

A Poetic Playground:

Collaborative Practices in the Peak District

And so I give you this land,
the way you'd hold open a door
or offer someone else your hand.
I give you this land for play,
which means I give you time itself,
the close-kept summer days. (Helen Mort, from 'I Give You This Land', 2015, p. 11)

Introduction: A Literary Lacuna

Margaret Drabble's work of populist literary geography, *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature*, contains two maps, drawn by Ian Thomson, which highlight key literary locations in England, Scotland and Wales (Drabble, 1979). In the first of the maps, focusing on Wales and much of England, an inset provides the granular detail required to represent some of the multi-layered literary associations of metropolitan London; and, saliently, a second inset map is deemed necessary, overleaf, to geo-locate the literature of the Lake District on the map of northern England and Scotland. In Thomson's mapping of Drabble's vision of literary Britain, then, urban London and the rural Lakes are presented as sites of textual thickness. By comparison, the map of the literary Peak District is strikingly thin. This predominantly rural landscape - encircled by the major industrialised conurbations of Manchester, Sheffield, Nottingham, Derby and Stoke-on-Trent - is represented by just three locations: the stately home of Chatsworth; the tourist town of Matlock; and the village of Cromford, home of Richard Arkwright's pioneering cotton mill. Moreover, in contrast to the nearby Potteries and Sherwood Forest, the landscape of the Peak District is not even labelled on Thomson's literary map. It seems symbolically apposite, then, that this innominate, in-between territory is cartographically split in two as the map showing Wales and the southern part of England is spread across two pages in Drabble's book. That is to say, the mapping of the Peak District is fragmented, in *A Writer's Britain*, by the presence of both cartographic borders and the white space of the gutter margin. On Thomson's literary map of Britain, this landscape of geographical centrality is placed on both the cartographic and cultural margins.

This article explores how this surprising literary lacuna has been addressed by a range of contemporary writers who have transformed the Peak District into a site of poetic hyperactivity: a landscape of creative processes and practices; projects and poems of place. Paying particular attention to texts by Helen Mort, Mark Goodwin and Alec Finlay, the article contends that much contemporary Peak District poetry is underpinned by imaginative and formal experimentation: a shared commitment to the exploration of new ways of perceiving, practising and representing landscape which is characterised by a collective playfulness. Moreover, the article argues that much contemporary Peak District poetry is shaped by collaboration as the poets placed under critical scrutiny share a preoccupation with finding new creative methodologies to articulate the communal experience of being-in-landscape.

Layering Landscapes: the Lake District and the Peak District

To begin contextualising contemporary poetic accounts of this surprisingly under-represented terrain, I want to offer some initial comparisons with the Lake District: a comparison which informed by personal interest, experience and geographical situatedness. Having spent over fifteen years living in and close to the Lake District National Park, my embodied and cultural engagements with the Peak District are inevitably framed by my deeper familiarity with Cumbria's material topographies, spatial histories and literary geographies. An acknowledgement of this interiorised process can be critically contextualised by the move towards moments of creative self-narration to be found in some cultural geographical research (Wylie, 2005; Pearson, 2007; Jones, 2015). As John Wylie has pointed out, 'studies of landscape informed by phenomenology', for example, 'have begun to find ways in which to shuttle between "embodied acts of landscaping" and issues of power, memory and identity' (Wylie, 2013, p. 61). Such methodologies allow for the self-reflexive braiding of abstract theorising and personal reflection. Moreover, such methodologies allow for the way all landscapes are encountered with the spectral presences – the individuated memories and cultural associations - of other terrains shaping the geographical imagination of the perceiving subject. When walking through and/or thinking about the Peak District, therefore, I invariably find myself comparing the landscape and its literature with the topography and texts of the Lakes. Crucially, though, this imaginative 'shuttling' between two landscapes is not exclusively predicated on egocentrism. According to Wylie, autobiographical

geographical practices ‘*can*’ transcend the limitations of first-person introspection by enabling ‘the forging of connections with wider cultural, historical and political questions regarding the constitution of landscapes’ (Wylie, 2013, p. 61). As a result, reference to the culturally over-determined landscape of the Lakes may be based on personal identity and memory; but, at the same time, the process places the relative textual blankness of the Peak District in sharp relief and raises questions about the respective ‘constitution’ of the two most visited National Parks in the United Kingdom.

