingly being reimagined and valued. They suggest that darkness can even function as a marker of distinction and it is sought out as a form of status that differentiates wealthier subjects and spaces from poorer ones (2024, p. 10). This desire for darkness, however, is not solely a contemporary development. As Edwards (2018) notes, historically darkness has repeatedly functioned as a space of retreat, contemplation, and intensified sensory experience. From ascetic cave practices to mystical theologies that value obscurity, darkness has persistently signified mystery, depth, and the limits of human knowledge. Like Dunn and Edensor, Edwards (2018) similarly resists interpretations of darkness as merely symbolic of danger, positioning it instead as a historically contingent and contested category shaped by shifting relations between power, belief, perception, and the senses. Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that darkness is neither a stable metaphor nor a singular condition, but a relational and spatial phenomenon whose meanings are continually produced, resisted, and reworked across cultural contexts.

Darkness and walking

These debates acquire a new significance when darkness is considered as a lived spatial condition encountered through movement. Darkness is experienced bodily and relationally, shaping how subjects navigate, sense, and inhabit space. For this reason, darkness is relative and, as Griffiths, et al. argue, it operates on a spectrum that refers to “the presence of little light rather than its complete absence” (Griffiths, et al., 2023, p. 94). For highly visual animals such as humans, reduced illumination complicates the ability to judge distance, depth, color, and detail (Morris, 2011, p. 316). Consequently, walking in the dark recalibrates perception and redistributes attention away from visual dominance toward haptic, auditory, olfactory, and proprioceptive cues. This disrupts anthropocentric assumptions of ocularcentrism by decentering human vision and resituating walkers “in a more-than-human world” (Griffiths, et al., 2023 p. 95). In this way, darkness reorganizes spatial practice and reshapes the relations between bodies and environments.

Scholars of walking have long emphasized that walking constitutes a form of embodied and spatial enquiry rather than simply a means of getting from one place to another (Ingold & Vergunst, 2016). Moreover, academic studies have suggested that night is a distinctive place and landscape that fosters alternative and creative forms of engagement (Edensor & Lorimer, 2016; Griffiths, et al., 2023). Fluctuating combinations of light and darkness shift the identity of a landscape such that it is always dynamic, provisional, and continually re-formed, changing in relation to shifting perception, light, and space (Morris, 2011, p. 316; Edensor & Lorimer, 2016, p. 3). In darkened environments, the walker must negotiate partial visibility, the surrounding textures, and sounds. Walking at night can therefore offer new perspectives on place and more-than-human worlds. In foregrounding walking as an experience, darkness emerges not as a deficit of vision but as a condition that reorients spatial relations, enabling alternative modes of inhabitation, perception, and encounter.

