

Chapel Street or Wherever You Are

(Slides 1-4)

We are nearing the end of our Practice as Research PhD project, which is conducted entirely collaboratively. We are friends, and met in 2011 during our Masters. When we began our PhD we were interested in collaboration as a more genuine reflection of knowledge production, and we were interested in the imagination and interpretation, but we hadn't really established what we meant by this. As the end draws nearer, friendship has remained central to our approach throughout, and we are currently thinking about how friendship offers an alternative to an heteronormative neoliberal interpretation of care. Our research is focused on the performance of millennial precarity, drawing on our everyday experiences (of labour, housing, money). This is explored through our practice of performance writing, which often takes the form of zines, craft, sound recordings, DIY aesthetics - and walking. We are interested in the concept of hauntology and how this relates to myth and place making. Hauntology brings together both ontology (the study of being) and haunting (the not quite dead), in order to consider and question those things that might have been or may never be. We are particularly drawn to Mark Fisher's writing on this, in relation to precarity. We use hauntology as a means to discuss a sense of failure of the imagination in relation to precarity - a sense of trappedness and of a lost future, and we use performance writing as a means of accessing the imagination in an attempt to overcome this stuckness. Walking is often part of the process of devising, or of a way of being with friends, or of a way of thinking about our location.

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Chapel Street is one of a number of streets which join the City of Salford to the City of Manchester. Most of the times we have been to Chapel Street, it has been from the direction of Manchester. When you walk from Manchester to Salford, if you didn't know you were leaving one city to enter another you might think you were still in Manchester due to the proximity of the two. However, they do feel different: you leave one of the central areas of Manchester, a shopping district with bars and venues popular with footballers, walk down another road and are suddenly in an area that looks and feels different - something that sits between old and new.

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Chapel Street is long with only a couple of bends, is relatively wide, hugs the river Irwell, and has a mixture of residential buildings, pubs, and a number of culturally significant sites along the way. These include a gallery and museum (the site of which was once the first free public library in the UK), an abandoned pub where Marx and Engels are said to have drank, The Working Class Movement Library, a shop that sits between bulldozed buildings because the proprietor is protesting his business being knocked down in the name of regeneration and redevelopment (this has since been knocked down), the arts buildings of The University of Salford, and a meadow. In 2020 we had the loose plan to produce a series of performance scores that offered readers a way of exploring the area, a way of walking in this area, and a way of thinking about these locations. We planned this initially in response to a call out for performance works to take place as part of an arts festival called *Loiter*. Our proposal was not successful, but we decided to make this work anyway because we had begun to wonder about *why* Chapel Street resonated with us. Our interest in Chapel Street differs from the subjects of our other work: we visit there, we have a fondness for the area, and we have memories of being there and a vague awareness of the history of the area, but we do not live there, we do not work there, we are not from there, we are not part of the community, and the specifics of what goes on in Chapel Street have no bearing on our daily lives. However, through making an artwork about Chapel Street, we discovered that it is a hauntological site, and the history, present and future of this area mirrors what is happening at other locations across the UK.

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We initially approached this project by walking up and down Chapel Street and stopping at locations that we felt connected to. This was for a variety of reasons, primarily to do with our affective relationship with each location. Some locations we are familiar with because of stories we have been told when walking with the Manchester-based derive group, The Loiterers Resistance Movement (a collection of people who go on monthly wanders through the city, organised by the artist Morag Rose) - for example, where people have shared their memories of locations or have mentioned local narratives about the place. Some of the

connections we felt are because of memories of times we have been to Chapel Street before, in particular to specific pubs and the university buildings. We utilise some of our anecdotal memories in the artwork we have made. We then drafted performance scores about our chosen sites. The scores are loose instructions for the reader such as 'imagine your ideal window' or 'what will you keep forever? Why?'. Some of the scores read initially as more open than others. For example 'Count the blades of grass in an empty field' suggests a meditation exercise or thinking exercise or perhaps is resonant of Marina Abramović's training method (such as the *Cleaning the House* workshop), that encourages ways of being present. Other scores are more suggestive, such as 'What matters so much that you'll make it your last stand?'. Presented as a question, for us these more 'leading' scores are less meditative or thoughtful with regards to thinking about one's presence in the surroundings, and is more about recognising the impact of the changing landscape (or at least, noticing the changing landscape). Other scores are more specific as to a circumstance (such as 'Buy a friend a drink') and invite reflection on the connection between one's relationships and the environment, such as through how the street may make the reader recall memories of being with particular people. We suggest that these are potential ways the score cards may be read - or perhaps more accurately are some of the ways we have read the score cards.

