

The Herepath Project

Deep mapping and hedge-springing during lockdown

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ABSTRACT

Moving to the Marlborough Downs on the edge of the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Avebury in late 2019 (an area I have been exploring since the late '80s), I decided to map my new locality through poetry and art – connecting nodes of significance to create a personal Wiltshire 'songline': The Herepath Project. As the 2020 lockdown kicked in, the concept of 'deep mapping' (Nan Shepherd) my local universe gained increasing poignancy. In the form of a literary *dérive* – charting zones of ambience and influence as I range metaphorically across the Downs – this article will consider different forms of creative mapping, including the 'Counter-Mapping' of the Zuni Map Art Project; and the 'song-walking' of Dr Elizabeth Bennett (Essex University); as well initiatives which 'hack' the hegemonic discourses of the countryside, such a Black Girls Hike, the Colonial Countryside project, and Slow Ways, and other acts of creative resistance (Rebecca Solnit; Nick Hayes). Examples from the poetry pamphlet produced will be shared, along with the odd field sketch. A technique of 'writing the land' will be fashioned, combining repurposed elements of Debord's psychogeographical *dérive*, Richard Long's 'Land Art', and Buddhist 'jongrom'. Drawing inspiration from the biodiversity of the Downs a non-anthropocentric perspectival shift will be advocated for deconstructing the conventional human-centred cartographies of property demarcation, ontological discreteness, and hierarchical layering.

KEYWORDS

Creative process, walking, psychogeography, counter-mapping, poetry.

Introduction

Can a creative engagement with cartography and landscape – defined speculatively by an increasing array of pioneering terms: altercartography [1], counter-mapping [2], mythogeography [3], deep mapping [4] – benefit the writer? Can confinement, or restriction – such as experienced in the 2020 lockdown in the United Kingdom – push creative-critical practice in new directions, forcing the writer to respond creatively to the inherent challenges? And can such an approach avoid the critiques of self-valorization, and romanticization [5] that have been levelled against earlier nature writing? These are the questions I set out to answer in this enquiry, with acknowledgement that it is an ongoing one – and one where the destination of ‘answers’ matter less than the journey of the ‘questions’, which are after all only loose co-ordinates to navigate by, indeed ones imposed retrospectively, in the way that academe expects exegesis; while as practice-based research is seldom so engineered. A piece of creative work often starts with an inkling, an impulse, an intuitive approach – akin to setting off for a stroll on a sunny day, without itinerary, map, or compass, just because it feels good. There is often a greater emphasis on the maps we impose on the ‘landscapes’ of our enquiries – the vectors of theory, the compass rose of criticality, the gnomonic legends of signs and signifiers – than the terrain itself. We forget that the map is not the territory, and are sometimes at risk of the hubris of Borges’ ambitious cartographers who created a map the size of a country.

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.[6]

So, mindful of this potential disjuncture – between

the sine qua non of the practice, and the retro-fitted abstract ‘performance’ of it in the register expected in academic peer-reviewed journals, I shall endeavour to navigate between the two, while trying to avoid a disservice to either.

Such a precarious line echoes Tim Ingold’s holistic conceptualization of linearity: ‘There is no division, in practice, between work and life. [An intellectual craft] is a practice that involves the whole person, continually drawing on past experience as it is projected into the future.’ [7]

A creative-critical practice that draws upon the proprioceptive/kinaesthetic has a long tradition – perhaps one of the oldest, if the palaeolithic transmedia of the Aboriginal Dreamtime ‘songline’ can be cited as a prototype. As Bruce Chatwin explored this was more than mere poetic embellishment, but intrinsic to a continued existence:

‘To survive at all, the desert dweller – Tuareg or Aboriginal – must develop a prodigious sense of orientation. He must forever be naming, sifting, comparing a thousand different ‘signs’ – the tracks of a dung beetle or the ripple of a Dune – to tell him where he is; where the others are; where the rain has fallen; where the next meal is coming from; whether if plant X is in flower, plant Y will be in berry, and so forth’ (Chatwin, 1987: 199)

Among the many who have walked this way before one could include Basho, John Clare, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, John Muir, Edward Thomas, Guy Debord, Richard Long, Iain Sinclair, Alice Oswald, Robert Macfarlane, Nan Shepherd, Rebecca Solnit, Anita Sethi, Jinni Reddy and many others. More contemporary indigenous creative engagements with landscape will be explored later in this article.

To follow in the footsteps of such exemplars is daunting, but walking has been central to my creative practice all of my life – it is simply where I draw the most inspiration from, let alone the physiological and psychological benefits to my well-being. I have discussed aspects of this previously (2020a; 2020b; 2018; 2015), but here I wish to focus on the creative mapping aspect. I will discuss in detail the project that occupied me throughout much of 2020, ‘The Herepath Project’, and how my practice intersects with other forms of altercartography.