The spatial histories and cultural geographies of the Lake District have been shaped by ideas of exceptionalism and homogeneity. Geographically semi-detached from the rest of England, this singular landscape has been imaginatively constructed as ‘a Hyperborean elsewhere’; a sequestered space which the traveller self-consciously enters in order to escape from ‘the industrial north’ (Davidson, 2005, p. 224). It is also, in the popular imagination, a region that is unified by a landscape that is ‘uniformly northern’: ‘bare summits, shelving valleys with the smooth land of cultivation stretching only a little way up the slopes from the valley bottoms’ (Davidson, 2005, p. 224). William Wordsworth was responsible for codifying such tropes through his high Romantic landscape character assessment ‘of the country of the Lakes in the North of England’ in the *Guide to the Lakes* (Wordsworth, 2004, p. 43): a difficult-to-categorise book which had a profound influence on the development of both the National Trust and the Lake District National Park (Bate, 1991, p. 47). Wordsworth can be similarly cited as generating a place-specific literary culture which has been commonly associated with both preservationist discourses and the cult of the lone, male writer. That is to say, although British Romanticism was founded on the social networking, creative collaborations, experimental poetics and radical politics of the Lake Poets (De Quincey, 1970), the lasting cultural legacy in the Lakes has been the image of the Wordsworthian solitary-in-landscape. It is a legacy which can be traced – in various ways and to varying degrees – in the writings of some of the region’s major post-Romantic landscape writers, including John Ruskin, Norman Nicholson, Alfred Wainwright and even James Rebanks (Albritton and Albritton Jonsson, 2016; Curry, 1994; Palmer & Brady, 2007); Rebanks, 2015).

The Peak District, on the other hand, is an area whose topographical diversity is integral to its spatial identity; and, in contrast to the Lakes, no major writer has attempted to force such landscapes to cohere within a grand geographical narrative. The most famous topographical contrast is that between the open moorlands and hard gritstone of the northerly Dark Peak (or High Peak) and the Carboniferous limestone uplands and deep dales of the White Peak in the

south of the area. Yet this dualistic model is complicated by the rich coalescence of natural beauty and industrial archaeology in the Derwent Valley; and the borders between the urban and rural are shown to be fuzzy, in the east of the region, as the suburban outskirts of Sheffield interpenetrate with the largely enclosed uplands of the Dark Peak's Yorkshire fringe. The importance of this diversity is explicitly acknowledged by the National Park Authority in their endeavour to encapsulate the essential 'character' of the entire area: 'The Peak District National Park contains an amazing variety of landscapes including broad open moorlands, more intimate enclosed farmlands and wooded valleys. This variety of landscapes is one of the reasons the area was designated as a national park' (Peak District National Park Authority, 2013). Heterogeneity similarly defines the administrative management of the social space as, although much of the Peak District lies in northern Derbyshire, the National Park also incorporates parts of Staffordshire, Cheshire, Greater Manchester and Yorkshire.

Moreover, the spatial history of the Peak District has been shaped - partly as a result of its geographical location at the centre of a chain of major conurbations - by a sense of socio-spatial sharedness. As in the Lakes, the idea that movement through these landscapes can provide restorative respite from the ills and temptations of urban life has provided a persistent and pervasive narrative; yet communality, rather than solitariness, has provided the dominant spatial motif. The notion of the Peak District as a shared social space is most obviously illustrated in the famous Mass Trespass of Kinder Scout in April 1932: a militant assertion, as David Matless points out, 'of a right to walk on moors closed by owners for shooting, a weekend movement from below, socially and topographically' (Matless, 1998, p. 71).

