Running Head Right-hand: Walking, writing, reading place and memory

Running Head Left-hand: Ceri Morgan

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Walking, writing, reading place and memory

Ceri Morgan

The last 15 years have seen an interest in walking in many disciplines, including geography, history, sociology, literary studies, performance, dance, and creative writing (Middleton 2011; Mock 2009; Sinclair, e.g. 2002). Indeed, ‘walking studies’ (Lorimer 2011: 19) is emerging as a sub-field or subdiscipline in its own right. In what have come to be some of the founding texts on the subject, walking is represented as a liberating and subversive – even revolutionary – act. Consequently, in ‘Theory of the dérive,’ Guy Debord (2006 [1956]) defines the ‘*dérive*’ or ‘drift’ as a dropping out of the regular routines of work and domesticity in order to ‘be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters [found] there’ (2006 [1956]: 62). Best undertaken as a collective, the ‘*dérive*’ aims to ‘study a terrain’ and/or ‘to emotionally disorient oneself.’ This is achieved via a ‘rapid passage through varied ambiances’ (Debord 2006 [1956]: 62, 64) within the city – Debord considers the ‘*dérive*’ or ‘drift’ as an essentially urban practice. The ‘drift’ challenges what he and other members of the Situationists International saw as the alienating numbness of modern capitalist society. The utopian aspects of Debord’s theory are echoed, to a degree, in Michel de Certeau’s less collectivist but similarly urban-centric, *Walking in the City* (1984 [1980]). In this ‘ur-text’ of cultural studies (Morris 2004: 675) – and other disciplines – Certeau describes walking as one of several ‘everyday’ practices with the potential to challenge the workings of power. This is because it escapes full representation, and hence observation by all-seeing authority regimes: ‘escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible’ (1984 [1980]: 93). Famously, Certeau contrasts the ‘path’ made by walking, with the panoptical ‘map’ which, he argues, seeks to fix space in a readable way. Eluding representation, since the ‘path’ can only trace the route undertaken and not the act itself, walking gives rise to ‘a *migrational*, or metaphorical city’ (1984 [1980]: 103). It is connected with legend and remembering – the second another form of potential micro-resistance – with Certeau claiming, ‘haunted places are the only ones people can live in’ (1984 [1980]: 108).

Certeau has been critiqued by Meghan Morris for mobilising a binary model of power (1992: 13). *Walking in the City* has also been revisited by Nigel Thrift, who argues that it fails to acknowledge the modern city’s symbiosis with the car, and driving as a complex, embodied practice (2008: 75–88). More generally, walking has been recognised as something which is not always done for pleasure, easily, or on feet. In this way, John Urry warns, ‘there are . . . many ways to walk, sometimes walking is mundane (to shop), sometimes the basis of unutterable suffering (to go on a forced march)’ (2007: 65). Phil Smith challenges the romanticism of some of the recent writing on walking, highlighting that ‘an overriding quality of walking . . . can be its connectedness. But not at the expense of disruption, of tripping up and over, stumbling and righting, of falling’ (2014: 27). For their part, Richard Keating and Sue Porter remind us that walking is not necessarily a bipedal activity (2015). Nevertheless, walking is seen as ‘the most “egalitarian” of mobility systems’ (Urry 2007: 88). It continues to be taken up as a research method, with one example being Maggie O’Neill’s project, *Methods on the Move: Experiencing and Imagining Borders, Risk and Belonging*. It still informs artistic practice, as in Rosana Cade’s performance piece, *Walking: Holding* (2011–). In this, participants are invited to walk a route holding a number of different individuals’ hands at certain points along the way; prompting reflections on sexual identity, intimacy, and abled, disabled, or un-able bodies. Walking is taken up, too, in works which combine method and practice, as in the ‘histories’ by Rebecca Solnit (2002) and Robert Macfarlane (2013 [2012]). Both these writers use creative nonfiction to bring together walking with the personal and the collective, the present and the past. Consequently, the introduction to *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, sees Solnit reflect on her experiences as an activist as part of a broader investigation of this ‘most obvious and most obscure’ practice (2002: 3). In *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, Macfarlane describes (largely non-urban) paths as ‘ghost-lines,’ which are collectively made and remade over time and across generations (2013 [2012]: 21). In so doing, he not only recalls his own walks with his late friend, the nature writer and environmental activist, Roger Deakin, but also acknowledges the ways in which literary texts – and, by implication, other forms of cultural production – can haunt us as we move through a landscape (Macfarlane 2013 [2012]: 32).