‘Here Am Your Land’ – pushing the limits of the local

Moving to the Marlborough Downs late December 2019, I began exploring the area and found inspiration in the ancient landscape, one festooned with hundreds of Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age monuments. Poems and artwork began to emerge. I decided I wanted to ‘map’ the area subjectively through poetry and art – connecting nodes of significance to create a personal Wiltshire ‘songline’, a multimodal enquiry, which I entitled The Herepath Project. The project took on a whole new level of poignancy during the first national ‘lockdown’ (23 March-23 June 2020), when exploring one’s local universe was the *only* option. For a while the UK population was restricted to a government-sanctioned 30 minutes of outdoor exercise per day. I quickly appreciated how fortunate I was to live on the Downs, with miles of open countryside on my doorstep, where I could often walk for hours without bumping into anyone. Without needing to get in a car or cross any roads I was able to continue my mapping in short bursts. As news reports of draconian reactions to lockdown restrictions started to filter through [8] I defiantly pushed how far I could get in a day on foot, demarcating a loose 15-mile circle of territory. Constantly aware of the invisible lines of tension in pushing the extent of my regulated ‘exercise’, which although putting no one at risk, meant my excursions turned into something mildly transgressive. The apparent open space of the Downs suddenly seemed suddenly interlaced with barriers of permissiveness and exclusion – psychological barbed wire -- and the transgression of these can become a creative, iconoclastic act in itself, as Nick Hayes argues:

‘Trespass shines a light on the unequal share of wealth and power in England, it threatens to unlock a new mindset of our community’s rights to the land, and, most radical of all, it jinxes the spell of an old, paternalistic order that tell us everything is just as it should be.’ (2020: 364)

The best art occurs at the threshold of convention and taboo, and in the liminal spaces between forms, traditions, cultures – ‘edgelands’, as Farley and Roberts describe them (2011); the ‘ditch vision’ of Jeremy Hooker (2017); or the ‘wayside inspiration’ of writer-artist, Peter Please: ‘Look at the wayside – and it’s full of debris, tenacity and insects. I always felt there was a dream there.’ (1997:7)

There is a chilling moment in John Bowen’s cult folk

horror ‘Play for Today’, *Robin Redbreast* (MacTaggart, 1970), when the scriptwriter protagonist, Norah Palmer, who has ensconced to a seemingly idyllic cottage, becomes aware of the limits of her apparent freedom. When she expresses her desire to return to her home in London, her housekeeper, the formidable Mrs Vigo, declares in her thick dialect, ‘Here am your land’ [9]. Like the unnamed ‘Number Six’ in Patrick McGoochan’s *The Prisoner* (1967-68), it soon becomes clear there is no escape, and the ‘village’ is everywhere. And yet, creatively, the best art is often generated because of such constraints – in the ingenious acts of escape artistry rigid parameters impose.

My field research was often, literally, that: much of the Marlborough Downs consists of large areas of heathland. There are footpaths, bridleways, and farm tracks that crisscross it, but much of it is open access countryside where one can pick one’s own way, following a ‘hare-path’ (the Downs are one of the key habitats of the brown hare in Britain). I have frequently come across hares on my rambles, and sometimes I have followed them along a path until they finally jink off into the undergrowth. Other frequent companions are roe deer, who bound away across the fields on their own secret paths; and the Red Kites – a colony of which dwelt near my home. They often circled above me – once I was buzzed by a family of five or six. Skylarks provided an almost continual soundtrack in the fairer months. And the thrumming murmurations of starlings dipped, soared, and descended like a single mind. As Nick Hayes reminds us, ‘The notion that a perimeter should be impenetrable is a human contrivance.’ (2020: 19) By following the sheep-trails, deer-tracks, and badger runs I was finding my own smeuse-holes out of anthropocentric restriction and consciousness – a lycanthropic destabilisation found in the anamorphic utterances of the early Celtic poets, such as in the ‘Song of Amergin’ and ‘Hans Taliesin’; echoed in animist indigenous cultures around the world; and most recently brought into the public sphere by Toby Litt in his Radio 3 essay-poem ‘Becoming Animal’ [10], in which he ludically self-identifies with the hare to the point he seems to change shape and become one. It occurred to me in these peregrinations that a non-anthropocentric map of the land would be very different, based upon the trails of scent and spore, territories of hunting, mating and migration. It is only human hubris (and centuries of acquisition, enclosure, and accretion of property laws) that frames the natural landscape

from the perspective of Homo Sapiens, and then only of a certain class, gender and race (as the initiatives I'll discuss later critique). Certainly, walking amid an explicitly ancient landscape (glaciated dry valleys; terminal moraine; prehistoric monuments) expands one's consciousness diachronically into deep time, to the point that a journey through physical space becomes a journey through time, civilisation, and evolution – 'older, slower stories of making and unmaking,' as Macfarlane observes [11] – and also through language.

Etymology

The titular 'Herepath' of my project has an etymology and polysemous resonance that fascinates me, so here I will reflect briefly upon it. A *herepath* or *herewag* is a military road (literally, an 'army path') in England, typically dating from the 9th Century CE. This was a time of war between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of southern England and Viking invaders from Denmark. The English military preparations, conducted under the leadership of King Alfred of Wessex, included fortified burhs or places of refuge and interconnecting *herepaths* using either existing routes or new works. As superior or safer roads, sometimes following ridgeway routes, *herepaths* were intensely used by ordinary travellers and hauliers.

The prefix of *herepath* (*here*: OE 'armed host') can be found in compound words such as harbour (a burh with a garrison) and heretoga (a militia leader). The very name of the 11th Century resistance leader of the conquered Anglo Saxons, Hereward the Wake, echoes this: *here* 'army' and *ward* 'guard' (cognate with the Old High German name *Heriwart*). There exist cognates in other Germanic languages in forms such as *Heerweg* (German) and *Hærvejen* (Danish). All three languages imply a 'herepath' denoted a road that was a *via publica*, maintained at central government expense. In the Avebury area, the Herepath runs from the ramparts of the main circle up to the Ridgeway, and across the Marlborough Downs (past my backdoor) to the town itself. On the map it jinks namewise and is also referred to as the 'Harepath' and 'Green Street'. As a poet, 'herepath' has echoes of 'Hero-path' (inviting us to awaken our inner warrior: to be 'wake' like Hereward); and 'Herepath', commanding us to bring our attention back to the present.