Matless rightly warns of the need to remain wary of placing 'preservationists and political rambles' in absolute juxtaposition as, ultimately, both groups 'offered parallel arguments for [rural] walking' as a 'moral practice' (Matless, 1998, p. 71). Yet, in the popular geographical consciousness, the Lake District has come to be associated with an imaginative conservatism through which this culturally privileged rural space is figuratively bounded from the rest of England; whilst the Peak District, largely due to its central landlocked location, has become inextricably indexed to a more progressive form of spatial politics.

Imaginatively, then, the Lake and the Peak Districts represent very different landscapes for the contemporary writer. Writing in 2005, Robert Macfarlane warned that: 'Any writer who takes the English landscape as his subject faces the problem of precedent [. . .] There is nothing original, nothing primary, to find again' (Macfarlane, 2005). This 'problem' is especially heightened for Lake District landscape writers. For example, even James

Rebanks's *The Shepherd's Life* - a self-consciously authentic 'story of a family and a farm' (Rebanks, 2015, p. xviii) – traces the author-farmer's shifting attitude towards Wordsworth: the area's overbearing dominant literary presence. For the contemporary landscape writer, therefore, the Lake District is a thickly – and often problematically – intertextual space. Although, as the map in *A Writer's Britain* illustrates, the Peak District lacks the textual over-determination of the Lakes, it would be erroneous to assert that its landscapes are characterised by a complete absence of literary representation. D. W. Shimwell, for instance, sketches 'the cumulative literary image' of the region (Shimwell, 1981, p. 33) and indicates that a poetic map of the Peak District – to turn to the literary form which is of particular interest in this article – would feature texts by, amongst others, Michael Drayton, Thomas Hobbes, Charles Cotton, Lord Byron and Edmund Blunden. Wordsworth would also necessarily figure as a result of his fleeting recollection of 'romantic Dovedale's spiry rocks' in Book VI of the 1850 edition of *The Prelude* (Wordsworth, 1995, p. 219). Yet, in contrast to the Lakes, there is not a bewilderingly extensive body of place-specific texts to which landscape writers might feel culturally pressured to respond. As a result, whereas post-Romantic Lake District writers have been frequently burdened by 'the problem of precedent', contemporary poets have been able to perceive the heterogeneous landscapes of the Peak District as up for literary grabs.

The Peak District: Poetry, Place and Play

To begin thinking about the ways Mort, Goodwin and Finlay have attempted to occupy this imaginative space, it is important to acknowledge the landscape writings of Roy Fisher and Peter Riley. Born in Birmingham in 1930, Fisher famously declared a Wordsworthian commitment to the urban landscape of his childhood when he baldly asserted: 'Birmingham's what I think' (Fisher, 1994, p. 11). In 1982, however, Fisher moved to the moorland hamlet of Upper Hulme on the Staffordshire-Derbyshire border; and, a few years later, he relocated to the outskirts of the village of Earl Sterndale in the Upper Dove Valley. As Sean O'Brien points out, Fisher has regularly applied 'the same methods of enquiry [for thinking about his native city] to a different landscape: hills, ridges, farmlands and old industrial sites' (O'Brien, 2011). Peter Robinson argues, then, the 'slogan-idea [. . .] "Birmingham's what I think with"' is perhaps better understood as 'a metaphor and synecdoche for the poet's way of processing *any* [my italics] landscape' (Robinson, 2013, p. 214). Ten years younger than

Fisher, Riley has long been associated with the Cambridge School of avant-gardist poetry and, at the time of writing, lives in Hebden Bridge in the Yorkshire Pennines. Much of his writing, however, has reflected the fact that he lived, for almost a decade, in the Peak District; and, for Eric Falci, Riley's 'continuing series of Midland and Northern topographies [. . .] may end up constituting the most significant engagement with location and landscape in twentieth-century British poetry' (Falci, 2009, p. 208).