Method and approach

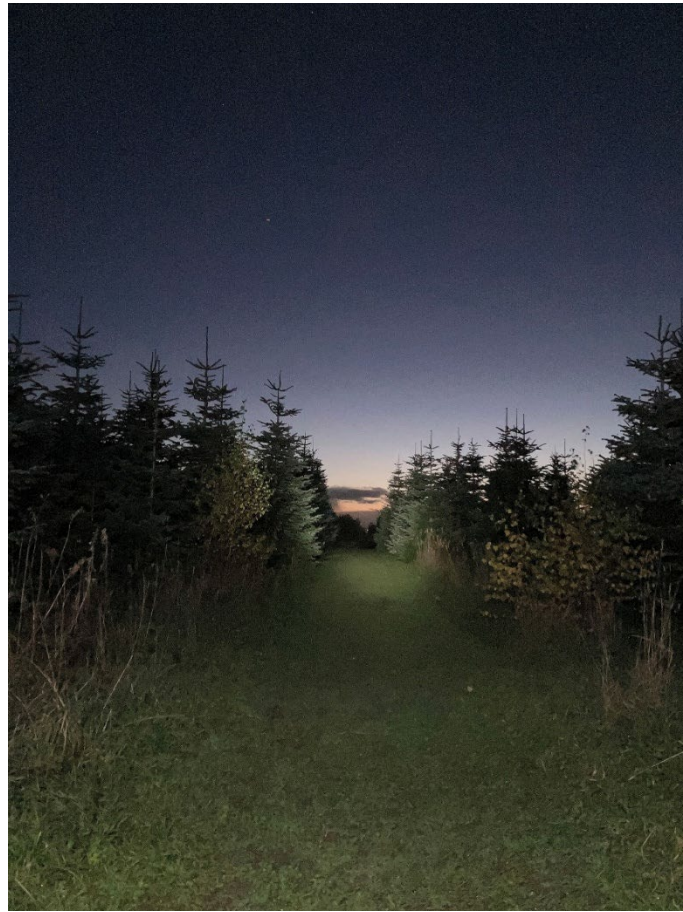


Figure 1: The private dog field (Parkinson, 2023)

This article draws on a year-long practice-based research project that used photography to document walks in a private dog field in the north-west of England, UK, with two canine companions: Boop, a 1-year-old female longcoated Akita, and Cosmic, a 9-year-old male Chow. Both Cosmic and Boop were rescue dogs for whom public parks were unsuitable for exercise due to their individual temperaments and situational sensitivities. Over the course of the year, we visited the private field at least once but no more than four times each week. Although other daytime and nighttime walks took place elsewhere throughout the year, the project and the images included in this article focused only on our visits to this field. The four-acre space had formerly been used for the cultivation of trees grown for the Christmas consumer market. As a result, the field was heavily planted with large conifers in wide regular lines with long strips of grass, brambles, and other vegetation in between each stretch of spruce and pine (see Figure 1). Over the course of the year, the walks took place at different times of the day and across seasons. While many of the walks occurred in the daylight, this article focuses specifically on those that took place in darkness. These nocturnal walks were not initially planned as a distinct phase of the project but instead emerged through the seasonal conditions of the research and the practical constraints of everyday life. During the winter months, the only available week-day field bookings that could be accommodated alongside full-time work were in the evening, at dusk or when it had already become dark. As such, walking in the dark was shaped by circumstances relating to labor, access, and seasonal change.



**Figure 2: Car parking inside with field space with dog waste bin illuminated by head torch.
(Parkinson, 2023)**

This temporal and situational framing proved to be central to the outcomes of the project. Darkness altered how the field was encountered and inhabited by both human and canine bodies, intensifying sensory experience and reshaping spatial relations. During nocturnal walks head-torches generated a restricted human-centered visual field composed of a narrow cone of light that moved with the body and produced a series of partial and shifting visibilities (see Figure 2). This reduced visibility heightened attention to sound, movement, and the feel of the space as the ground and vegetation became less visually legible and more affectively charged. Moreover, the head torch illumination impacted not only what could be seen but what could be photographed. Boop and Cosmic wore harnesses during the walks, often with small red or green LED safety lights attached when it was dark (see Figure 3). These conditions produced distinct modes of human and canine engagement during nocturnal walks that highlighted how time, seasons, and weather shape multispecies encounters and practices.



Figure 3: Boop in motion with harness and attached light. (Parkinson, 2023)

Photography was the main research method across the project, supplemented by post-walk notes. The photographs generated during the walks functioned as visual fieldnotes, supporting the later processes of reflection, interpretation, and writing. This approach situates the project within practice-based methodologies in which documentation is not separate from practice but constitutes an integral mode of enquiry (Nelson, 2013, pp. 26-28; 86). In this sense, the photographs do double work in that they are both a method of capture and a mode of critique that makes visible the conditions under which multispecies encounters are recorded and interpreted. At the outset, I began working with a 35mm digital SLR camera, flash, and tripod to facilitate long exposures in low-light conditions, but this quickly proved to be ill-suited to the conditions of the research which involved following two dogs in the dark across uneven terrain. Instead, I shifted to using an iPhone camera, with illumination provided by a head torch. This transition facilitated a more mobile and responsive mode of image-making that aligned with the everyday practices of dog walking. The use of a device embedded in daily life—an iPhone—allowed photographs to be taken as part of the walk rather than as a separate activity. In this way, the ordinariness of the technology worked with the ordinariness of the practice and supported a methodology that responded to lived multispecies relations. The shift in equipment also changed the aesthetic qualities of the photographic images which were not always sharp and often contained digital noise as the camera compensated for the low light. Instead of being seen as technical shortcomings, the aesthetic effects registered the embodied, mobile, and perceptually constrained conditions of nocturnal dog walking.

