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Psychogeographic Approaches for Fiction Writing

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ABSTRACT

The term “psychogeography” was coined by the philosopher and founder of Situationism Guy Debord as “the precise study of the effects of the environment, consciously organised or not, on the behaviour and/or emotions of individuals” (Debord, 1955: 8) in the mid-1900s, and the practices arising from it were then primarily concerned with defamiliarizing and critiquing urban spaces. Specific actions of psychogeographic practice related to writing, especially consciously engaging with a landscape and writing about its effects on the self, are more commonly associated with non-fiction texts, however, the conscious practice of creating “situations” and studying emotional/behavioural responses can be adapted and incorporated into fiction writing research and practice. This article examines the ways in which adopting a metacognitive psychogeographic methodology can provide content, form, theme and meaning in fiction specifically, with reference to practices used when writing *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, forthcoming 2022) as part of my doctoral research. It explains the challenges of using psychogeographic research to inform fictive character development, and examines the complex creative processes involved in adopting such methodologies. Finally, it encourages the fiction writer to slip on a pair of imaginary shoes and enjoy embodied research in the landscape.

Introduction

Fiction writers do not work in a void, with their stories plucked out of an entirely imagined space or influenced only by other texts. I can state with confidence that my forthcoming novel, *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022), has its creative roots in a memorable and embodied childhood experience: fingers pressed hard against a cold glass pane, my breath steaming the window, I watched the cherry blossom fall from the tree in our front garden and tried to work out what had changed, why I was not allowed outside anymore. I was six years old and news of the Chernobyl disaster had just been broadcast, with a report stating that the radioactive fallout was being carried by the weather across Europe and to the UK. This memory, and many years of living and working close to and occasionally at a nuclear power station, provided a rich tapestry of embodied experiences that contributed to the creation of the novel, and led me to question how the writer's personal situation and experience of landscape might inform fictional narratives, and how overtly seeking such influences might affect creative practice.

Writers are often generous in explaining the influences and sources for their literary creations, overtly referencing their engagement with place and culture, and to the landscapes and communities in which they reside or visit. These explanations sometimes include research undertaken away from the desk: Virginia Woolf, for example, explains how she used the excuse of needing to buy a pencil to escape the confines of the house in her 1927 essay "A Street Haunting" (Woolf, 2009), describing how her writing process was influenced by the sights she encountered and the thoughts they triggered when walking the streets of London. Woolf is not alone in using walking as both a tool for freeing the mind and one for generating content and ideas for writing. As Rebecca Solnit describes in her book *Wanderlust* (2014), walking, thinking and writing have been intricately linked throughout human history, from the Sophists and Aristotle, through Rousseau, Wordsworth, Thoreau, Edward Thomas, and right up to Macfarlane's canon of enraptured nature writing (Solnit, 2014). There are indeed two distinct literary movements recognised as overtly reliant on walking and exploring the self in relation to place: The Romantics (Jarvis, 1997; Amato, 2004) and The Avant Gardes (Matthews, 2005; Knabb, 2006). It could be claimed that there is in fact a new literary movement reliant on such activity:

contemporary publishing has seen a surge in texts centred on the practice of walking and then writing about the experience of walking itself, of tapping into palimpsestic readings of landscape, and of evoking a sense of place for those who are not able to access those landscapes themselves. This rapidly developing canon includes writers who can be identified as following specific psychogeographic practices such as the *dérive* – a movement through varied locations for the express purpose of invoking awareness of behavioural and emotional response – as Will Self explores in his book *Psychogeography* (Self, 2007), as well as nature writers who plan and execute experiences within specific landscapes to explore both personal responses and to provide historical/geographical discourse (see: Macfarlane, 2010, 2016 and 2017; Cracknell, 2015; Winn, 2019 for examples). Connections between the practice of these writers to the Avant Garde practices of the Situationists who defined psychogeography as "the precise study of the effects of the environment, whether consciously organised or not, on the behaviour and emotions of the individual" (Debord, 1955: 8) are easy to make: they are exploring landscapes and examining the resulting effects on their feelings and actions, often making wider political or cultural commentary in parallel. But what about those writers who work in the fictive realm? In what ways does the writer's position in the landscape inform their imaginative work? How can fictive responses be generated from psychogeographic actions when there is an inherently internal and subjective process taking place? How exactly might walking and observing emotional and behavioural responses to varied places "sharpen [the writer's] skills" (Overall, 2015: 26) and provide data for fictive creations? How can the writer deliberately plan "situations" that can generate research for fiction writing?

Inspiration and Situation

In my own writing processes, I have long been aware of the etymology of the word *inspiration*. Defined by critic Rob Pope as carrying:

the general sense of being moved and stirred by a powerful force other than oneself (divine, human, natural or otherwise), its root sense, from Latin *in-spirato*, is of being breathed into. (Pope, 2005: 91, italics in original).

There is a suggestion here that the writer, being breathed into, is a vessel for an external force which

directs the resulting creative actions and outputs, at times without the writer's conscious awareness. This external force could be defined as the situation the writer/artist resides in, culturally and physically, although there are undoubtedly other interpretations. Defining the external force as the writer's situation, however, aligns it with sociological theories of creativity, such as those explored by Janet Wolff, who states:

The sociology of art enables us to see that artistic practice is situated practice, the mediation of aesthetic codes, what Bourdieu calls the "cultural unconscious," and ideological, social and material processes and institutions. At the same time, it insists that we do not lose sight of the artist as the locus of this mediation and the facilitator of its expression (Wolff, 1993: 137).