All these ghosts and echoes of meaning fed into my choice of name for the project, and it became the

title of the poetry chapbook published at the end of that 'lockdown year' (*Herepath: a Wiltshire Songline*, 2020). An initial limited edition of 50 was printed. An expanded edition was planned as I continued to add more writing and sketches to my 'mapping' of the area, but these were included in a 2nd volume: *Station Stones* (2021), a collection of short stories and artwork reflective of my second 'lockdown' year in Wiltshire.

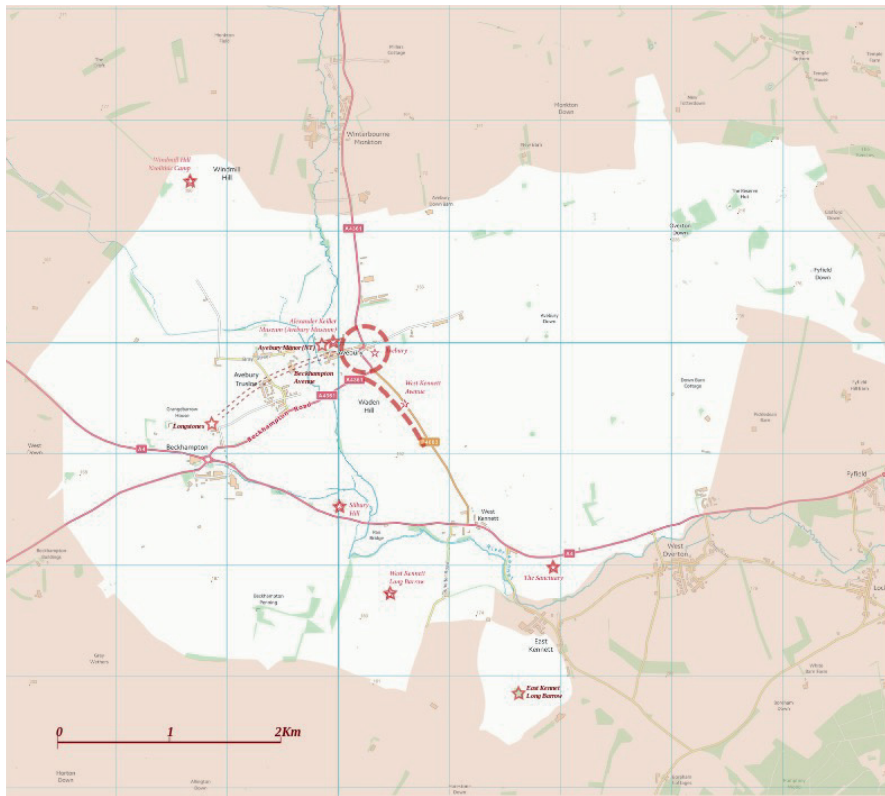
The Sites

My main purview is within the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Avebury, which comprises a complex network of Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age sites, including the main Avebury stone circle (the largest in Britain), Silbury Hill (the largest man-made mound in Europe), West Kennet long barrow, the Ridgeway (the oldest trackway in Europe), Windmill Hill (Neolithic causewayed enclosure), the Sanctuary (the remains of Overton stone circle), Fyfield Down (main sarsen field), and Hackpen Hill white horse, as well as the Herepath itself, of course, which runs from Avebury up to the Ridgeway, and on to Marlborough.

Key Sites & Further Routes

1. Avebury SU 1016 6993
2. Silbury Hill SU 1001 6853
3. The Avenue SU 103700
4. West Kennet SU 10456 67739
5. Windmill Hill SU 087714
6. The Sanctuary SU 118681
7. West Woods SU 1548 6629
8. The Devil's Den SU 1521 6965
9. Seven Barrows SU 118681
10. Hackpen Hill SU 127748
11. Barbury Castle SU 149762
12. Swallowhead Spring SU 101680
13. Fyfield Down SU 142710
14. The Polissoir SU 128715

My territory ranged wider than the parameters of the World Heritage Site, taking in West Woods (identified as the source of 50 of the sarsens of Stonehenge [12]), the dramatic earthwork of the Wansdyke which links sites overlooking the Vale of Pewsey (including Martinsell Hill, Knap Hill, Milk Hill, Tan Hill, Adams Grave, and Morgan's Hill), and the many impressive sites of the Ridgeway (Hackpen Hill, Barbury Castle, Liddington Castle, Waylands Smithy, the White Horse of Uffington). In late June, as lockdown eased, I extended my range further, by walking from my doorstep to Glastonbury (68 miles);



and then in July I undertook a long-distance walk I had been planning sometimes, linking Tintagel in Cornwall to Glastonbury Tor (a modern pilgrimage route I researched and mapped entitled 'King Arthur's Way', a distance of 155 miles). For the latter I created a website [13] and provided full details for the Long Distance Walkers Association [14] and The British Pilgrimage Trust [15], as well as designing a trail-marker. In doing so, I had in effect created a 223 mile long mythopoeic 'wildlife corridor' between my former home and Tintagel.

Now, from such a suitable viewpoint let us consider the theoretical field in more detail.