The combination of mobilities, personal and collective memories, and broader connections with places and their representations is found in psychogeography, with Will Self and Iain Sinclair being two of the best-known contemporary writers working in this mode. In his characteristically mock-arch style, Self identifies psychogeography as the pursuit of the (implicitly heterosexual) middle-class male, as he sets out on a series of walks which underpin his creative non-fiction book, *Psychogeography* (2007). Self humorously associates himself with what his friend, Nick Papadimitriou, describes as a ‘psychogeographic fraternity’: presenting this as a group of ‘middle-aged men in Gore-Tex, armed with notebooks and cameras . . . querying the destinations of rural buses’ (Self 2007: 12). Sinclair’s fiction, creative non-fiction, and film have drawn on the author’s walks around London, including around the M25 motorway in *London Orbital* (2002), and along the Thames in *Downriver, or, The Vessels of Wrath: a narrative in twelve tales* (2004 [1991]). The author’s writing blurs temporal layers, so that the past bleeds into the present, as in the visions of one of *Downriver*’s characters which occur during the present of the novel in Thatcher’s London. These are of the victims of the *Princess Alice*, a pleasure steamer sunk in 1878 following a collision with a colliery boat on the Thames:

From beyond the curve of the power station, Bobby saw them coming up on the tide. . . . They were all dead. They swam to fetch him. . . . There were women in hats, holding their children above the waterline.

(Sinclair 2004 [1991]: 10)

Sinclair’s novel mobilises a dreamy or trippy atmosphere found in the work of other psychogeographic practitioners, such as the artist, Laura Oldfield Ford, who, in working on *Chthonic Reverb* (2016), walked repeatedly around Birmingham’s Digbeth and Eastside – formerly industrial neighbourhoods targeted for regeneration. In so doing, she recalled her younger, anti-capitalist, and rave-frequenting self as she attempted to tune into the past. The exhibition featured photographs, written texts, and visual symbols such as the smiley face associated with 1990s rave culture on plywood and sitex (perforated steel); materials used to board up disused buildings. It suggested the ignored, neglected, and marginalised spaces lying alongside or beneath the shiny new-builds of redevelopment. *Chthonic Reverb* also featured an audio piece of a ‘*dérive*’ undertaken by the artist and a friend from her youth, which Pawas Bisht describes as ‘resisting . . . the newly regenerated (sterile/sepulchural/unhaunted/uninhabitable) Eastside Park’ (Bisht & Morgan 2017: n.p.). At least in its popular perception, psychogeography has tended to be identified with cis-, straight-, and often middle-class and white masculinity. However, as Oldfield Ford illustrates, there have been, and continue to be, creative practitioners and critics who do not identify with this model. A collection edited by Tina Richardson (2015a) features essays from a range of contributors, including Victoria Henshaw, who has a chapter on sensory walks (2015), Morag Rose, who includes a contribution on the LRM (the Loiterers Resistance Movement) she founded in Manchester (2015), and Richardson herself, who writes on her adaptation of ‘schizocartography’ (2015b: 164–175).