Wolff's arguments propose a holistic view of creativity, focusing on the many influences affecting the processes of production – such as physical, social, and cultural positionality – while also recognising that there is a relationship between external stimuli and internal agency within the artist. Acknowledging this symbiosis opens up the opportunity to further understand and analyse the complex creative processes that take place within this relationship, and also provides a route to the utilisation of metacognitive knowledge of the self's positionality in the processes of imaginative writing. By identifying the situated position of the self within physical, sociological and cultural frameworks, the writer can not only identify influences on their thinking but can begin to consciously create situations or enter spaces for the express purpose of generating responses and stimulating connections and ideas.

In an academic context, Creative Writing research usually involves practitioner-researchers carrying out their research inquiries through the combined production of creative work and exploration of process in exegesis form. It does not make claims to objectivity (Nelson 2013: 19). In fact:

in the role of "practitioner-researcher," subjectivity, involvement, reflexivity is acknowledged; the interaction of the researcher with the research material is recognised. Knowledge is negotiated – inter-subjective, context bound, and is a

result of personal construction (Gray and Malins 2004: 21).

Donna Haraway similarly recognises the value of situated knowledge in research and practice, arguing:

for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, [...] for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (Haraway, 1988: 589).

While many research disciplines prioritise an attempt at objectivity, and in my fiction writing I too find myself reaching towards non-personal interpretations of the world around me, I have found that recognising one's own situatedness – culturally, sociologically and also individually – is not detrimental to creative practice, but can actually function as a key to compiling data for creative interpretation. By metacognitively examining my own personal responses to specific landscapes and places, for example, I have been able to generate knowledge that can inform the development of fictional characters. These responses may be complex, contradictory, intersectional and often in conflict with my own views and values, but are rooted in analysing my circumstantial acquisition of knowledge of place and people and then questioning how other people may be influenced. The knowledge gained can also inform the narrative, helping me develop a structure that reflects the multifaceted issues around a specific community. As Jenn Webb states, while the whole world is a potential data source for the writer, inquiry can only be contained by "the way we shape our research questions and by the focus of our story" (Webb, 2015: 127), and acknowledging and embracing personal situatedness can provide a locus for both to develop.

However, the writer's unique position in the world is not the only way in which situation informs creative actions. While the writer's position as a human being with prior experience and knowledge of the world in which they reside (both globally and locally) could be described as the situation "breathing into" them and providing input for creative output, as both Janet Wolff and Rob Pope point out, there is agency in the creative process. Pope states that creative inspiration can, literally or metaphorically, be "induced by the kinds of breathing exercises practiced in yoga and

other forms of meditation” (Pope, 2005: 92). I believe these “breathing exercises” can be extended to take many forms: research, reading, contemplation, creative exercises in groups or alone, for example. The writer can consciously direct their exposure to, and awareness of, specific stimuli to generate creative response, and therefore has some control over the process of “breathing in.” This awareness of the writer’s role as mediator for input and resulting artist output, and the knowledge that writers can direct their sources of inspiration, signposts the way towards developing a research methodology for fiction writing that is based on psychogeographic theories and practice. As the *Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement* says:

Creative Writing is not primarily a vehicle for what may be termed “factual” knowledge, but a synthesizing process that brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative interpretation and representation of experience (Neale *et al*, 2018: 5).

Embracing this freedom to synthesise existing, and carefully planned, situated responses to place with imagined characters and their responses to their own fictive situations empowered me to examine more closely the nature of structured psychogeographic practice and how it relates to fiction writing specifically.

Psychogeography as a Practice-led Methodology

Eudora Welty’s essay “Place in Fiction” (1994) begins by describing “setting” as being classed as “the lesser angel” in narratives, often relegated behind “character, plot, symbolic meaning, and so on,” and whose influence “might be thought so modest a one that it can be taken for granted” (Welty, 1994: 1). However, she goes on to explain that in her view place is not only intrinsic to readers’ experience of stories, becoming symbiotically bound together in the cultural consciousness of the readers (*Wuthering Heights* and the Yorkshire Moors for example), but is also intrinsic to the writing process itself. To Welty:

place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows on us [writers] our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it (Welty,

1994: 15).

When considering my own writing and research experience, Welty’s assertion that writers pay attention to both the landscape and the way it affects the individual connects directly to Guy Debord’s definition of psychogeography. I can identify links between the actions of studying place and of exploring resulting observations in my own writing practice. When I write, I recognise that the ideas for stories – the characters, plots, symbolic meanings and imagery – are often fomented in my own emotional or intellectual response to certain aspects of a specific landscape or place. These aspects might be geographical and encompassing the physical features of a region or area, or localised and responsive to individual aspects of architecture, design or a sense of home. For example, my short story “A Sudden Rush of Air” (Holloway, 2017) has its conception in my observation of anti-bird spikes fitted to the window-ledges of buildings in my local town to prevent pigeons settling. Noticing this small physical attribute in a precise situation became the seed for the story, and also featured in the piece as a central image and basis for symbolic meaning, action and character response. The “lesser angel” of place, through a specific investigation of psychogeographic responses to a defined location, thus acted as a creative source for those elements of the story which Welty identifies as taking precedence in the text.