The poetry of both Fisher and Riley is sensitive to the complex convergences, coalescences and contradictions which characterise the surface and subterranean, contemporary and historical, real and imagined landscapes of the Peak District. Here, however, I want to draw attention to how a shared preoccupation with concepts and practices of play and playfulness feeds into their respective Peak District poetics. Both writers document the Peak District as a lived, worked, scarred landscape of permanent communities; but, at the same time, they remain mindful of its status, for many, as a space of active leisure. Connected with this, their writings are underpinned by the knowledge that, although the experience of landscape is communal, the perception of landscape is always, inescapably individuated: a knowledge which, in turn, informs the surrealist visions which can be traced in their respective accounts of the area's topography. A sense of playfulness is similarly evident in formal experimentations as both poets regularly eschew rigid structures and conventions in the attempt to encapsulate, through the arrangement of the poem on the page, the impossible-to-frame messiness of landscape.

Fisher's heterodox engagement with the landscapes of Staffordshire and Derbyshire can be found throughout his collected poems (Fisher, 2005); and a formal playfulness is evident in Riley's meditation on the imbrications of landscape poetics and politics in *The Ascent of Kinder Scout* (Riley, 2014). This shared interest in play and playfulness, however, is perhaps best illustrated by *Alstonefield* (Riley, 2003): a long poem, centring upon the titular Derbyshire village, which Neal Alexander has praised as 'Riley's most sustained and successful engagement with the poetics of place' (Alexander, 2013, pp. 133-34). As Alexander points out, a 'keen awareness of the interpenetrations of natural, agricultural, urban and industrial spaces characterises Riley's representations of the Peak District': a landscape which is simultaneously distanced from, and inextricably embedded within, 'the excesses of late capitalist modernity' (Alexander, 2013, p. 136). In *Alstonefield*, such tensions are unconcealed through the central conceit of noctambulism: a practice that results in a

restlessly meandering landscape poem which Andy Sanderson describes as ‘a digressive meditation on this and that’ (Sanderson, 2005).

The sense of serious play which is threaded through *Alstonefield* is foregrounded in the Preface which consists of excerpts from two letters to Tony Baker. In the first note, Riley self-mythologises an overnight stay in the village recalling how he ‘began to think of the place as an arena, a theatre of outrageously manipulated light in which the soul puts on a show for the people’ (Riley, 2003, p. 1). Such images of play and playfulness, performance and performativity, are scattered through both letters and lay the imaginative foundations for the rest of the topographical text. Saliently, Riley asserts that the practices and tropes of play and playfulness emerged organically from the landscape itself: ‘It had to be like that, it had to be a performance’ (Riley, 2003, p. 2). For Riley, playful performativity is the only imaginative response to a landscape which is characterised by contradictory tensions: ‘An upland pastoral community run by machines; a weekend break zone for the wild soul which betrays refused planning permission at every turn; sublimity locked into sordidness on the high pastures’ (Riley, 2003, p. 2). That is to say, poetic playfulness is deemed to be the only imaginative strategy for approaching a landscape which resists categorical frameworks of perception and understanding. In the remainder of this article, I will build upon these ideas to suggest that a younger generation of poets – Mort, Goodwin and Finlay – are following in the footsteps of Fisher and Riley to think, in varying ways, about the Peak District as a site of play and playfulness. Moreover, I will argue that these writers are redefining Peak District poetry through a common commitment to collaborative projects and practices.

Connecting: Helen Mort’s *Made in Derbyshire* and the Practice of Everyday Life

Helen Mort’s debut collection, *Division Street*, was published in 2013 and, in the following year, she was named as one of the Poetry Book Society’s Next Generation Poets. Mort, then, is a poet who is situated within the so-called ‘mainstream’ of the contemporary poetry scene; a writer whom *The Telegraph* labelled as ‘the leading poet of her generation’ (Runcie, 2014). From 2013 to 2015, Mort was also Poet Laureate for Derbyshire: a public role – funded by Derbyshire County Council - which involved ‘two years traversing the county from New Mills to Swadlincote, giving workshops, readings and creating new commissioned poems’ (Mort, 2015, p. i). One of the material products of this Laureateship was *Made in Derbyshire*: a volume of *Laureate Poems*. As the biographical note explains: ‘Helen Mort was born in