Although psychogeography is a genre which lends itself particularly well to creative productions which move between the individual and the collective as well as the past and the present, there are other walking research practices which engage with memory. One example is the *The Walking Library* which Deirdre Heddon and Misha Myers originally created for the 2012 Sideways Arts Festival. This featured volunteer librarians carrying a selection of purchased and donated books across Belgium (2014). The project included some public readings at festivals, but also discussion, song, and conversations, as well as reading, on the move. Heddon and Myers argue that reading and walking are altered by doing both at the same time (2014: 651–652). They also suggest that reading-walking/walking-reading add further layers to the strata of material and imaginary geographies from the past and present which make up any landscape, revealing that ‘the books we read *in* place’ function as ‘mnemonics of place’ (2014: 649, their italics). Another engagement with memory is found in Myers’ article on pre-recorded and ‘live’ audio walks, with the latter being defined as those in which a performer reads aloud at points on the route (2010: 59). Myers’s critical-creative piece gives a sense of the interplay of her own memories with the collective recollections she hears whilst undertaking Graeme Miller’s *Linked* (2003). *Linked* is a pre-recorded soundscape featuring former residents of an area of East London whose homes were expropriated for the M11 Link Road. It plays continuously along a three-mile route via radio transmitters. Myers writes of her experience of it, ‘I look through windows into front rooms just a few feet away, the memories I hear interweaving with a displaced memory-house of my own’ (2010: 62).

Myers’s participation in *Linked* is a kind of staged haunting, a deliberate listening out for voices from the past. As such, it differs from the many ‘micro-hauntings’ (Morgan 2018) we likely encounter every day without noticing. In an article structured around his commute to work through suburban Manchester, Tim Edensor highlights how hauntings are a regular feature of daily life, arguing that ‘traces of the past linger in mundane spaces by the side of the road to renewal, haunting the idealistic visions of planners, promoters and entrepreneurs’ (2008: 314). In his contribution to a special journal issue on ‘spectro-geographies’ (Maddern & Adey 2008: 291), Edensor suggests that the repetition across generations of everyday tasks and routines ensures these ‘become sedimented in neighbourhoods and are often physically inscribed on place’ (2008: 325). These ‘mundane hauntings’ (Edensor: 2008: 313) have the capacity to disrupt chronological time like Derrida’s ghosts (1993: 72). In *Spectres de Marx: L’État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, Derrida points to the possibility of positive hauntings in the form of ghosts who remind us of the necessity for social change by warning us, like Hamlet’s father, that ‘*the time is out of joint*’ (1993: 47, Derrida’s italics). These spectres can come from the future as well as from the past (Derrida 1993: 71). Walking and writing (where ‘writing’ is defined in broader terms than purely literary) can be combined to layer presents, pasts, and imagined futures, and offer possibilities for potential exchanges between various temporalities. As a long-term member of the geopoetics research group, la Traversée, at l’Université du Québec à Montréal, in recent years, I have drawn on methodologies shared by Rachel Bouvet, André Carpentier, and others, notably the ‘*ateliers nomades*,’ or mobile workshops (Bouvet 2015: 239–240). Planned and organised by a small sub-group in advance, these take the form of trips to particular places, discussion, reading, and creative practice. The resulting outputs are published in the series, *Carnets de navigation*. Geopoetics has tended to be largely associated with the work of its founder, Kenneth White. For White, geopoetics is a world writing which ‘applies not only to poetry . . . but also to art and music, and can be extended . . . into science and even social practice’ (2004: 241). Seeking to break with post-Romantic traditions which position the world as the object of study of the observer, geopoetics proposes a relationship between humans and the world which has similarities with deep ecology in its recognition of the interdependence of the human and non-human.