Unpacking Psychogeography

Psychogeography, in its broadest sense, has a long and fascinating tradition, although pinning down a definitive definition is surprisingly hard. Its pioneer, Guy Debord, never offered a substantial one beyond fleeting comments such as 'The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.' (Debord in Coverley, 2010: 10). Robert Macfarlane makes a better stab at it, "The exploration of cities and other landscapes by means of drift, play and randomly motivated walking, encouraging a re-imagining of familiar terrain.' (Macfarlane: 2019) Yet as a term it offers at best a 'fuzzy set' of practices. Although Debord claimed and colonised the term in post-war France (first in the Letterist pamphlet *Potlatch*, 1954; and

then from 1957 in numerous pronouncements via its evolution, the *Situationist International*) there are many antecedents, influences, and developments. In two distinctive traditions, one based in London (the Robinsonade) and the other in Paris (the Flâneur), leys of affinity can be gleaned: although as with Alfred Watkin's 1922 notion of the 'ley', how much is geographical serendipity, geomantic intentionality, or the projection and pre-occupations of the viewer is hard to say. In hindsight, viewed from the hill of the here-and-now, there seems to be a parallax *movement* emerging autochthonically from the labyrinths of London and Paris. Psycho-geographical commentators like to cite Daniel Defoe as the 'Godfather of Psychogeography' (when not citing Blake, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Machen, Poe, or Stevenson), with his *Journal of a Plague Year* (1722). Ur-texts like *Confessions of an English Opium-eater* (DeQuincey 1821), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson 1886), *The London Adventure* (Machen 1924), and *The Old Straight Track* (Watkins 1925) on this side of the English Channel; and the works of Baudelaire [16], and the Dadaists and Surrealists, Aragon's *Paris Peasant* [17], Breton's *Nadja* [18], and Soupault's *The Last Night in Paris* [19], act as reliable co-ordinates. Important outliers include Edgar Allan Poe's story, 'The Man in the Crowd' [20], James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the writing of Heinrich von Kleist and Heinrich Heine, extending the 'leyline' to Boston (Poe's birthplace if not the setting of his story), Dublin, Berlin, and Vienna. This anti-tradition has been perpetuated

via various literary *dérive* (Debord's term for his psychogeographical technique of drifting and qualia capture) by an irregular cohort of free radicals, including Walter Benjamin, John Michel, Iain Sinclair, Alan Moore, Peter Ackroyd, Patrick Keiller, and others. Notably, this *inshore drift* has been dominated by solitary (white) males and an obsessive focus on the urban. Fortunately, a counter-tradition to all this flâneury has welled up, as articulated in the writings of Rebecca Solnit (notably her 2000 history of walking, *Wanderlust*); Lauren Elkin's radical reclaiming of urban walking for women in the *Flâneuse* (2016); Philippa Holloway and the 'imaginary shoes' she put on to bring the world of her novel alive (2022), and in the work of Sonia Overall, who created a limited edition 'Drift Deck' in 2017, and wrote of her approach in *Heavy Time* (2021). [21]

Other variations or subsets include: 'mythography', 'deep topography', 'deep mapping' (as brilliantly expressed by Nan Shepherd in *The Living Mountain*, 1977), 'cyclogeography', and 'wayside inspiration' (a term the writer Peter Alfred Please coined in 1997 to describe his particular form of intimate travel-writing). I would add to this parameter space the *Immrama* (Celtic wonder voyages, e.g., the voyage of St. Brendan); and the New Nature Writing, which blends travel-writing and memoir into the long tradition in works like *Nature Cure* (Mabey 2005), *Waterlog* (Deakin 2011), *Edgelands* (Farley and Roberts 2012), *Wild* (Strayed 2012), *The Outrun* (Liptrot 2015), *Crow Country* (Cocker 2016), and *The Salt Path* (Wynn 2018). Robert Macfarlane's oeuvre almost deserves a category of its own – in tomes like *The Old Ways* (2012), *Landmarks* (2015), and *Underland* (2019) he deep dives into language and landscape with dazzling erudition and daring, in prose that glitters like mica. None of these later writers would necessarily claim to be psychogeographers, but there are important elements in their work – textual nutrients – which psychogeography needs if it is to continue and flourish. The thin soil of the capitol city is depleted, and the 21st Century *dérivant* (as I like to call those who choose to take psychogeographical roads less travelled) needs to look further afield for its seeds to thrive. Thus, I fashioned a rural *dérive*.

The Method

Since childhood I have been intuitively imbibing the genius loci of my favourite haunts, and throughout adulthood I have consciously sought

out places for their affect: predominantly rural places that have layers of prehistory, folklore, and literary associations. This ambience I have habitually captured in my notebook – in poems, reflective writing, and sketches. In more recent years this practice has coalesced into something more conscious, although you could say I have been formulating this approach all of my life. Sometimes it is closer to pilgrimage than psychogeography, and I have written about this elsewhere (2015; 2018; 2019; 2020c), but the latter is a more useful frame for our purposes here.

In 2019 [22] I devised a checklist of what I felt psychogeography needed to leave behind, and what it should 'pack' for further explorations. Much it applies to my approach in 'The Herepath Project'.

Leaving Behind

1. Capitols (London; Paris anyway...)
2. Solipsistic intellectualism.
3. The pontifications of the lone, white male.
4. Obfuscation and needless jargon.
5. A performance of erudition over a sincere, embodied engagement and strong sense of voice.
6. 'Wikipedia-lit' and *Rough Guide*
7. Self-importance (it's only going for a walk).
8. Maps (*Done with the compass, done with the chart*, Emily Dickinson).
9. Smart devices.
10. Footnotes, endnotes, a bibliography ('death-by-quotes').