Sheffield and grew up in Chesterfield. She has lived in many places, but she's always drawn back to the Peak District where she writes, runs and climbs' (Mort, 2015). Immediately, therefore, this paratextual information presents Mort as a poet who is inextricably emplaced within this particular landscape. In a Wordsworthian sense, the Peak District is portrayed as the environment of the poet's physical and imaginative growth; but, crucially, emphasis is simultaneously placed on her continuing, quotidian embodied practices within and across this terrain. The Peak District, then, remains the landscape of Mort's always emerging present.

Given the county-wide brief of the scheme, some of Mort's Laureate Poems inevitably focus on places which fall outside the boundaries of the National Park; but many other poems in *Made in Derbyshire* draw the reader's attention to landscapes and communities within the Peak District. The collection begins with the five-couplet title poem in which Mort lists some of the sites and features which habitually attract 'the tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990): from Derbyshire Blue John to Mam Tor; from 'leather at Lennon's at Stoney' to 'the tarts that Bakewell refines' (Mort, 2015, p. 1). In the final line of the poem, though, the focus shifts from the exterior Peak District landscape to the interiority of the first-person speaker: 'I can't make these hills, but these hills made me' (Mort, 2015, p. 1). The collection's foundational poem, then, ends with an unapologetically neo-Romantic reflection on how the lyrical 'I' has been shaped by the material and cultural landscapes of the Peak District. As the reader progresses through *Made in Derbyshire*, however, acts of sharing, communicating, supporting and holding emerge as dominant motifs; the focus moves away from the individual self-in-landscape, therefore, to establish images and tropes of physical and socio-spatial connectedness. Moreover, these images of connectedness are inextricably entwined with images of play: the Peak District is presented as a site of carnivalesque summers visually defined by well-dressings and 'ribboned' streets (Mort, 2015, p. 1); it is an environment in which groups of readers collectively enter fantasy worlds via the imaginative portals of public libraries (Mort, 2015, pp. 19-20).

Symbolically, Mort's sensitivity to the way the 'cultural landscape is shaped by a colloquium of voices' is reflected in the playful organisation of the collection's textual space (Matless, 2014, p. 219). *Made in Derbyshire* opens with a series of first-person poems in which the reader is not discouraged to identify the lyrical 'I' with the authorial voice. On page 14, however, this seemingly stable pattern is disrupted by a sequence of 'Seven Group Poems' which have been brought-into-being via creative writing workshops – with both school groups and older writers - held within the Peak District and other locations in Derbyshire.

The stable 'I' is dissolved, in the first of these poems, with the inclusion of an authorial footnote which explains the poem's genesis: 'By Linda, Mary, Jo, Margaret, Helen, and Michelle, with a bit of help from me' (Mort, 2015, p. 14). Clearly, this self-deprecatory note contains the residual trace of a creative hierarchy. The poet's voice, however, is democratically subsumed within the collective; hers is simply one voice amongst many. By extension, the landscape emerges, in these group poems, as a communal environment for the unfolding of a range of habits and practices, memories and affects: the 'colours of Spring' prompt a collective return outdoors (Mort, 2015, p. 14); the ever-evolving built environments of towns and villages are conceived (Mort, 2015, p.15 & p. 17) as sites of 'group belongingness' (Tuan, 2004, p. 40). The 'Seven Group Poems', then, embody the idea that the articulation of the shared experience of landscape might benefit from a commitment to a polyphonic and collaborative form of poetic.