This does not mean my stories are autobiographical in nature, or memoir even, but that they are responsive to location, and the specific attributes of specific places. Alice Munro explains how she uses real details and locations in her writing process by describing her personal observations as “the starter dough” (Munro, 1982: 225) for a story to emerge. Like her I realised I often take personal observations of real places, and features within those locations, and combine them with other inputs – inspirations I have gathered along the way or that I seek out specifically – so that I can breathe them out into the story I am constructing:

some of the material I have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes, bits of speech) [sic] (Munro, 1982: 224).

In my research for *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022) I chose to explore how far I could use such observation of landscape as a tool for creating fiction, choosing to write about landscape in depth, as the central driving force of the piece, with setting not relegated to the status of “lesser angel,” but rather as the defining element in my characters’ lives. I wanted to explore the ways in which, as Welty says:

It is by the nature of itself that fiction is all bound up in the local. The internal reason for that is surely that feelings are bound up in place. [...] The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of “What happened? Who’s here? Who’s coming?” (Welty, 1994: 1).

Applying these questions to a specific landscape can form the foundation of narrative, character and content. By merging Welty and Debord’s ideas about landscape observation I developed a psychogeographic methodology for my doctoral research through which my writing could be directed by spending time in specific landscapes as a means of generating and then studying emotional and behavioural responses to these spaces. When conducting practice-led research, the “methodology should be responsive, driven by the requirements of practice and the creative dynamic of the art/design work” (Gray and Malins 2004: 72), and “research may include experiential learning, whereby creative writers put themselves in particular situations or undergo experiences in order to generate writing” (Neale *et al*, 2018: 5). I decided to actively create “situations” from which I could then explore in depth the ways in which certain landscapes affect the self, wider communities, and by extension the characters and form of imaginative writing.

In developing this methodology I decided to consider Debord’s definition of psychogeography within the wider practice of the Situationists International (SI), not with the intention of adopting their principles or copying their actions, but of drawing on and adapting elements of their practice into my research where I felt it would benefit my creative aims.

The SI as an active organisation was formed by Guy Debord in the mid-1900s, and was comprised of individuals from pre-existing collectives and

movements, including Avant Garde artists, intellectuals and political theorists. The writings and actions of the SI, and particularly Debord, locate psychogeographic practice specifically in the urban environment, and imbue it with political weight. It originated as a method of critiquing urban planning, of observing and defying the corralling of space and time into functional zones. The *dérive*, a term coined to describe a drift or arbitrarily planned movement through cities to evoke awareness and responses to the specifics of place, was one of the SI’s methods of reclaiming power from the capitalist state, and a mode of play that could feed artistic minds (Debord, 1955 and 1958, in Knabb, 2006: 8-12 and 62-66; Ridgeway, 2014; and Matthews, 2005).

For my research I chose environments that cannot be defined as urban, but that are still sources for political critique: landscapes containing nuclear power stations. These are locations where the industrial meets the rural, perhaps more like an extreme version of what the activist and writer Marian Shoard terms “edgelands,” only rather than being at the blurred edges of cities,

characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plants, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland (Shoard, 2017),

these particular landscapes sit at the very end of the strutting strings of pylons that connect the power source to the communities they serve. They juxtapose working farmland and picturesque seascapes with vast high-tech, high-security buildings that dominate the land. These landscapes merge the rural, domestic, wild and/or industrial, providing a rich and complex setting for the examination of emotional and behavioural responses. While this choice does not comply with the SI’s intended sites of study, it does still involve the observation of how defined places inform behaviours in, and often access to, politicised and controlled landscapes and therefore constitutes a reclamation of these locations as spaces that serve to inspire creative practice rather than merely sites of industry/leisure/living. Similarly, describing these spaces in fiction gives access to the site to readers who may be excluded for a variety of reasons.

While my chosen landscapes are visually striking, and the juxtaposition of nuclear reactors and rural

seascapes provides rich content for descriptive passages of prose, I realised very quickly that using psychogeography as a methodology for writing about place demands the writer do more than look at the terrain/location and describe its colours and shapes in the text. The notion of looking implies an ocular-centric, externalised conception of landscape, positioning it as scenery to be gazed on from a distance, or perhaps the background to a character's story arc. However, as Jordan-Baker explains, landscapes, whether real or fictional, are also "places human communities abide in and work with," emphasising "the existence of an emplaced and practiced-based conception" (Jordan-Baker, 2019: 3).

While seeking fiction writing that evokes a strong sense of place as both context for narrative and an inherent part of the narratives and character behaviours, I discovered that writers such as Jenn Ashworth and Sarah Hall have shown themselves to be aware of the need to look, and look closely, but also to experience. Hall states, when discussing her writing practice:

I'm interested in the working nature of the land as well as its resistance to what we place upon it, metaphysically, and sometimes physically. This is what I've grown up with when it comes to Cumbria – farming, sheep, rain, difficulties travelling, self-sufficiency, obduracy, respect (Hall, 2009).

She identifies here her own observations and experience of landscape as a significant source for narrative and action. Particularly relevant is that she notes not only things which can be seen, but also physical modes of interaction with the landscape that give rich data for developing character and situation in a narrative, demonstrating an approach to reading landscape and the behaviours and responses of individuals within it that aligns with my own approach for writing *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022).