Hensey argues that darkness actively resists objective study and makes the point that images of darkness are not photographs of the dark but instead the temporary removal of darkness using camera flashes or other means of lighting (Hensey, 2018, p. 23). Photography, in this case, was used not simply for illustrative purposes but as a way of thinking through spatial, affective, and relational dynamics. Photographic practice served to slow the walk and frame moments that might otherwise have gone unobserved. In low light conditions, the act of photographing changed with more focus paid to proximate interactions and encounters and greater attention given to moments of stillness and movement. Michael Kenna notes that night photography “slows you down” in part because it dictates “long exposures; the world turns,

things move, time accumulates on the film” (Kenna cited in Ballard, 2026). Along with highlighting the temporality of photography at night, Kenna’s work also points towards darkness as a productive condition. Minna Proctor’s (2010) analysis of Sharon Harper’s night sky images from the projects *Moon Studies and Star Scratches* and *One Month, Weather Permitting* is instructive here in thinking about darkness not as a lack of visibility but as a condition that produces distinct photographic phenomena. Describing long exposure images as “chance compositions” emphasizes that, while the resulting forms are subject to uncontrollable forces such as atmospheric conditions, the star trails Harper photographs materialize what would otherwise be imperceptible temporal and spatial processes (Proctor, 2010). As Griffiths, et al. (2023, p. 100) similarly observe, photography in this study was not concerned with creating “loyal” representations of vision but instead understood as partially narrating the experience through both intentional framing and serendipitous or accidental acts. In this sense, darkness does not simply obscure the world but enables a different visual and temporal register to emerge through the camera.

This project extends my previous work on anthropomorphism by explicitly positioning it as a methodological tool for engaging with canine experience in situated encounters (Parkinson, 2020; Parkinson, 2026). Here anthropomorphism operates relationally, through a combination of empathetic attention, informed understanding, and imaginative narration. It involves close embodied attentiveness to the dogs’ affective cues such as their shifts in posture, pace, and orientation, framed by knowledge developed through long-term cohabitation and shared routines. Such an approach has inherent methodological limits in the sense that it remains necessarily speculative, vulnerable to misinterpretation, and to the anthropocentric projection of human frames of reference onto a nonhuman. Rather than being resolved, these risks are acknowledged and negotiated through situated knowledge acquired via daily life with the dogs, which offers familiarity without certainty. This provides the conditions under which imaginative interpretation becomes both possible and accountable. At the same time, imagination in this context does not claim access to canine interiority but instead it works as a provisional interpretive practice through which canine agency and experience can be tentatively narrated. Deployed in this way, anthropomorphism becomes a practice of relational ethics and a responsive mode of engagement that acknowledges interspecies intimacy while remaining attentive to epistemic limits. As I have previously argued (Parkinson, 2020; Parkinson, 2026), this methodological stance aligns with a feminist care ethics that highlights attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness to animal agency (Donovan, 2006).

Darkness and distributed agency: walks with Cosmic and Boop

Canine agency is relational and situational and emerges through specific encounters, environments, and interspecies relationships rather than residing as a stable capacity within an individual dog. Agency in this sense is not an inherent property of individual beings but emerges through the relational and affective interactions between them (Despret, 2013). Aligned with this conceptualization of agency, in an analysis of dog park activism in Poland, Włodarczyk (2021) argues that canine agency operates through a hybrid human-canine dyad which is “neither fully canine nor purely human” (p. 497). In the case of this project, Boop, Cosmic, and I were a multispecies group rather than a human-canine dyad, but the point about agency remains relevant. An anthropocentric conceptualizing of agency is that which is expressed, enacted, and interpreted through a human framework as intentional, visible, and resistant actions. In contrast, a critical animal studies perspective understands agency as contextual, relational, and distributed, while always recognizing that it is exercised within

