Only the Disenchanted are Free: social hiking, mapping and the academy.
Richard White. RGS/IBG International Conference 2016

Introduction

I’m driving up the motorway listening to an interview with the poet David Dabydeen …There is a deep connection between the Caribbean plantations and the English country house …. and I’m thinking yes that’s it!

There is a deep connection between the chaos of the Caribbean plantation, the inhumanity and the humane values represented in the English country house and the English country garden …

To recognise that is not to create a sense of shame or guilt, it’s just being accurate in terms of scholarship.

David Dabydeen OU interview 2010

and then this plummy BBC voice asks him:

Is there no way that you could visit such a place and for it to be neutral?

Dabydeen responds that maybe one day… and describes how currently the presentation of country houses are all about the gloriousness of the English past…. and I think he continued talking about fairy tales and enchantments, children lured to a magical house with a marzipan roof. I’m not sure what he exactly said but somehow his phrase: ‘only the disenchanted are free’ stuck in my head.
How would it be if we could experience the magic, recognise the enchantments and not be drawn in? What strategies do we need to ensure we don't get seduced by the triumphalism or, in the case of the fairy tale, don't get eaten by the witch?

Walking and Mobile Media

My creative practice over the past few years has been about developing such a disenchanted approach through walking and mobile media. The question for today is what kinds of new knowledge are coming out of this?

Over the next few minutes I will put my creative work in context and case study one set of walks, Forced Walks: Honouring Esther. I will suggest two areas further enquiry I think this offers.

As a walker I am trying to engage all our senses and feelings, my work is performative, socially engaged and wherever possible collaborative. I have always been interested in myths and memories, the multiple, multilayered presences of the past in the everyday.
I don’t have time today to unpack some of the more questionable practices of place *making*. Modern consumer capitalism, seeks to hold us all in its enchanted, spectacular, grip…but relics, memories, virtual and actual bombshells from other realities and other possibilities and other ways of seeing, break through. Revealing these is becoming a key element in my creative strategy.

**Social Networks**

When I walk I actively engage and network using social media. Every time we tweet or facebook, send a message, take a picture or make a sound recording it can be, it is, geo located.

On the one hand this is scary surveillance stuff…but using this technology we can at least challenge that which the authorised heritage discourses have silenced, by locating other accounts, soundscapes or stories from other places.
I am using two networks: Viewranger and Social Hiking for planning and publishing digitally way marked routes. The same technology enables people to follow my walks live remotely.

Viewranger:  http://my.viewranger.com/user/details/277417
Social Hiking:  http://www.shareyouradventure.com/user/profile/walknowlive

In this way I am extending the presence of the walk and offering opportunities for engagement.

**Spatial Dissonance:**

I was particularly inspired by Paula Levine’s work on ‘empathic narratives’ She uses a variety of tactics to mix ‘now’ with ‘then’ and ‘here’ with ‘now’ including smart devices and apps and transposed maps.
Her web based piece in the series ‘Shadows from Another Place’ transposed the map of the US raids on Baghdad to Levine’s home city, she used GPS to link bomb sites in Iraq to locations in San Francisco. Her intention was to create spatial dissonance not unlike cognitive dissonance, ‘uncanny contradictions’ and thereby to generate opportunities for new cross cultural, historical and conceptual understandings…

For my part I have been experimenting with a walking and mapping process that similarly seeks to challenge enchantment, generate dissonance and stimulate empathy.
....So I walk, sometimes alone and sometimes with others. I use social media. I am suggesting that the processes I use have two key areas of potential for scholarly work, firstly in the context of addressing obscured or intangible heritage, and secondly it offers evidence of new processes of networked memory production and insights into changing cultural practices involving mobile media, physical and virtual presence, space, place and identity.

**Forced Walks**

I now wish to turn to a project that offers glimpses of this potential: Forced Walks: Honouring Esther

Forced Walks began in response to the rhetoric of placemaking, as a challenge to notions of enchantment and the pastoral mythology of artwalks. Forced Walks are artist-led performative walks.
Honouring Esther was conceived and produced by artist Lorna Brunstein and myself and began with a two day public walk documented by the walkers and shared on social media. The walk took place over the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen Death Camp in April last year and was based on the route of a Nazi Death March from a slave labour camp near Hanover into Belsen, transposed to Somerset. The original death march took place in February 1945. Lorna’s mother, Esther, survived the walk. In February this year, seventy one years to the day that Esther Brunstein walked it under armed guard, we retraced her steps.

Setting the walk up I began by transposing the route from Germany to England, retaining scale and orientation. I located the end point at the old Jewish Burial Ground in Bath, because we live in the City and it was a location known to us as a place where the last remains of some of Bath’s Jewish dead are recognised and respected.
We pledged to undertake the walk in Somerset, on public rights of way, as close as possible to the transposed line, this created two interlocking routes with ten points of intersection. The very idea of such a transposed walk generated numerous resonances. A social media invitation to take up the model resulted in others walking in Germany, Scotland, Canada and Italy.

At the 10 intersections we curated themed interventions. Each intervention began with audio recordings including Esther Brunstein’s testimony. The route of the walk and the content of the interventions deliberately disrupted and reconnected local knowledge: we found echoes in Syria, Libya, Palestine, then uncanny connections in England.

We walked it in a strange burst of spring sunshine and luxurious greenery. The spatial dissonance was intense. Second and third generation holocaust survivors walked with second generation liberators. We arrived at the Jewish Burial Ground in Bath with some 50 people, some who had walked for two days, others just a few yards.