Taking with Us

- A compassionate, curious gaze.
- A visceral, authentic response.
- The Flâneuse.
- A multi-dimensional form of exploration, one that is both diachronic and immediate, vertical as well as horizontal, outward as well as inward.
- Self-excitation – a form of travel through one's own history.
- Body writing – maps of the skin.
- Voices of the marginalized: the psychogeographies of indigenous peoples, BAME, LGBTQ+, Traveller culture, asylum seekers and refugees, working class, etc.
- An awareness and acknowledgement of the

challenges of the Climate Crisis, and the seismic destabilisation of the Anthropocene.

- Humility: a disavowal of omniscience.
- An ethical foregrounding. A responsible form of writing, sensitive to cultural appropriation. An exoticisation of the self, perhaps, but not the 'other'.
- Humour.
- Soulfulness: a *Psyche*-geography, rather than a *Psycho*-geography.
- Mindfulness (*mind in one's feet; mind in the pen*).

Of course, it would be difficult for any one person to embody, to hold in their awareness, all of these second positive attributes all of the time, but with such a hopeful hypothetical rucksack, let us resume our drift.

A Multimodal Practice

The *dérivant* by nature follows what Margaret Atwood calls the 'way of the jackdaw' [23], a kleptomaniac creative practice – stealing anything that suits along the way and adopting any trick or technique according to artistic whim. In recent years this has been reframed as something a bit more respectable: multimodality. In *The Multimodal Writer*, Josie Barnard defines what she means by a 'multimodal' writing practice:

'...a creative approach wherein the inter-relationships between and among a writer's decisions and different media and modes contribute to the production of meaning. A multimodal writer who has adopted a multimodal writing practice works to develop a personalised model of creativity robust enough to enable improvement of productivity and/or creativity in the face of fast-paced change.' (Barnard, 2019: 6)

I have certainly embraced this fully in the totality of my critical-creative practice, but in the context of

The mon that the hare i-met
Ne shal him neuere be the bet
Bote if he lei doun on londe
That he bereth in his honde—
Be hit staf, be hit bouwe—
And blesce him with his helbowe.
And mid wel goed devosioun
He shal saien on oreisoun
In the worshipe of the hare;
Thenne mai he wel fare.

the Herepath Project I adopted a more 'grassroots' approach, adapted to the *field*. Having a background in Fine Art, I found it instinctive (and deeply therapeutic in a time of global crisis) to weave sketching, painting, and photography into my project. The first two especially make you slow down and be fully present in the 'scene', to 'sit and stare', to repurpose W.H. Davies' famous line ('What is this life if full of care/ we have not time to stand and stare?' [24]). Photographs were used more as aide memoires, along with notebooks, for future qualia-retrieval. I sometimes made audio field recordings, such as the sound of wind on the downs. During one wild-camp I recorded the sound of my campfire, which I then incorporated into my podcast, 'The Golden Room' (episode #10, May 2020, 'Green Fire'), alongside readings of seasonal poetry and music. Part of my regular creative practice became a series of Twitter poems, which I posted under the hashtag '#DailyAwen' ('Awen' being a Welsh feminine noun signifying 'inspiration'), thus fusing ancient and modern traditions. It felt natural to range between forms in this way, another form of creative 'trespass' perhaps – a restless hybridity, which I see as intrinsic to my work.

Hedge-Springing: trespass and totemism

Perhaps a totemic personification of this 'restless hybridity' can be corralled from an early medieval poem related the 'names of the hare', most famously translated by Seamus Heaney. This early Middle English poem is preserved in a late thirteenth-century West Midlands trilingual miscellany written by an anonymous scribe for his own use [25]. It lists seventy-seven names, which in themselves, offer a kind of creative adrenaline high – a truly bardic volley of leporine eloquence. Among the many inventive epithets is 'hedge-springer', and that perhaps epitomizes best of all my creative-critical practice. The poem begins with a strange placatory ritual – the placing of an elbow on the ground followed by the reeling off this litany of tribute.

The man the hare has met
will never be the better of it
except he lay down on the land
what he carries in his hand—
be it staff or be it bow—
and bless him with his elbow
and come out with this litany
with devotion and sincerity
to speak the praises of the hare;
Then the man will better fare. [26]

The consequences of this word-spell are a new-found freedom, one that seems conceptual as well as physical – a *modus vivendi* as well as a *modus operandi* – which comes with the important caveat, ‘but only if you’re skilful too.’ Creative, academic, or ontological freedom can only be enjoyed if you sustain the embodied epistemic of the hare.

*When you have got all this said
then the hare’s strength has been laid.
Then you might go faring forth—
east and west and south and north,
wherever you incline to go—
but only if you’re skilful too.*
Heaney, ‘The Names of the Hare’ [27]

Other writers and artists have found inspiration in the spirit of the hare, such as George Ewart Evans (1972); Robert Macfarlane with his ‘spell-charm’ about the animal as featured in his project, *The Lost Words* (2017); and folk-singer and ethnomusicologist Fay Hield’s song ‘Hare Spell’ [28], which became the title of an audio drama [29] co-written with Terri Windling, Sarah Hesketh, and Sarra Culleno (2020). I myself first started to write about the hare in my enquiry into Bardic Tradition [30], where I shared my Taliesinic poem, ‘The Song of Gwion Hare,’ with the line: ‘That which is fixed, dies.’ (2010: 54). And now, living by the ‘Hare Path’ of the Herepath, and seeing brown hare frequently on my daily wanderings, I feel closer than ever to its energy. Throughout the third national lockdown of March 2021, I sketched the hare in various poses and guises, perhaps envying a little its wild freedom.