conditions structured and constrained by human control. As a result, distributed agency does not imply freedom. Erica Cudworth illustrates this point in a study of everyday lives with companion dogs, explaining that while they “are agential and emotional, the agency they are able to express is highly limited” (Cudworth 2024, p. 13). Włodarczyk (2021) similarly points out that canine agency, while emergent and relational nonetheless relies on the social and cultural contexts established by humans (2021, p. 497). In other words, while individual dogs do indeed navigate spaces and enact influence, the conditions for their actions are shaped and remain limited by human decisions, designs, and management practices.



Figure 4: Cosmic alone moving deeper into the trees. (Parkinson, 2023)

During nocturnal dog walking there is a redistribution of perceptual authority where canine sensory capacities such as smell and hearing are advantaged relative to the constraints of human vision. Accordingly, the condition of darkness provides a particularly interesting opportunity to consider these dynamics, demonstrating the distributed, relational and context-dependent nature of canine agency.

Dogs encounter the world in their own way, shaped by their particular sensory capacities and interests, while everything beyond their perceptual reach or relevance remains effectively unseen (Tyler, 2022, p. 21). Dogs are macrosomatic animals, meaning they rely heavily on olfaction to interpret and navigate their environments, using scent for foraging, social communication, and bonding with both conspecifics and humans (Berg, et al., 2023). Unlike vision or hearing, which operate rapidly and situationally, olfactory perception accumulates more slowly through molecular traces but persists over time, creating a temporally layered sensory world (Berg, et al., 2023). Olfactory perception thus operates as a fundamentally different mode of world-making. In this way, smell reconfigures the environment as a field of lingering presences, trajectories, and absences that remain largely inaccessible to human perception.

During our walks in private dog fields, my canine companions were able to move freely for approximately an hour, dictating the route and pace. I followed, or attempted to follow, them but this often proved difficult. Boop and Cosmic would frequently split up, and

they moved faster than I could and into spaces that I was reluctant to enter, particularly areas of denser woodland where undergrowth was thick and the trip hazards were more pronounced (see Figure 4). In these moments, the relationality of agency became evident. The dogs' movements were shaped by each other, the environment, and by my presence, although my capacity to influence or control what they did was limited. The darkness intensified the conditions, reducing my oversight and amplifying the distributed nature of their agency, as they negotiated space, each other, and environmental constraints in entanglement with me as a human companion.

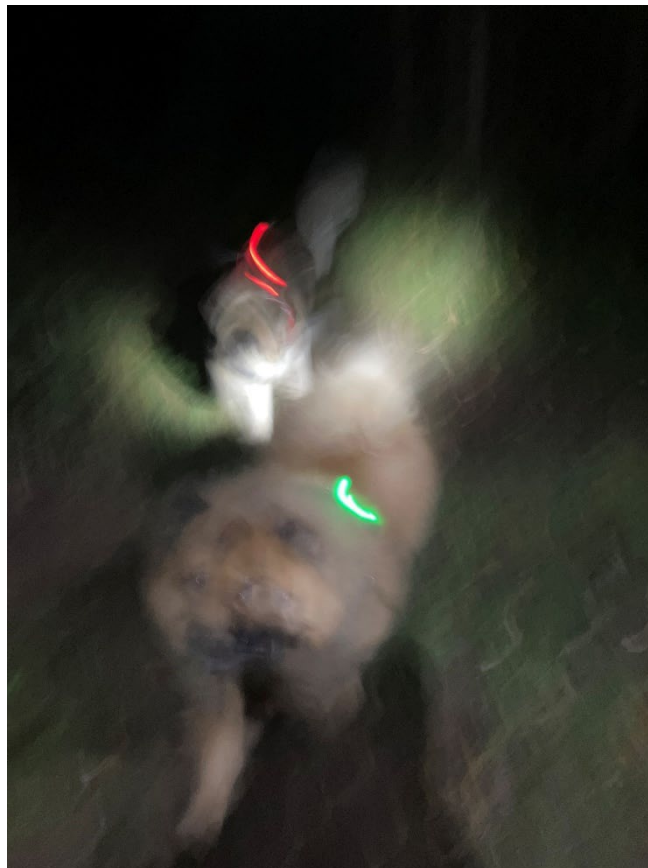


Figure 5: Cosmic and Boop in motion. (Parkinson, 2023)