Similarly, Ashworth, when discussing her process of writing *Fell* (2016), describes the novel as "a diary of looking – of what I paid attention to during that time" (Ashworth, 2017), going on to situate the development of the novel in her observations and experience of a specific landscape:

I can say that *Fell* grew from a particular place. The unbiddable, uncanny, shifting sand of Morecambe Bay intrigued me because I was frightened of it. I had been taught to be frightened of it, to watch the sands, to never walk there alone. The bay holds its own dark histories of flux and danger. It is a place of work and leisure and rest and peril. It demanded its place not as a mere backdrop for action, but one of the novel's most shifty characters (Ashworth, 2017).

Ashworth's description of fear of a particular landscape as the initial creative force for action resonates with Wolff's identification of the artist as a uniquely positioned viewpoint for the interpretation of place. Ashworth locates her fear of Morecambe Bay within a culturally taught relationship, highlighting her own social, cultural and personal situatedness within her process of writing *Fell*.

Ashworth and Hall reveal here how they are inspired by, and then write about, specific landscapes, demonstrating their positionality within certain locations as an influence on their writing processes. However, while this implies that there are elements of psychogeography intrinsic to writing processes in general - and to a greater or lesser extent depending on the unique project – it does not fully explain how structured psychogeographic practice and the deliberate creation of "situations" for study might be incorporated into writing processes or the complexities that arise when such research is undertaken. How then might a writer overtly adopt and adapt psychogeographic actions to metacognitively seek knowledge and meaning in landscape form and use? What happens within the process of reading familiar landscapes afresh, ready to be "drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters [they might] find there" (Debord, 1958:62)?

To understand the complexities of landscape perception and find ways to depict place as the primary element that informs characters' emotions and behaviours, I realised I needed to negotiate the "tension between proximity and distance, body and mind, sensuous immersion and detached observation" (Wylie, 2007: 1-2) inherent in landscape study, considering carefully how the individual conceives of and engages with landscape/place spatially and temporally. One way to negotiate these

tensions is to learn to read the landscape, and read it in particular way – in a writerly way. In *On Creative Writing*, Graeme Harper discusses the ways in which the writer reads the world around them as a resource for new work, explaining we read the weather, the tides and temperatures, the behaviour of others, the shape and pattern of the world around us, and situations. Specifically, he notes that “reading” means “examining meaning,” stating:

it relates to receiving and [...] comprehending. It can mean to gain knowledge from something, to examine and decide upon intention. It's about discerning, attempting to grasp, interpreting (Harper, 2010: 25).

Harper's definition of reading the world positions it in the writing process as an active and metacognitive engagement with external information, perhaps one of Pope's “breathing exercises” (Pope, 2005: 92). Approaching landscapes this way, I began to “read” them to seek out meaning, to discern not only how specific places are composed in terms of colours, shapes and textures that I might describe in my writing, but also to discover what knowledge they generate in terms of symbolism or imagery, to analyse how the topography and design of the buildings direct physical, emplaced behaviours in visitors and inhabitants. To begin grasping at an interpretation of place as part of wider pattern of connection between people, community, industry and nature.

Reading landscape is not something that is done solely with the eyes and through intellectual or artistic analysis, though; it is important to recognise the body, too, as a tool for perception and interpretation of place. Macfarlane reminds us of this, stating:

we have come to forget that our minds are shaped by the bodily experience of being in the world – its spaces, textures, sounds, smells and habits (Macfarlane, 2016: 74).

Macfarlane's statement builds on the phenomenological approach to perception posited by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose anti-Cartesian stance reunited the mind and body as a symbiotic locus for generating knowledge of the world, arguing that knowledge is felt within the

body in a way that precedes cognition and informs understanding. Rather than experience of place being understood solely as an intellectual response, then, it can be seen as an embodied response, in which thoughts and sensory experiences, mental and physical feedback, are mutually contributing to the experience as a whole. Tapping into this method of reading place can facilitate the translation of felt knowledge into fiction, as sensory inputs can inform psychological states and help generate the atmosphere and tone of a piece of fiction. For example, when engaging in embodied research for *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022), I found that turning my back on the nuclear power station enabled me to respond to other indicators of its presence and relationship to the landscape in which it sits – the deep drone of its turbine hall in competition with the waves crashing on the rocks, the vibrations in the earth beneath my feet, and the crackle of static in the overhead powerlines. Merleau-Ponty recognises that words are gestures of the body, positioning writing as an expression of existential meaning as experienced bodily and sensually (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 144-6; Macfarlane, 2016: 73-74; Tobin, 2012: 29), and I certainly found that these sensory readings contributed as much to my development of the narrative and characters as the visual and intellectual readings.