In Germany the walk followed a similar pattern, we stopped at the same ‘stations’ generated by the intersections between the virtual and actual routes. Our walk began in the carpark of a garden centre on bare sandy soil where once Nazi guards had relaxed.
And in the back garden of a modern house we stood in the drizzle looking at an old shed, remains of the earth toilet for 400 enslaved Jewish women.

Repatriating Esther’s memory and generating our own, wrapped up against the elements we walked in cold driving rain.

A smaller group on foot, this time with second and third generation witnesses, possibly children of perpetrators, 10 of us arrived at Belsen.

Again the cognitive and spatial dissonance was intense, overwhelming.
I believe this approach opens a space for memory making, for sharing and making sense of memories. Our intention was always to create something that would generate resonances but in that space we did not know what would come up or how it would be expressed or networked. In a messy and unpredictable way we found testimonies and stories and myth unfolding before us.

**Some examples:**

Last year in Somerset we were joined on the walk by a man whose grandfather and great uncle had been in the first wave of troops into Belsen. One of our key contacts in Bath, Alex, told us a story of how his father, a Rabbi in Bristol, had given shelter to a Belsen survivor and that on his departure he had left the blanket the Army had issued him with.
Alex brought the blanket with him to our closing event at the old Jewish Burial Ground. It turned out that one of the first tasks the brothers undertook at Belsen had been distributing blankets. The two grandsons were completely overwhelmed by the sight of the blanket, their fathers had clearly been seared by the experience and had shared its intensity with them. They passed that on to us with commitment and a fervour that such stories need to be told and retold.

There were many other such experiences in England, it felt that we were opening a door for such empathetic sharing of testimony but it was in Germany that I experienced the strange energy of this moment we were holding open.

A garden centre specializing in orchids now occupies a corner of the site of the former slave labour camp at Hambuhren-Ovelgonne, fine new homes recently built on the rest of it. The local historian, Irmlinde, showed us the surviving remains of the camp, now a garden shed, and later we met at the garden centre.
In our meeting another gentleman stood silently beside us, Irmlinde introduced him, she said that he was a witness. He spoke slowly, quietly in German, almost as if he still could not make sense of it, something like, ‘I remember the camp, it was here’. We walked out past the rows of orchids and he seemed to just melt away.

The following day he stood silently at the roadside to see us off. We were joined on the walk by several local residents, including Dieter, who said he had lived there for many years but knew nothing about the slave labour camps. They all knew about the horrors of Belsen but many did not know what had happened in their own village, we were clearly stepping outside the local post war heritage narrative.
As we walked, Irmlinde, told us of a phone call she had received that morning from another local witness, who told her that she had seen an old woman collapse in front of an SS guard, he had kicked her and told her to get up and then when she didn’t, he shot her dead. The elderly witness, Irmlinde told us, said that when she saw the shooting she had let out a cry, the guard had turned his gun towards her and she had run away home. Her mother told her to say nothing, that morning in that phone call on our first day of walking was the first time that she had shared that story.

We heard other stories from those who had been children during the war, of children running up to give food to camp inmates and death marchers. Children who had been told they had seen nothing and not to tell, finally finding their voices. Perhaps we stimulated the surfacing of those unexplained memories, helped them manifest through our walking act of witness.

We had made a physical effort to get there and we carried with us recorded witness memories and were in some way re-patriating them. This combination of physical and emotional activity seemed to help trigger memory and create a safe space in which it could be shared.

**Digital Network Memory:**

‘Pervasive digital networks are reconfiguring our relation to place by enabling simultaneous presence in both physical and networked place’ (Ito, M. 2008:6)

But there is more to it than stimulating empathy in a performative walk. Years ago academics predicted that mobile media devices combined with always on networks would reconfigure our relationship with place: this approach to walking and social media produces digital network memory and thus informs our sense of place and space.

Both walks were live on social networks.
The walk in Germany was also relayed live via Social Hiking to a huge screen at Bath Spa University, where further interaction and testimony sharing took place.

On both walks I led the social media activity and a number of other walkers contributed to the stream. Through ‘checking in’ to our social media streams and ‘route tracking’ on Viewranger and Social Hiking we were performing the twin sociotechnical practices that Frith and Karlin (2015) argue are key to building digital network memory.

Sounds and images we gathered became part of other’s archives and in turn have become searchable and interconnected. Individual memory becomes linked to and shared through digital archives.
The physical world blurs into the digital and back again.

No death march ever trudged through the north Somerset woods but for a group of walkers in April last year those woods will be forever imbued with thoughts of exile and threat. For two days last February we walked in Esther’s steps repatriating memory, connecting to other memories and generating new ones. Much of this still exists and continues to ripple out and generate responses in those digital network memory archives.
**Forced Walks: Honouring Esther Social Media Trails:**

Social Hiking aggregated feeds:  

**Conclusion:**

I have offered you a view that this creative practice of networked performative walking and mapping offers new knowledge and understandings in two concrete ways.

1) in the context of addressing obscured or intangible heritage this walking practice has contributed to triggering/generating/attracting new testimony and enabling people to find a voice to share such testimony.

2) and through the use of smart devices and social media the practice contributes to the understanding of how and in what way mobile media is impacting on memory making practices and in turn senses of place, space and identity.

One follows from the disenchantment of the walk, the other may be about new kinds of enchantment, new cultural practices, and invites further interrogation.

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**Contact details:**

Richard White: Artist/Researcher

Portfolio:  http://www.walknowtracks.co.uk/

Walknow.post@gmail.com

Academic: r.white2@bathspa.ac.uk

Creative Practice PhD candidate Bath Spa University
Senior Lecture in Media Practice Bath Spa University
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