So, to the writing itself.

Examples of writing

To date, I have written around 40 poems inspired by my local landscape, 33 of which were included in the first edition of *Herepath*. Here are a couple of examples. The first was written in situ at Avebury stone circle early in lockdown. The sister UNESCO World Heritage Site to Stonehenge the massive neolithic complex (large enough to accommodate a pub, and several cottages) is usually a popular place for a walk on a sunny Spring day, and so the absence of people rendered it in an eerie light.

Avebury Alone

Avebury alone
on a day of sun,
the corvids are out in force
while the humans remain
Covid bound.
I sit in the centre,
back to the obelisk,
and bask in the photons.
The warp and weft of
wind and light.
One day the people
will gather here again.
They will form rainbow circles
share the air, the warmth
of an embrace. The stones
shall ring with song.

Sitting with my ‘back to the obelisk’ (the site of a 60ft high monolith, the centre of one of the two smaller circles, and locus of many of the seasonal ceremonies), I felt my pen provided a conduit for the stone stylus against my spine. Whether I tapped into telluric energies, or just my own subconscious, the experience proved inspiring. The act of writing ‘fixes’ the chthonic murmurings in the way St Michael lances the dragon (a recurring icon along the ‘St Michael Line’ – a geomantic alignment that is thought to run from St Michael’s Mount in Cornwall to Avebury). [31]

The pen pins the serpentine pulses of consciousness and phenomenological qualia to the page.

The next poem was also written early in lockdown, up on the Marlborough Downs a short walk from my home – the haunt of brown hares, red kites and absconding bards:

Up on the Downs

The sky holds you
in its bright blue bowl
—stops you falling into
the black.

The sharp Spring light
makes you squint,
but it scrubs clean your soul.

The skylark threads the air
with ribbons of song.

The wind at your back
is carded by thorns.

Ragged dags of cloud snag
in the corner of your eye
like dark thoughts of a
land locked down –

yet here you are free,
no drone shames you home.

In this poem even the act of writing felt mildly transgressive. Sitting outside in the middle of lockdown, I half-expected to be caught red-handed – like the walkers in the Peak District who were ‘drone-shamed’ or even, in some cases, fined for their apparent breach of UK government Covid-19 restrictions. [32] The poetic act became a form of self-emancipation and creative resistance.

I will now look at different forms of creative mapping – or songline making – from an indigenous perspective, as promised.

Counter-Mapping of the Zuni Map Art Project

An inspiring post-colonial counter-mapping initiative is the Zuni Map Art Project, based in New Mexico. This is led by Jim Enote, a Zuni farmer and director of the A:shiwi A:wana Museum and Heritage Center. In an inspiring film-essay by Adam Loftén & Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, (*Counter-Mapping, Emergence*, 2019 [33]), Jim introduces us to his project as we follow him on his daily rounds to his farmland, and centre, all within his ancestral homelands. His deep knowledge and respect for the land is evident, as he converses with his crops, ‘checking in’ on them, and pays homage to the elemental spirits. He observes ‘Modern maps don’t have a memory’ and ‘We limit ourselves if we only think of maps as two dimensional.’ To counter this, Jim explains how he has ‘...patterned languages that help [him] to remember how [to] get from one place to another.’ (ibid) This lexical cartography echoes the Aboriginal songlines, and like their Dreamtime art tradition, Jim has commissioned Zuni artists to paint their own memory maps of the landscape. These are maps that convey a subjective sublime – depicting

genius loci, important rituals, significant historic events, and culturally important figures within their community and tradition. Loftén and Vaughan-Lee describe how ‘The Zuni maps are an effort to orient the Zuni people, not just to their place within the landscape, but to their identity, history, and culture. The maps contain a powerful message: you have a place here, we have long travel[led] here, here is why this place is important. Through color, relationship, and story, the maps provide directions on how to return home.’ (ibid) To date, Jim has commissioned 30 of these maps, and more are being created and exhibited in his centre. Thereby the map-paintings become a resource for teaching new generations about Zuni tradition, while simultaneously providing a platform for their contemporary indigenous art scene (and vital income). The initiative is empowering, educational, and practical. Art can be an extremely effective tool in community development – a celebration of local distinctiveness and cultural identity. It can also be used to critique hegemonic discourse, and endemic bias, and facilitate essential framing of collective space. At the forefront of this is American writer Rebecca Solnit.

Regendering the City

In much of her work Solnit has questioned the heterodoxies of culture through her erudite enquiries into walking, art, literature, disaster capitalism, the climate crisis, and gender, although she admits in an interview with Emma Watson [34] to have ‘held back’ from adopting an overtly feminist critique in her early oeuvre – a reservation she no longer has. In her talk for the Creative Time Summit of 2013, ‘Art, Place, & Dislocation in the 21st Century City’, Solnit offered, ‘A Thousand Stories in the Naked City’, [35] which looked at how the naming of a city – its streets, buildings, public spaces – can imply certain power discourses, and how therefore a regendering of the city can be radical act that can shift consciousness. She discusses her project (and collaboration with geography, Joshua Jelly-Shapiro) to rename the stations on the New York Metro with women [36] – feminist icons, public figures, role models – and how this changed how her female students from Columbia felt when exploring the urban landscape. In her interview with Watson Solnit playfully suggested that Watson did the same with the London Underground, a project which the young actor has now instigated with the author, Renni Eddo-Lodge, who took to Instagram to ask: ‘If your local London Underground station was named after a woman, who would it be?’ [37] Such initiatives, especially when