Using Psychogeographic Practice in Fiction Writing: Wearing Imaginary Shoes

Psychogeographic practice takes place within the landscape, and can incorporate defined and carefully planned movements and activities within specific places and for specific purposes (to document, analyse, question or learn about a place), or take the form of a planned but less structured approach that relies on an openness to observation. I find that the most helpful practice in the early stages of developing ideas for fiction, is the *dérive*. By suspending the “usual motives for movement and action” (Debord, 1958: 62) such as work or commuting, for example, and instead physically moving through a space for the sake of experiencing the space itself as Debord suggests in his essay “Theory of the *Dérive*” (Debord, 1958: 62), the body reads and responds to the varied ambiances that are created by a mixture of senses – smell, temperature, touch and even taste – as well as sight. This practice can generate knowledge of a specific place or places that can in turn inform cognitive processes and “sharpen [the writer's] skills – of description, evocation of atmosphere, detailing minutiae, making connections – to give

greater authenticity to [...] writing” (Overall, 2015: 26). What this “authenticity” may be is open to debate. Whether anything can be described as truly authentic when all interpretations and representations of place are embedded in codes, signs and symbols is not the focus here. For the purpose of this practice I choose to interpret Overall’s use of the word to mean the writer’s subjective observations of real places in the moment, that in turn provide the detailed descriptions of place, action and character with which I might build complex and convincing fictional worlds and stories.

I tend to record my observations during the *dérive* via a mixture of photography, notes, audio recordings and video, so they can be referred back to, annotated and used as the basis for both descriptions of settings and character responses to physical, social and political considerations encoded in the landscape. These experiences and subsequent notes then provide a rich textural map of specific locations, and, as discussed later, can be used to map out the characters and narratives of fiction.

However, as I learned through undertaking these actions, there is a difference between the practice of reading landscape directly in order to reflect on how it affects the self – as demonstrated by non-fiction landscape writing – and engaging in psychogeographic practice for fiction writing. When examining how psychogeography and non-fiction writing intersect, there are clear connections between that which is seen, felt, thought and then written, with the author as the central locus for interpretation and explanation. Wylie posits that a phenomenological approach to writing about the environment shows that the self and the world are “indissolubly entwined” and that by extension, therefore, “text and the world are conceived and executed in terms of fusion” (Wylie, 2010: 47). This approach places those writers engaged with landscape phenomenology as a subjective conduit for experience, and as such their own embodied experiences of landscape are then explored through evocative descriptions that express and elucidate often epiphanic experiences:

in which there occurs an apparent lacing together of perceiving self and perceived landscape, to a point where self and landscape, inner and outer worlds are intertwined (Wylie, 2010: 52).

This intertwining can be seen, for example, in the nature writing of Macfarlane, whose book *The Wild Places* (2010) explores his experience of trying to find wilderness landscapes in the North West. Summing up his “revelation” that every wild space he visited had at some point been intersected and altered by human life, he uses his experience of swimming in an estuary to explore his epiphany:

Where the salt and the fresh wove with one another, and the river lost itself gently into the increased space of the ocean, I swam briefly. Though I could not see how the two waters mingled, I could feel it all about me; the subtle jostle of currents, and the numberless small collisions of wave and ripple. [...] I thought of how the vision of wilderness with which I had begun my journey – inhuman, northern, remote – was starting to crumble from contact with the ground itself (Macfarlane, 2010:126).

This merging of body, place, thoughts and words provides further testimony, as Wylie identifies in similar non-fiction texts, to “the central argument that human being is, fundamentally, embodied, involved being, ‘caught up in the fabric of the world’” (Wylie, 2010: 52, quoting Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 156).

When examining the processes involved in psychogeographic activity for fiction writing, though, there is a demand for a cognitive split in terms of translating that which is seen/experienced into a fictional narrative. When writing *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022), a story exploring one family’s relationship with nuclear power production and its past disasters and current potential dangers, I found my own phenomenological experience of landscape had to be extended to encompass and imagine the phenomenological experience of my invented characters, creating multiple, often disparate, responses to the same space. Rather than describing my own experiences and response to place directly, I had to both develop characters in response to the area, and then find my way inside those characters’ minds and evoke their experience of viewing and being immersed in landscape. In effect I began extending Debord’s definition of psychogeography to include creative actions, redefining it as “the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment [...] on the emotions and

behaviour of [imagined] individuals” (Debord, 1955: 8).

These creative actions changed my relationship with the landscape itself, to become a way of reading through looking at/interacting with landscape that developed within a liminal space between the self and other (invented) selves. This is more than a personal interaction and negotiation on the page between the self and the world: the conscious actions of reading the landscape and seeking out potential interpretations of its features – perceiving and then imagining, reconstructing, building a new and different perspective of the world (or even a new version of the world) – take this fusion of self and world and make it, through fiction, a representation of something beyond the personal. The external landscape, read this way, is reformed into new, imagined landscapes: internal landscapes. These were constructed of all the readings I took during research trips and blended with my existing experiential knowledge of the landscape more widely. These malleable landscapes then provided a testing ground for imagining places and dramatic situations that in turn could be invoked on the page. I began to merge descriptions of real place with added fictional elements, to explore responses to these real or imaginatively re-drawn locations by fictive characters. I was also able to access these internal geographies in my study at home, miles away from the real landscapes I had walked in and studied, using my notes and memories as triggers and resources for the writing.

I found that if the cognitive split is acknowledged and assimilated into the creative approach, the potential for imagined responses to place could then be explored more freely. Although I recognised that my personal responses could be used as a foundation for building characters and actions, I also realised I was no longer bound by a focus on my own embodied experiences, emotional or behavioural responses. The process of reading the landscape from the perspective of developing fictive personalities in parallel to my own afforded an opportunity to expand my own responses to specific landscapes outwards, imagining responses to the landscape that pushed far beyond my own experience towards extremes of engagement.