The walks were not structured around human intention but instead they unfolded through ongoing negotiation between canine movement, environmental conditions and my own bodily limits. The absence of light reduced my capacity to visually monitor or manage Boop and Cosmic's movements, but at the same time the conditions of darkness highlighted how distributed agency emerges. In Figure 5, the image does not represent a stable or clearly defined canine subject. Instead, Boop and Cosmic's bodies are blurred and partially dissolved into motion, resisting easy visual capture. The lack of clarity is not considered here as a technical failure. Rather, it is a visual trace of the conditions under which the encounter unfolded. While blur may be associated with aesthetic failure or formal flaw, it also carries with it a symbolic weight, signifying authenticity, chaotic movement, and a reminder that photography is never instantaneous but instead marks out duration (Good, 2019, pp. 417-8). Blur is something that belongs to the medium specificity of photography, both a result of the technical design of photographic equipment and a mediation of flow and movement that is otherwise inaccessible to human vision (Good, 2019; Henning, 2026). As Good remarks: "blur very successfully, if unintentionally, conveys an energy and dynamism" (2019, p. 418).

In this case, Boop and Cosmic's movement exceeds the camera's capacity to stabilise it and agency here is not expressed through a visible decision or act of resistance but through speed, direction, and the capacity to shape the encounter. The illuminated harnesses function as markers of presence rather than tools of full visibility, producing a form of partial legibility that underscores the distributed character of agency. Boop and Cosmic are neither fully absent nor fully knowable. Instead, agency is dispersed across dog, darkness, terrain, human body, and photographic apparatus. The image is shaped by their movement as much as by my attempt to follow, see, and record, making agency perceptible through its effects rather than its intentions. At the same time, human control is not entirely absent. The use of tracking lights signals ongoing human mediation—a reminder that canine agency unfolds within an infrastructure of care, safety, and management. What darkness reveals in this case is not canine freedom but the tension between emergent distributed agency and persistent human constraint. By limiting human visual dominance and bodily authority, darkness renders the tension more visible and exposes the relational nature of agency within asymmetrical human-canine power relations rather than as a property residing within either individual dog.

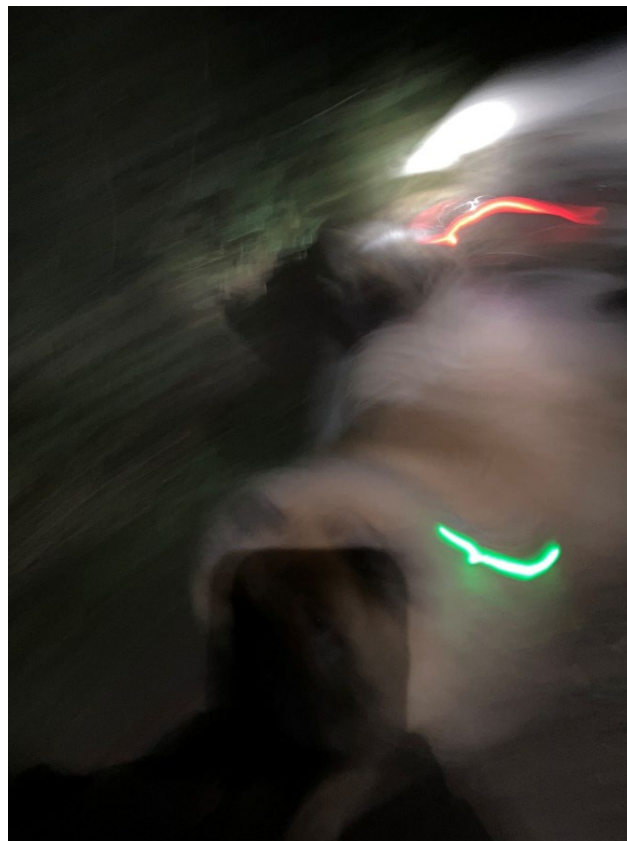


Figure 6: Layering of light and dark (Parkinson, 2023)