devised in such an egalitarian way, enable citizens to redefine (remap) the landscape in which they live. This conveys ownership, and a rebalancing of power dynamics. The ongoing debate about the, often problematic, figures represented by public statuary – a debate that is perhaps understandably emotive, as witnessed by the debouching of slave-trader, Edward Colston, in Bristol harbour by Black Lives Matter protesters in the summer of 2020 [38] – shows how vital it is to consider the way we name, and frame our landscapes we live and work in. On International Women’s Day in 2020 I discovered on one of my local ‘lockdown walks’, an unidentified stone circle approximately thirty feet across, and comprising a ring of 19 stones. Returning to scrutinise my Ordnance Survey collection and sites such as The Historic England Archive [39] I could not find it listed on any map. I decided to call the circle ‘The Mothers’, in honour of the day it was ‘discovered’ and wrote a poem as a commemorative act. Although clearly a recent stone circle (an unrecorded number of these have been erected by geomancers, neo-pagans and prehistory enthusiasts since the 1970s, mostly on private land) I had incorporated it into my personal ‘mythscape’.

Songwalking

On a bright May morning in 2015, academic and folk-singer Elizabeth Bennett (Essex University), set off on the South Downs Way, a 100-mile long National Trail that runs between Eastbourne and Winchester. She sang songs along the way collected from the villages and villagers en route and researched from The Full English folksong archive [40] (hosted by the English Folk Dance and Song Society). This she subsequently developed into a paper and chapter (‘Amberley to Upper Beeding: A Parliament of Lines’) for her forthcoming book, *Performing Folk Songs: Affect, Landscape, and Repertoire*. Bennett explains how in her autoethnographic account notions of ‘lineage, heritage and inheritance’ weave into the affective sensorium of the experience: ‘Lines grow through this day’s walking, raising associations and questions of movement, wayfaring, social history, woven threads of stories, sensory perceptions of songs, singing as remembrance, evocative handwriting, and how these may contribute to processes of landscaping and world-making.’ (Twitter, 21st January 2021) Bennett’s approach echoes the songwalking I started to do, intuitively initially, when walking the West Highland Way in the Summer of 2015 – an experience I wrote about for *The London Magazine*

(‘Let the Mountain Sing Its Own Song’). Every year since I have undertaken a new long-distance walk, adding to what has become my own ‘Walker’s Songbook’ – an anthology of traditional ballads, sea shanties, pop songs, and protest songs designed to keep my legs moving.

Another initiative, using poetry rather than song, is the ‘Long Map’ of Claire Dean. Given as a paper at the MIX Conference 2017, Claire describes her ambient literature project: ‘A Long Map is a reimagining of the Persephone myth, a response to escalating carbon emissions, and a map that can be used to explore any city. As Persephone climbs higher – first to escape the underworld and then the city streets – the listener must climb higher to hear more of her story. I explore the role walking played in the conception, composition and design of A Long Map and suggest the development of Ambient Literature requires a bodily engagement with place, and that challenging writing habits can extend practice in exciting new ways.’ [41] (MIX Conference Programme, 2017). Both Elizabeth’s and Claire’s projects show how an embodied engagement with the landscape can produce creative work that is both site-specific, and a form of linear mapping.

Other Initiatives

Other inspiring counter-mapping initiatives, ones that often ‘hack’ the hegemonic discourses of the countryside, include ‘Black Girls Hike’ [42], founded in 2019, whose mission statement is to provide ‘a safe space for Black women to explore the outdoors. Challenging the status quo and encouraging Black women to reconnect with nature.’ They host nationwide group hikes, outdoor activity days and training events. A mirror initiative based in Yorkshire, ‘100 Black Men Walk for Health’ co-founded by Ghanaian journalist Maxwell Ayamba in 2004, led to an acclaimed play written by rapper Testament: ‘Black Men Walking’ [43]. The health initiative has many side-benefits – not only does it provide a safe space to talk about a range of issues, including mental health, it reclaims the landscape for all. A member of the walking group, Donald, a geography teacher, hopes that the project will allow “for the next generation of black people to feel confident to be out and about in the countryside in Britain, in a way we perhaps weren’t when we were their age”. And in early 2022 the walking group Muslim Hikers (founded during the 2020 lockdown on Instagram by marathon-runner Haroon Mota to encourage fitness and wellbeing) garnered support on social media after being initially trolled

when they posted photos of their group in the Peak District, and subsequently have become a popular affirmation of modern British Muslim identity. [44]

This (re)claiming of the British countryside is also occurring in nature writing, with the work of Anita Sethi (2021), Jini Reddy (2020), and Elizabeth-Jane Burnett (2019), among others. This is a much-needed redressing of endemic imbalances in the genre, in publishing, and in public life in general – but clearly much work is still needed to be done, and many are still resistant to this trend.