Once my characters became more defined, I changed my use of the *dérive* to become more specific: I slipped on imaginary shoes – a new pair for each

character – and went out into the specific landscapes I chose to study. I tried to see and feel a response to place that each character would have, both drawing on what I already knew about the character so far, and building the character through the fictive responses they have to each place. I could therefore create characters whose relationships with places were disparate and different to my own, and whose responses to landscape were imagined while still being plausible, powerful and narratively viable. Throughout the writing process I then began creating more structured situations, perhaps engaging directly with a smaller area or single aspect of a location and asking more detailed questions than those in the initial *dérive*. These situations further challenged character perceptions of place and engagement with landscape, of the places in which they lived and worked, and helped me to develop a narrative journey for each character that moves them through actions, relationships and personal change.

Negotiating the *Dérive* in Imaginary Shoes

I have found that engaging in a *dérive* is one of the most beneficial research practices to generate responses to place, but such actions are varied and complex. While the *dérive* has throughout history been predominantly the activity of the privileged white male (Solnit, 2014; Jamie, 2008), or the privileged white female (Woolf, 2009), the individual’s choice of spaces or strategies for engaging with spaces can open up this activity to underrepresented demographics, and diversity of both voice and spaces studied is desirable and vital to the richness of creative writing. Planning a *dérive* can therefore be anything from an epic journey or defined research project, to a wander around the local area. They can be entered into with no set intentions and with an openness for ideas, or be structured to address certain aspects of landscapes depending on the needs of the writer or stage of the work in progress. Debord states that “the spatial field of a *dérive* may be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the goal is to study a terrain, or to emotionally disorient oneself;” however these positions frequently overlap (Debord, 1958: 64), and as such provide varied data for creative response.

When I planned the experiential research for *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022) I hoped to achieve both goals: to gather subjectively authentic, detailed data related to nuclear landscapes in order to portray a realist experience of these specific landscapes and communities, and to open myself up to a looser

methodology reliant on serendipity: catching sight of a wild animal; experiencing a familiar space in a new way; a conversation providing specific knowledge I could not have known to seek out; or the feeling/emotion of being within a particular space. Some of the dérives I undertook were relatively relaxed and in areas I was familiar with, some more restricted by the safety rules, regulations, and dangers implicit in the landscapes I explored.

Once the cognitive split necessary for psychogeographical fiction research was recognised and embraced, I found the practice of the dérive and creation of situations became simultaneously easier to engage in, and more complex theoretically. Researching certain landscapes online or via other media before a physical exploration takes place complicated the experience further. Recognising that my knowledge of any landscape I had not visited in person was a synthesis of research but not “the thing itself” (Bergson, 1998: 29), I felt I needed to engage in embodied research to seek what Henri Bergson describes as an intuitive response to the landscape as a means of capturing authentic, serendipitous data. He states that there are:

two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first implies that we move around the object. The second that we enter into it (Bergson, 1998: 1).

Intuition, according to Bergson, is the antithesis of an analytical approach in which the object in question is perpetually divided into symbols, and from which only a spectre of the original can be evoked (Bergson, 1998: 6-9). In order to grasp and experience that which is unique and ineffable within an object he argues one must feel sympathy with it, and gives the following example in explanation of this process:

were all the photographs of a town, taken from all possible points of view, to go on indefinitely completing one another, they would never be equivalent to the solid town in which we walk about. [...] A representation taken from a certain point of view, a translation made with certain symbols, will always remain imperfect in comparison with the object (Bergson, 1998: 5).

While I am acutely aware that any fiction I write is

itself a representation from a certain point of view, in terms of my creative process for *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022) I wanted the actions of writing to be informed through direct intuition, and not secondary representation, and so ensured that I visited in person the landscapes featured in the novel. The connections between Bergson’s explanation of intuition, psychogeographic practice, and Merleau-Ponty’s theories on embodied perception are clear to me: to understand a place, even subjectively, I must be inside it, reading it as Macfarlane (2016: 74) suggests, with my whole body. My cognition and knowledge could then arise from letting go of a distanced, analytical approach and opening up to whatever interactions, feelings and knowledge might be formed through psychogeographic engagement of all of my senses.

There were two ways this unfolded. Firstly, when engaging in psychogeographic practice in local and familiar landscapes, I found myself reconsidering my habitual embodied experience of the landscape and finding new ways of looking at the space from a position as part of the “closely woven fabric” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 249) that is the real. Secondly, when exploring a new landscape – in the case of *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022) this was the Exclusion Zone around Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station – which I had examined online in advance, I was entering a space I had become habituated to only visually, via mediation and distance. I considered how my prior knowledge would shape my experience, and what new knowledge I would gain.

Bergson’s theories of la durée (duration) unite past knowledge and present experience through what he calls the “multiplicity of states of consciousness” (Bergson, 2004:117), whereby instead of things (sounds and sights, for example) being experienced as a series of successive elements, rather “their totality may be compared to a living being whose parts, although distinct, permeate one another just because they are so closely related” (Bergson, 2004: 130). Therefore, my experience of both types of landscape, and the knowledge I gained inside them, was intrinsically interpenetrated by all past knowledge and experience, and distinct elements could only be recognised and isolated via abstract thought (Gillies, 2014: 16-19).