Both practice and method, geopoetics can be undertaken using the most basic technologies – pen, pencil, paper, and legs (composed of flesh or other materials). In recent years, I have adopted the collective approach practised by Bouvet, Carpentier, and other members of La Traversée (Bouvet 2015: 239–240), combining this with creative methods drawn from psychogeography, literary, and cultural geographies, and oral history. I currently work with a group of graduate students who are using walking methodologies in their creative writing. Nicknamed ‘the Dawdlers,’ after the use of this term by Carpentier in his creative nonfiction ‘flâneries’ (e.g. 2005), we draw variously on a theoretical mix of geopoetics, psychogeography, geocriticism, ecocriticism, and related methods in our place-writing on Manchester, Montreal, Stoke, Kent, Somerset, and South Wales. To date, these methods have produced two main projects: ‘Tapping Ware’ and ‘Memories of Mining.’ ‘Tapping Ware’ took the form of two mobile workshops and an exhibition. The first workshop was at the Spode Works in Stoke-on-Trent, where tableware, teaware, and decorative ceramics were made from 1776 until 2008. There, scattered design transfers, paperwork, and health and safety signs left behind following the pottery factory’s closure gave the impression that the workers had only just gone home. A testament to Stoke-on-Trent’s industrial past as the world-leading producer of ceramics, the factory functioned as what Caitlin DeSilvey and Tim Edensor term a ‘new rui[n]’ (2012: 466). In their overview of the extensive scholarship on ruins, DeSilvey and Edensor point to the ways in which spaces deemed no longer useful by capitalism ‘may become forces for mobilizing and materializing collective anger and resistance; but . . . may also simply be painful reminders of loss’ (or [2012](file:///%5C%5Cchn-fs2-svr%5Ccns-pps%5CWFS%5CWFS%20%26%20REF%5CWFS%20%26%20REF%5C2018%5C05-May%5C15031%5C3060%5CProduction%5CREF%5CSrini%5C15031-3060-FullBook.docx#Ref_927_FILE150313060P5025): 468). The hauntedness of the Spode site was intensified by traces of previous visits on the part of other artistic and educational groups. These traces included the occasional artfully arranged artefact, such as an open drawer containing a teacup, and a piano which had been installed for an arts or performance project and forgotten or abandoned.

At the time of the workshop, the Spode Works comprised what Karen E. Till terms a ‘wounded plac[e].’ For her, such places ‘are understood to be present to the pain of others and to embody difficult social pasts’ (2008: 108). Unquestionably, working conditions in Stoke’s potteries factories were often exploitative. However, it is not so much the memories of these but the loss of the majority of the jobs associated with ceramics and other industries which opens a ‘wound’ in the city-region. Unemployment, job and housing precarity, poverty, and ill health affect a high proportion of Stoke-on-Trent’s residents, and the city is ranked 14th out of 326 local authorities in England with respect to deprivation levels (CHAD 2018: n.p.). There are many local activist and community groups working to improve people’s lives, and the last couple of years have seen a certain degree of renewed civic pride in response to increased awareness of, and growth in, many forms of cultural activity. This has been especially the case in the lead-up to, and following, the bid for UK City of Culture 2021, which saw Stoke-on-Trent make the five-long shortlist but ultimately lose out to Coventry. Some of the recent artistic activity takes place at the Spode Works, which were renovated and refurbished in 2016 to include artists’ studios. Nevertheless, economic and social forms of suffering persist, as do emotional ‘ruins’ wrought by multi-generational marginalisation. These give rise to a kind of ontological dysmorphia by which some residents see themselves and their city as worthless – a phenomenon identified by Mark Featherstone in a piece on the Bransholme housing estate in Hull. Featherstone argues that the ‘banal horror, the despair of wasted lives in a wasted world’ fosters a ‘being-on-Bransholme,’ whereby residents excluded from participation in a social and economic life shaped by neoliberalism define themselves as nothing (2013: 195).

The ‘Tapping Ware’ project aimed to avoid focusing solely on the city’s historic successes, contrasting these with the failures of the moment. For, as DeSilvey and Edensor point out, ‘new ruins’ (2012: 466) can become sites of a socially conservative nostalgia (2012: 469–70). A second workshop was held at the highly successful Emma Bridgewater Factory, which produces vernacular ceramics using traditional techniques. The factory occupies buildings originally opened in 1883 for Charles Meakin of the Meakin brothers, a company best known for its ironstone tableware. As with the Spode workshop, participants had an hour’s visit to the site, during which they used their own preferred technologies to make notes, take photographs, or record ambient sounds. As the majority were undergraduate students in their twenties, the smartphone was the most commonly selected technology. Photographs, recordings, and notes from the site visit informed poetry and fiction produced during a creative writing session and later refined following peer critique. Influenced by the lyricised depictions of manual labour in Michael Ondaatje’s novel on the building of modern-day Toronto, *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), my own stories evoke working-class labour practices and industrialised pasts in Stoke and South Wales (2016a, 2016b). Excerpts from some of the poems and stories formed part of the *Back to the Drawing Board* and related exhibitions on the Bridgewater-Rice family at Keele University (Autumn to Winter 2016–2017). The creative writing was displayed alongside photographs and excerpts from interviews with former potteries workers on their everyday work routines.