We also did some light reading about the history of each chosen site, and although we were not concerned with making a history walk out of this project, we did end up making an audio tour that incorporated unverified historical information that we liked. We realised whilst making this audio element, as well as on repeated visits walking up and down the road, that part of what drew us to Chapel Street was a myth – in particular, the rumour that Marx and Engels drank on Chapel Street. We cannot remember where we first heard this story, but we enjoyed this rumour enough to explore this connection more. Ultimately, whether apocryphal or not, Marx and Engels now haunt our interpretation of Chapel Street.

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The work comprises thirteen business card sized printed scores; each are different. These cards are presented inside a black cardboard box that looks like a small jewelry box. There

is also a pamphlet with information about how to use the artwork; this pamphlet includes a QR code that readers can scan to access the audio component. There is also a map drawn on tracing paper, that labels each location (in correspondence to the audio tour), that can be placed over other maps, as a way to transpose the route to other locations.

The work has similarities with that of Wrights & Sites *Mis-Guide*'s, and may be likened to a mythogeographical exploration of the street as articulated by Phil Smith,

“mythogeography” has developed as a paranoid, exploratory, detective-like approach to space and place, deploying Tim Ingold’s model of hermetic-like excavation of ever-finer layers of geographical texture (see Ingold 1993). It has prioritised anomalies and “in-betweenness”, working in gaps, extolling “voids”, and constructing general ideas from the “and and and” of the accumulation and assemblage of disparate parts (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 554-6) (Smith, 2011: 268)

As such, each element of the artwork can be said to be adding a further layer to the geography of the street. We think of this audio component as ghostly. For other tourists (we return to this notion of being a tourist in a moment), perhaps those in particular who do not know Chapel Street or who are listening at other sites, the listeners' encounter with the area is filtered through our own voices. We position this as writerly, using Barthes description of how semiotic codes are used in such a way that meaning is not narratively ‘easy’. Where audiences have no tangible connection to Chapel Street, particularly if listening in other locations, the audience must make their own connections to the audio, in effect completing their version of the narrative. The idea of the ghostly here is one of suggestion, of being haunted by our experience of Chapel Street but not being defined by this.

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Chapel Street’s unique history encompasses left wing and union movements, and is inherently connected to the working class history of the area. For example, Peel Park is one of the first public parks in the UK, formed so that the local working class would have access to green space. However, this history now haunts the area as it has become a regeneration project, and there is a sense that its working class history (and present) is being removed. This is something we recognise from other locations we’ve visited and cities we have lived

in, such as Ancoats in Manchester and the Heygate estate in Elephant and Castle in London. We found that whilst the specifics of individual locations will differ from area to area, the street as a whole is recognisable across the UK as a regeneration project: somewhere in a state of change, somewhere whose history is being subsumed by the contemporary neoliberal agenda. Chapel Street is home to (for example) the Islington Estate, and we found when reading in the MEN (a local newspaper) about the regeneration of Chapel Street that there was concern that this was not for the local community on the Islington Estate. The concern is that the project is to bring in new residents, into new build houses and flats that the current residents cannot afford, and to provide amenities to accompany these new residencies, that again the current local residents cannot afford. As part of this process, older businesses that serve the local community are being forced to shut and are knocked down, and there is concern that the social housing and ex-social housing flats could be next. Whether this sense of what *might* happen does actually come to pass or not, the narrative is familiar - both the aspect of concern from the local community, and projects that oversee the building of new residencies creating uncannily similar building sites across UK cities.