This multiplicity of states of consciousness is especially important, though, regarding the nature of visits to culturally significant and well-known

locations, like Chernobyl. Such visits are generally conducted in accordance with heavily mediated prior knowledge of the history of the site and awareness of cultural significances, and are frequently performed with the express purpose of gaining knowledge, visual artefacts or information (Yankovska & Hannam, 2013, Goatcher & Brunsden, 2011, and Rush-Cooper, 2013, 2014). My intention was that by visiting personally and feeling what the writer Elizabeth George calls “the total place experience” myself, I could recreate this in the text for the reader to experience, so that the landscape reflects in the writing “not only the setting but also the emotions that are evoked by the setting,” (George, 2004: 34-35). George believes the ability to generate a strong sense of place in relation to characters originates in an attention to physical detail by the author. However, I believe that paying attention to both personal emotional responses to place, and imagined character responses, is as important.

The traditional practice of a *dérive* often involves imposing rules (such as only turning left) to force a drift through unexpected, disparate ambiances. However, movements through the ambiances of any landscape can be directed by various location specific rules or regulations (footpaths, traffic, bylaws, furniture in a building) or the contours of the land itself. The phenomenologist, philosopher and writer, Alphonso Lingis, building on Merleau-Ponty’s theories of embodiment and perception, describes “environment as an imperative” (Lingis, 1998: 68). In this way landscape is never neutral, but an authority, demanding we read it physically through the senses. Perception of landscape cannot be reduced to a singular process; rather, aspects of each specific landscape demand multiple bodily responses:

To feel the tangible, the smooth, the sticky or the bristly, our touching hand has to move across a substance with a certain pressure [...]. We do not see the dull moss-green of the leaves with the same movement of the look that makes the ardent red of the rose visible (Lingis, 1998: 57).

Even looking, when unmediated and undertaken within the spatiality of a landscape rather than via media representations, is a physical response to the demands of the environment (Fullegar, 2001: 175-177) and is intertwined with other sensory responses such as sound and light which draw our gaze.

I discovered that it is easy in these situations to forget the purpose of the visit, or to become distracted, or even frustrated, if ideas for fiction and/or character development are not flowing. To combat this, I found one practical way of using the imperative of environment (whether rural, urban, domestic or a combination) was to both be led by the environment itself to generate personal responses, and to ask specific questions regarding how the fictional characters might be led depending on their own position. By asking such questions (would *x* be drawn to or repelled by this texture? What memories would *y* have triggered by this smell/sound/colour? for example) I found I could return to my notes later and test out answers on the page in short fictive scenarios. In this drafting stage, each of the characters’ responses to specific parts of the landscape then built up and demanded, as imperative, a logical response to the next based on temporal, spatial, emotional and cognitive experience as part of **their** own multiplicities of consciousness. Additionally, by questioning how **they** might read items within the landscape, connections could be made between different places and also between characters. In this way thematic links were fomented, narrative structure developed, characters were rounded, and imagery focused. Small details were mirrored or distorted, or became symbolic, acting as anchor points within the writing process itself.

Documentation and Resolution

One of my concerns during the psychogeographic practice described above was to what extent writerly documentation, especially taking photographs, might interrupt my objective of immersion in the landscape. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty highlights the presupposition that there is a distance between the object and the viewer, stating:

In exactly the same way as the act of naming, the act of pointing out (or pointing a camera) presupposes that the object, instead of being approached, grasped and absorbed by the body, is kept at a distance [...], treated as representative of its previous appearances in me, and of its simultaneous appearances in others, in other words, subsumed under some category and promoted to the status of a concept (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 120).

There is an immediate tension apparent here, in

that while I was seeking out a sympathetic, intuitive response to the landscape that required letting go of analytic thought, at the same time my purpose for being in the specific landscapes was to gather data for my writing; a process that demanded I distinguish and record elements of the experience. The tension between analytical thought and immersive experience is recognised, and to a certain extent also resolved, by both Bergson and Merleau-Ponty.

Bergson, while arguing that to achieve an intuitive, absolute knowledge of a thing one must “refrain from separating [the self’s] present state from its former states” (Bergson, 2004: 100) in order to achieve pure duration and sympathy, goes on to acknowledge that we are unwilling, as critic Mary Ann Gillies explains, fully to “surrender a mode of thinking in which symbolic representation replaces the living moment” (Gillies, 2014: 21). Dynamism of thought, in which the accumulation of experiences in time are made possible through duration, and simultaneously act on our inner states to become living reality through symbolic modes of understanding (Gillies, 2014: 20-23), therefore, is an active system of flux. Means of representation – in thoughts and words – must similarly be in a constant state of adaptation, fluctuating between intuition and modes of thinking in which symbolic representation replaces the living moment. In fact:

[w]e can intuit our own conscious processes if we stop thinking of our own self as made up of separate perceptions, memories and feelings and accept that our self is a continuous flux of interconnected processes, recognizing that “[t]here is a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it” and that “[n]o one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other” (Fell, 2009: 15 quoting Bergson, 1999: 25).

Merleau-Ponty’s theories of perception and subjectivity take this flux further and state that consciousness, the world, and the body are all intertwined regarding perception, and that experience of the world is rooted in bodily response – the senses experiencing situations spatially, temporally and physically. Cognition is situated within the corporality of the mind/body and its environment, so that prior/developing knowledge and perceptions influence physical engagement

with landscape in the moment, as much as the demands of the landscape itself. If we acknowledge that writing processes involve both cognition and sensory perception, this heterogeneous reading of landscape then becomes an open system, a space for active negotiation and exchange between self, the environment, and imagined narratives in which the self and landscape’s spatial and temporal entanglements are acknowledged. As such, I recognised that my thoughts and acts of documentation regarding my experience are as important a part of my response to the landscape as any other sense or emotion.