The silhouetted presence of the iPhone, created by the head torch illumination, was occasionally visible over the blurred bodies of Cosmo and Boop who were registered primarily through their LED lights (see Fig 6). This makes apparent the technological apparatus through which movement is partially perceived, tracked, and translated into an image. Not only do such images make clear the conditions of mediation through which agency is captured, they also make both the human observer and the recording device materially present. The dogs' movement appears as light and motion rather than as a stable bodily form, while my human presence is rendered as a more static shadow and therefore made present by an absence of light. Darkness here operates not simply as an aesthetic

condition but as a methodological one that limits the human capacity to track, follow, or frame canine movement. As a result, agency is neither centered in the human or fully located in the dogs but instead it is dispersed across bodies, light sources, technologies, and darkness itself. The image holds the partial decentering of the human during the walk in tension with the persistence of asymmetries of power, since the very act of photographing, and therefore the documentation of the encounter, reasserts human authority over what is made visible, knowable, and analyzable.

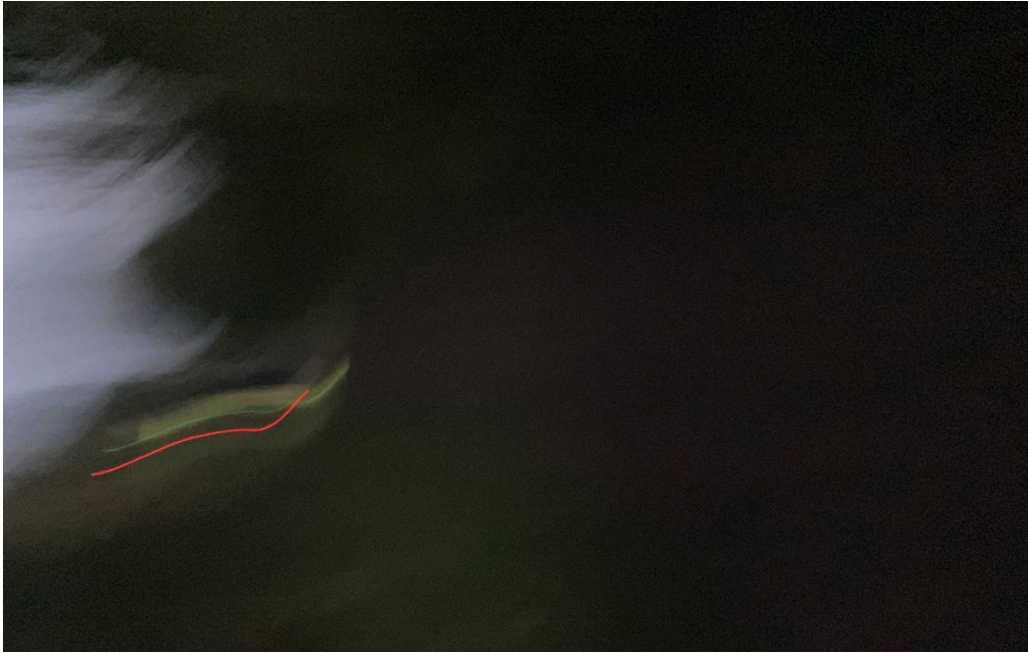


Figure 7: Light, darkness, and motion (Parkinson, 2023)

In other images, the partial visual anchoring of blurred bodies in motion collapses further and Boop and Cosmic's bodies disappear entirely, leaving only two traces of light suspended against darkness (see Figure 7). It is not clear in these images whether the lights are moving from left to right or right to left; instead, any sense of forward motion relies heavily on photographic conventions in which left to right movement is culturally normalized and cues such as lead room—the space into which the moving subject is expected to face—suggest directionality (Palmer, et al., 2008; Bertamini, et al., 2011). In Fig 7, the large expanse of black space to the right encourages the impression that the dogs are heading into it, yet this directionality is not an index of canine movement so much as an effect of the composition. Indeed, the image is also a record of my own movement while attempting to follow bodies moving faster than I could see or frame in the darkness. What appears as canine disappearance is co-produced through canine speed, my bodily motion, technological mediation, and the visual conventions through which photographs are read.