In a landscape shaped not just by millennia of agriculture, and industry, but also riven by the fault-lines of class, gender, and race, it is more important than ever to confront the uncomfortable legacies of the past, as historian David Olusoga eloquently points out. [45] One pioneering initiative is by Professor Corinne Fowler of the University of Leicester, who has spearheaded the Colonial Countryside project [46]. Corinne commissioned a team of ‘country house historians’ to work with 10 schools and 10 country houses, ‘to explore the global connections of stately homes: from heritage furniture and black servants to colonial trade. Pupils will communicate their discoveries and personal responses through personal essays, creative writing, and social media campaigns.’ This culminated in a book, *Green, Unpleasant Land*, published by Peepal Tree Press in 2020, and continues to generate debate in the media – debate that is often vituperatively oppositional from the Conservative press, showing how the project has clearly touched a nerve.

Urban spaces can also be reclaimed creatively, and a palimpsest of narratives captured, such as in ‘Hidden Stories’, an app [47] which enables users to explore the area (St Georges, Leicester). Using its locative technology, users can be led on a series of commissioned writer-trails through the rebranded ‘Cultural Quarter’, and read text inspired by its heritage in situ, as well as archive recordings of former residents, workers, and community members. A similar initiative continues in Birmingham, Overhear Poetry.

Other counter-mapping initiatives seek to map the entire country through poetry (Places of Poetry [48]); folk tales (Mythsmap [49]); or folk song (Songs of England [50]). While some, such as the English Heritage initiative, Songs of England, work with professional musicians, others allow members

of the public to upload their creative response to a particular site.

Sometimes, such counter-mapping can be used as a form of eco-activism (Slow Ways seeks to chart the hundreds of miles of public footpaths before they are lost); or mythopoeic instauration (as in my pilgrimage route, King Arthur Way; the Robin Hood Way, in Nottinghamshire; and the Twrch Trwyth Trail in Cwmaman, South Wales). No doubt other initiatives exist, many of which are artist-led, such as Louisa Albani’s ‘William Blake’s Mystic Map of London’ [51]. Creative mapping will continue as an essential radical act, revivifying both self and community.

My drift has brought me full circle back to where I began – where we all must – the ground beneath one’s feet: a sense of situatedness informed by a deep knowledge of the local, held lightly and always open to new influences and insights.

Over a well-earned pint I conclude my walk by reflecting upon what has been gleaned.

Conclusion

I began this enquiry by asking three questions, which I shall reflect upon here. Firstly, I asked can a creative engagement with cartography and landscape benefit the writer? Well, I can certainly confirm that is the case, speaking personally (and Cep Casey in *The New Yorker* discusses how the act of writing and the act of cartography have interesting parallels, and how writers have long been inspired by maps in various ways [52]). I continue to find fresh inspiration every time I step foot outside the door, and explore my local landscape a little bit more. New details continue to reveal themselves to me in these delvings, or as I like to call them: ‘soundings’. I feel my way through the landscape with a kind of artistic sonar. The fact that the chalk that I live and walk upon is comprised of the deposited bodies of innumerable sea creatures, and that the downlands are in fact a raised seabed, adds to this feeling. Secondly, I asked can confinement, or restriction push creative-critical practice in new directions, forcing the writer to respond creatively to the inherent challenges? Again, from a personal perspective I can confirm that to be the case. I had not planned my ‘Wiltshire songline’ when I first moved to the Marlborough Downs – the form emerged from the practice and was intensified by the strictures of lockdown. Like an artesian well, it manifested through the pressure

of place and circumstance. Finally, I asked can such an approach avoid the critiques of self-valorization, and romanticization that have been levelled against earlier nature writing? I hope so – certainly my awareness and intentionality is informed by Nan Shepherd's approach to deep mapping in the Cairngorms (1977). To precis her philosophy, you don't walk 'up' a mountain, but 'into' a mountain (the totality of the landscape is the mountain, not just the summit), and that you don't 'conquer' such a landscape, it 'conquers' you. Eschewing the emphasis on the peak experience, and on the tendency of many to turn the countryside into a backdrop for a cheap adrenaline fix, precipitous 'hero shot' or selfie, I've focused on the peaceful and reflective. Repeated walks in the same landscape reveal incremental changes, which a race through on a mountain bike rarely do. I have long believed that the best way to get to know a land is on foot, and that this pace of experiencing it provides the best medicine. The benefits to my wellbeing in having such a priceless resource on my doorstep, especially in a lockdown, have been immeasurable. As G.M. Trevelyan said: 'I have two doctors – my left leg, and my right.' [53] This connection between walking and well-being maybe obvious, but became increasingly important during the challenging years of 2020-2021. Several initiatives arose out of the government restrictions, including Walking Publics/Walking Arts, a project to promote 'walking, wellbeing and community during COVID-19'. [54] Creative works inspired by walking during lockdown were solicited for an exhibition, the

virtual #WalkCreate Gallery (launched November, 2021). The Herepath Project was included in the exhibition, and has also been featured in Storytown Corsham (a literary festival in Wiltshire) and Bardfest 2020 (an online spoken word celebration, which I initiated). As lockdown restrictions returned during 2021 I focused on short fiction inspired by my local universe, and put together a new collection, performing the stories orally at a series of local storytelling events I organised before committing them to the page.

To conclude, my self-styled creative mapping will continue in its own 'hare-brained' way. I could, if I felt so inclined, invent a label for such a methodology: *mythocartography* perhaps – because as a storyteller and writer of fiction I am particularly attuned to narratives of place (and where one does not already exist, I often have an urge to create one) – but such impressive-sounding terms (altercartography; counter-mapping; autocartography; mythogeography, et cetera) fall away in the phenomenological affect of the walk. Even words themselves seem ultimately to fade away in the susurrations of wind, the vast presence of the skies, and the clean line of the downs.

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