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Streets that are in the process of regeneration are hauntological because of the ghost of the past, the nostalgia accompanying this, and the projection of imagined future residents. Chapel Street, to quote Derrida, “lingers in this transitory passage’ (1994: 29) between the past and an uncertain future. There is the potential experience of precarity for the local residents, and the uncertainty of building for a future that hasn’t happened yet. There is also the sense that the regeneration project isn’t building for the future at all, or at least not a future that serves most people - but rather is a way to create neoliberal growth, bringing the consequent precarity that this ensures. We find Jen Harvie’s definition of neoliberal useful here, ‘neoliberalism is the revived form of liberalism which thrived first in Britain in the seventeenth century and which recognizes and prioritizes the individual’s right to seek self-fulfillment and to do so in conditions unrestricted by state-initiated regulations, such as the requirements to pay appropriate taxes, to heed trade restrictions or to observe employment laws pertaining to hiring, firing and paying workers. In neoliberal capitalism,

these principals of diminishing state intervention and enhanced individual liberty to seek self reward work in the service of maximising private profit' (Harvie, 2013: 12).

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In the previous works we've made for this PhD research, we've reflected very much on our personal circumstances. We drew on our own house, our own workplaces, and our own feelings about these experiences. The difference when making work about and on Chapel Street, is that we do not inhabit this site in the same way. Whilst we do draw on our relationship to Chapel Street, a lot of what we conclude about it as a hauntological site, sits *outside* of our relationship to Chapel Street specifically. For example, when we make reference to how regeneration can lead to precarity for residents, we are aware this is not *our* experience there, as we are not those residents. Secondly, this is not a socially engaged practice, and so we want to be mindful that we are not trying to represent an experience that we have not researched or represent people who we have no relationship with; we don't have the authority to do that and we are mindful we are reflecting on a place that residents don't have this tourist relationship with, because for them it is home. We are essentially tourists in this site. And as such, our understanding of Chapel Street as tourists comes from how we recognise the impact of the neoliberal on Chapel Street, whilst being limited to drawing on our experience. Whilst the process in our Chapel Street work is different to the previous works, the outcome (the practice) is familiar.

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Our relationship to this work and the location, problematizes our position when writing about precarity. With regards to housing and labour, it has felt quite straightforward that the models available to us don't work for us but we are yet to imagine an alternative model. (and by 'we', we literally mean the two of us). When it comes to pockets of the city that resonate with us culturally, but that are undergoing change that impacts on the local community, we are now wondering how we might be contributing to other peoples precarity by consuming the things put in place as part of the regeneration project. We have not really remained as residents in a location long enough to understand the impact of being threatened out of our *long term* homes by rising costs, although we have had to move many times because of

rents rising in the areas we've lived in. Furthermore, it is likely that even when we are drawn to these gentrified sites, we will remain tourists in them, and not reside in them as we are pricing ourselves out of the market to live there - in contributing to a rise in prices through consuming the goods available. In writing up our reflections on the process of making this work, we are thinking more about what the role of artmaking might be in problematising these structures?

Some notes on collaboration:

We think of all our work for this project as collaborative. We include in this the people who interact with the work (we haven't gone into this in detail here but our approach is informed by Barthes, particularly the concept of the writerly). In both the practice and the thesis, we would find it hard to separate who's voice is who's, and there isn't any sense of ownership over the work, i.e that an idea was one persons. Collaborative PhD's are really rare in the UK and we were able to do it at Plymouth because of a precedent set by one of our supervisors (Lee Miller) who did the 1st collaborative performance PhD in the UK with Bob Whalley. As far as we are aware there is one other completed collaborative arts based PhD (Pil and Galia, at Goldsmiths), and there is another collaborative PhD happening at the same time as ours at Plymouth also, (Teri & James Harper - Baile). As far as we are aware, all other collaborative PhDs are between married couples, and this is the only one between friends. There were some logistical issues in having a collaborative approach accepted, partly because universities wanted to ensure that both parties are contributing equally, and there was some concern over how to examine this.