The practice of psychogeography similarly demands fluid movement along a continuum of being in the moment and experiencing the world bodily, and thinking about that which is experienced. I decided to embrace this dichotomy of engagement, allowing myself to tune into to the space and sensory experience, alternating this with note taking, jotting down my emotions and observations, and considering how the characters might respond to and behave in the landscape. I felt my character responses must, like mine, be created not only from their intuitive experience of the landscape, but from the way their (imagined) embodied experience triggered memories and directed their thoughts, gaze and behaviours. By allowing myself to be directed, or drifting through the landscape and letting myself experience the space, I was able to acknowledge how my intuitive responses were triggered, and then use them to help me depict characters’ feelings and behaviours. In her discourse on Bergson and the communication of intuition through literature, Elena Fell argues that when fictional “events are presented in an obviously fallacious manner, exaggerating the work of analysis” it can reduce the actions and experiences of characters to mere signifiers of experience. This reduction thereby distances the reader from engaging closely with the sensual, emotive elements of immersion: the “full and vibrant flow of reality” (Fell, 2009: 10). For the *Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022), therefore, I chose to describe character actions and emotional responses in a mimetic, realist way that represents, as closely as possible, their embodied experience. By avoiding diegetic overttness where possible, my intention is that the readers themselves might then “become immersed in what is happening, sharing the characters’ moods and feelings as they may have taken place” (Fell, 2009: 12).

Photographic documentary was particularly helpful to me in terms of evoking a sense of place further along in the writing process. The digital age has facilitated, in the privileged/western world at least, the opportunity to have a single device that records voice, text and image. The Smart Phone can be utilised to document thoughts, sounds, and sights, all of which can be utilised later in the writing process. When I captured images, many of the pictures were hastily taken, sometimes focusing on minutiae which drew my attention via my personal interest in the details that make up the fabric of the place. In this way, the act of photographing the features of the landscape became an act of “plunging into” it (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 67), in that it involved not a methodical cataloguing of items or objects, but an instinctive openness to that which I was encountering and drawn into. This practice became an intrinsic part of my writing process for *The Half-life of Snails* (Holloway, 2022), and I often documented the textures and colours of the landscapes – the dust, mould, mosses, damp patches and peeling paint of abandoned buildings, the way textiles and furniture were arranged in domestic settings, how buildings and industrial structures sat within the natural landscape. In this way I created textural maps of the landscape into which I could immerse my characters, and to which I could refer long after psychogeographic research had taken place in practice, stimulating memories and emotional responses to inform my writing. I found that to view my own photographs was to return to the subjective, self-authored experience of place, rather than to rely on the mediated gaze of another. Returning to them later “ignite[s] embodied reflections that extend beyond the materiality of the photograph” (Scarles, 2010: 472) and helped me to reconstruct a sense of place within the novel.

In addition to photography I took detailed notes on smells, temperatures, tastes, sounds and textures, which I later matched with my photographs to stimulate sense memory as well as visual memory. Beyond this my notes documented not only what was seen and sensed physically, but my own, and my characters’, imagined, emotional responses to each detail, enabling me to recapture the “emotional disorientation” (Debord, 1958: 64) of the *dérive* itself. The SI, after conducting a *dérive*, would often construct maps of the cities they explored. These maps were not objective cartographical diagrams of the roads and buildings, drawn to scale for the purpose of documenting the topographical

features of the spaces, but narrative maps of subjective experience that signposted emotions and experiences, joined by arrows that suggested the flow of movement (Morten *et al*, 2018: 230). Drawing on this idea, the writer might, as I have done, organise photographs and notes into smaller maps of specific locations, adding personal and imagined emotional responses to each space. This can make it easier to plan characters’ emotional and behavioural journeys. Drafting experimental character sketches that test out potential emotional responses to each space, adding them to the maps and editing them throughout the writing process can also be an effective way of organising data and stimulating ideas. Creating these layered maps then provides the scaffolding for early drafts and the evolution of narrative. From a writerly point of view, the construction of the final text was that of creating a final narrative map, one which shows the characters’ movements through varied spaces from an embodied viewpoint within the landscape.

Conclusion

Not all walking leads to a story, and not all stories need a walk at the root of their inception or to feed their growth. However, by stepping away from the desk, the screen, the page and the usual routines of writing, I discovered that new methods of creative play and research could be developed. Situationist theory, techniques and methodologies do not have to be followed and applied within boundaries, but can be adapted, incorporated, imaginatively redrawn, and blended to feed each project as necessary. Solnit describes a path as:

a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape, [...] to follow a route is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessors on it as scholars and trackers and pilgrims do (Solnit, 2014).

However, if as scholars and artists we all continue to follow set paths, we will miss the opportunity for new revelations, for explorations, and for creating our own paths. Instead, as Kayleigh Moore suggests, we can forge our own creative and critical Desire Lines: “paths, [that] are made by natural human behaviour and deviate from the route officially planned” (Moore, 2018). I am convinced Debord would approve, at least, I *imagine* he would while I’m wearing his shoes...

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