Darkness here not only absorbs the bodies and certainty; it transforms agency into something apprehended through ambiguity, partial trajectories, and the breakdown of ocularcentrism. As Michel Serres notes, at night human bodies seek out small traces, faint calls, and what he refers to as those “small insignificant perceptions” (Serres, 2008, p. 68). Read through a Foucauldian understanding of regimes of visibility, the image unsettles an ocularcentric order in which power operates through vision by structuring what can be seen, how it is seen, and who controls the gaze. Rather than enabling surveillance as such, darkness disrupts vision as a stabilizing mechanism of power and reveals the limits of a regime in

which agency is recognized only when it can be visible, legible, and knowable. At the same time, this disruption of ocularcentrism does not negate asymmetries of power that structure the encounter. The selection, framing, and presentation of images constitute a position that determines what is seen and what remains obscured. The images therefore continue to sustain the tension between the destabilization of vision as a mechanism of control and the persistence of authority over what is shown. This in turn underscores the point that distributed agency does not entail an absence of power but is negotiated within it.



Figure 8: Rosebay willowherb (Parkinson, 2023)

Rosebay willowherb, a wild plant often found in open woodland and on sites where the ground has been burnt, grew throughout the private dog field. It is a plant well known for its rapid colonization and spread through airborne seeds, a form of nonhuman mobility and persistence. Boop and Cosmic would push through areas where the willowherb had grown, bending or snapping the tall dried-out stalks which, during the winter, would begin to break down while still retaining their fluffy cotton seed pods. As they passed, strands of dog hair would become entangled with the seed heads to form a hybrid assemblage composed of plant and canine body, held together through movement, friction, and contact rather than intention (see Figure 8). Anna Tsing's conceptualization of assemblages is helpful here, explaining that they are "open-ended gatherings" which "show potential histories in the making" (Tsing, 2017, p. 38). Tsing notes that "the question of how the varied species in a species assemblage influence each other—if at all—is never settled: some thwart (or eat) each other, others work together to make life possible; still others just happen to find themselves in the same place" (Tsing, 2017, p. 38). The entanglement of seed fluff and dog hair created moments where Boop and Cosmic's movements through the space became vectors for vegetal dispersal and where agency was distributed across species, materials, and environments. In this way, agency is not located in a decision made by either dog, not in a biological process, but in the intra-active encounter between fur, seed, plant stem, and path. In Karen Barad's terms, the intra-action "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" wherein "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

Darkness is central to how this form of agency becomes legible. Boop and Cosmic had charged ahead chasing an olfactory presence that I was unable to perceive and taking a route that I could not follow. In their absence, my attention shifted from Boop and Cosmic to what remained and the photograph records not the action, but what was left behind. In doing so, it makes agency perceptible through trace rather than through visibility. This aligns with the move away from anthropocentric expectations that agency must be witnessed as intentional but instead highlights its material consequences. The broken stem marks a spatial and sensory boundary. It is evidence of my inability to follow under conditions of limited visibility and as such the image registers the asymmetry of the encounter. Boop and Cosmic's movement reshapes the environment in ways that remain beyond the moment, while my access to that movement remained partial and delayed. In this way, the entangled broken willowherb does not simply document where the dogs have been; it materializes distributed more-than-human agency as something which unfolds across time, species, and matter. Moreover, the darkness does not erase agency but instead allows it to be encountered as a residue rather than in the presence of the moving dogs.