A third workshop, entitled ‘Memories of Mining’ was held at Silverdale Country Park in 2016 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Aberfan Disaster. This saw a spoil tip collapse on Pantglas Junior School in the South Wales village, killing most of the pupils and teachers inside. I have a personal connection to the event, in that my aunt is a survivor of the Disaster. Silverdale Country Park is situated on what was the site of the village’s coal mine. The workshop was attended by a mix of academics, undergraduate and graduate students, parish councillors, an archivist, and a former miner who had worked at Silverdale Colliery and his wife. Drawing on research by Evans and Jones on the walking interview, which suggests that ‘it seems intuitively sensible for researchers to ask interviewees to talk about the places that they are interested in while they are in that place’ (2011: 849), I carried out an informal interview with the last two participants. Not surprisingly, given the theme, the discussion centred on striking as well as working practices, with local memories of the Miners’ Strike of 1984–1985 contrasting with my own from South Wales during the same period. Poems and short stories prompted by the workshop were displayed alongside quotations from the interviews and photographs at the community library in Silverdale during Autumn 2017. An exhibition launch event featuring readings and a performance of a song was attended by colleagues, villagers, and former miners. In June 2018, an opportunity to work with local participatory performance company Restoke led to a collaborative performance called *Seams*. This featured readings by several Dawdlers, dance, music, and sound. A small number of professional dancers and singers were joined by community volunteers from a range of backgrounds and ages. Several of the volunteers had performed with Restoke before, and others had an interest in, or connection to, mining. One of the most memorable moments of the show featured an extract from the recorded interview from 2016, in which the former miner describes some of the fun and camaraderie of mining. It was accompanied by music composed by Restoke Co-artistic Director, Paul Rogerson, and an athletic and playful solo by male dancer, Frankie Hickman. The music and solo articulated some of pleasures found in the dangerous and difficult work of mining and celebrated miners as a collective. They also paid tribute to the individual miner whose voice the audience heard, with the dancer’s performance a sort of ventriloquising or translation of the youth of the man now in his 60s, who was sitting in the audience.

Till argues that ‘places are embodied contexts of experience, but also porous and mobile, connected to other places, times and peoples’ ([2008](file:///%5C%5Cchn-fs2-svr%5Ccns-pps%5CWFS%5CWFS%20%26%20REF%5CWFS%20%26%20REF%5C2018%5C05-May%5C15031%5C3060%5CProduction%5CREF%5CSrini%5C15031-3060-FullBook.docx#Ref_954_FILE150313060P5025): 105). *Seams* suggests this interplay of bodies, temporalities, and places. It was performed at Keele Chapel, a modernist building by architect George Pace. The choice of venue represented something of a change of practice for Restoke, whose work is usually site-responsive. However, under the direction of Co-artistic Director, Clare Reynolds, performers succeeded in producing contemporary dance sequences which responded at one and the same time to the (read) written texts, the landscapes of Silverdale and South Wales represented within the poems and stories, and the chapel itself. *Seams* and ‘Memories of Mining’ did not claim to aim to heal any past or present wounds – as if such a thing were possible. Rather, they acknowledged the wounds’ presence whilst offering a moment of hope: a ‘beautiful gesture’, as White describes geopoetics (2004: 230). Combining walking and writing methods enables a (fictionalised, aestheticised) tracing of social histories to produce textual memoryscapes which can speak with the present. Given that geopoetics refers to cultural or artistic production in general rather than creative writing specifically, it has the potential to be used with a variety of publics. My own future adaptations of the method include a project with screendance theorist and practitioner, Anna Macdonald on walking, screendance, cyclical processes, and chronic pain (forthcoming, 2018–2019), as well as further development of the ‘Memories of Mining’ project. Other possibilities, of course, are as wide as the horizon.

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