Figure 9: Path, logs, trees, and waste bin (Parkinson, 2023)

The private dog field we walked in is a site shaped by and through everyday repeated patterns. Stacked logs are obstacles to certain areas, paths implicitly direct the movement of bodies, tall fencing encloses the field, and red dog waste bins are located on trees and attached to the fences at regular intervals throughout the space. All of these elements make clear that this is a human designed space that is shaped by canine movement, behavior, and responsibility. Taken shortly after I deposited a bag of dog waste in the bin, Fig 9 is marked by the material traces of what routinely happens here. The bin is not simply a signifier of regulation; it indexes the accumulation of daily encounters, bodily outputs, and acts of maintenance and responsibility through which the space is produced as appropriate for canine recreation. As Instone and Sweeney note, picking up dog waste enacts responsible dog ownership, care relations, and civic duty (2013, p. 356). While primarily there to support canine well-being and shared pleasure, the space also folds dogs and humans into broader regimes of cleanliness, risk management, and norms of human-dog companionship. The presence of dog waste bins not only signals where waste should go but that waste is

expected and normalized as part of everyday use. Canine agency is thus entangled with infrastructures that organize responsibility, distributing it across humans, objects, and routines. The logs, bin, and path together constitute an infrastructural assemblage that manages movement, intra-action, and care through repeated use. Darkness complicates this arrangement, making it difficult to see when the dogs have toileted and where. Here, though, my knowledge of Boop's and Cosmic's bodily rhythms and the habitual expectation that they would toilet within a few minutes of arriving at the field, became a practical mode of orientation. Responsibility was not enacted through visual surveillance alone but through embodied familiarity, anticipation, and routine. The act of cleaning up was therefore the outcome of an assemblage in which design, repetition, bodily knowledge, and care co-produced appropriate action. In this way, the private dog field emerges not as a neutral backdrop for canine agency but as a site in which agency is continually negotiated, enabled, and constrained through the ordinary everyday practice that make off-lead exercise possible in the first place.

Conclusion

Dog walking is often framed as a benign, health-oriented routine, but attending to nocturnal walking in private dog fields re-situates it as a contingent, multispecies practice in which perception, power, and care are continually renegotiated. Darkness here is not a mere absence of light but a spatial-sensory condition that redistributes agency across bodies, technologies, and environments. In this project, where human visual dominance was limited, canine olfactory and auditory capacities came to the forefront, and pace, direction, and disappearance operated as forms of action that exceeded easy visual capture. Under these conditions, agency is apprehended less through intention that is legible to the human eye and more through effects and traces. It is blurred bodies, suspended LED arcs, bent stems, seeded fur, and delayed recognitions that mark an encounter's asymmetries and proximities.

The practice-based methodology that combined walking with Boop and Cosmic and photographing the ordinary, makes distributed agency visible. The images here function as mobile fieldnotes that register how darkness shapes space and time, slows the walk, narrows visibility, and privileges a more haptic, auditory, and anticipatory orientation. The camera's "failures" in low light (noise, shake, blur) are not only aesthetic artefacts but they materialize the methodological limits and possibilities of researching multispecies movement at night. They also expose the apparatus such as the headtorch, phone, and harness LEDs as part of the assemblage through which agency is sensed, channeled, and recorded.

Enclosures, paths, stacked logs, and dog-waste bins index an everyday regime of responsibility that enables off-lead "freedom" while also curtailing it. Darkness unsettles those regimes without dissolving them as responsibility shifts from surveillance to embodied familiarity and timing, and the emphasis on seeing gives way to knowing through habit. The walks thus reveal how care is distributed across human attentiveness, canine rhythms, designed prompts, and repeated routines. In this sense, however, emergent agency is never outside power. It is exercised within infrastructures that both enable and inhibit, and within a politics and economy of land-use that has reconfigured rural space and everyday canine leisure. In short, walking dogs in the dark does not simply put a familiar practice into the shadows. Instead, it remakes the practice in that it redistributes perception and responsibility, reveals agency as dispersed and negotiated, and recasts everyday recreation as a site where multispecies life is continually remade through ongoing relationality.

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