A shuttling between exteriorised sociability and interiorised self-reflexivity is evident throughout *Made in Derbyshire* but is perhaps most apparent in 'Poem for Careline' with which the volume is brought to a close. As Mort explains, this poem was commissioned to mark the tenth anniversary of Hathersage Careline: 'a free telephone befriending service that works to improve the welfare of people who are elderly, isolated, frail, disadvantaged or disabled in the Hathersage and Outseats area' (Mort, 2015, p. 40). The text begins with the first-person speaker reflecting on the silence that remains following the termination of a telephone conversation; but saliently, through that silence, the speaker is able to access the layers of the local soundscape:

Through silence, I can hear the Derwent run,
the pat of new rain drawing near,

the call of a curlew from the moor
or climbers clinking high on grit,

the squeak of every opened village door,
the pool as a swimmer ripples it. (Mort, 2015, p. 35)

Here, the speaker is alert to the more-than-human sounds generated by and within the local landscape: the running river, the falling rain and the calling curlew. At the same time, the speaker is aurally sensitive to the sounds generated by the human practices of climbing and swimming as the gritstone moors above the village are understood and represented as a site of

leisure activity. Moreover, Hathersage – a Dark Peak village which ‘is the “Morton” of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*’ – is heard, through the white noise created by unopened doors, as a location of everyday dwelling (Banks, 1975, p. 189). ‘Poem for Carline’ moves out from these environmental particularities to meditate on the ‘art’ of listening, with the poem – and thereby the collection – climaxing with a reaching-out to the anonymous caller who is no longer at the other end of the line: ‘Together we can listen twice as well / and double what this landscape tells’ (Mort, 2015, p. 35). At the last, then, Mort builds upon her previous presentations of the Peak District as a site of playful phenomenological practices and quotidian communality to suggest that a shared openness to, and immersion in, the local acoustic ecology will enrich the experience of landscape. By extension, the collection ends on a note of hope as Mort suggests that this collaborative process might reveal the psychologically restorative potentiality of place.

Climbing: Mark Goodwin’s ‘River Through Names’

In *Made in Derbyshire*, Mort makes only fleeting references to the Peak District as a landscape for climbers; but, elsewhere, her own experiences as a climber feature prominently within her landscape poetry (Mort, 2016). A preoccupation with the Peak District as a playground for the climbing body can be similarly traced in the experimental writings of the Leicestershire-based poet, Mark Goodwin: a writer whose ‘startling poems’, according to Macfarlane, make him one ‘of the most interesting poets, to my mind, currently writing’ (Macfarlane, 2011). Drawing upon his own practices of walking, climbing, balancing and strolling (Goodwin, n.d.), Goodwin playfully explores how the visual appearance of the poetic text upon the printed page can go some way towards encapsulating the felt, fleeting and fragmentary experience of landscape. At the same time, however, Goodwin’s poetry is productively destabilised by the anxiety that language is ultimately incapable of encapsulating the phenomenological experience of being-in-landscape: an anxiety which results in the development of a landscape poetry in which ‘words begin to split and splinter into their linguistic components or energy compounds’ (Tarlo, 2011, p. 10). Goodwin’s practices as a landscape poet also take him beyond the page as he regularly produces sound-enhanced poems based on the exploratory use of field recordings and digital software.

‘River Through Names, Chee Dale’ is a poem which emerged out of creative collaboration and which encapsulates the formal experimentation of Goodwin’s landscape poetics on the

page (Goodwin, 2011). The fluvial focus is on the Wye: the limestone river which flows, from its source on Axe Edge Moor, between Buxton and Bakewell, before passing Haddon Hall en route to its confluence with the Derwent at Rowsley. Visually, the long, narrow form of the poem reflects the liquidity of the river: the varying line lengths replicate the protean progression of the Wye; the short – often single word - lines placed in the centre of the white page encapsulate the modest fragility of a river which, in this particular valley, is sandwiched between vertiginous limestone cliffs. In terms of content, it soon becomes clear that the poem is concerned with landscape change and, more specifically, the drying of the Wye:

[. . .] it's done
 its job it's
 carved those
 cliffs out
 it's now
 a slug
 gish milk
 y grey some
 years it's
 barely
 there [. . .]

This extract exemplifies Goodwin's technique of cutting up individual words to unsettle the reader's preconceptions of both the habitual use of language and, by extension, the physical landscape which it is being used to describe. The splitting of single words over line endings, combined with the absence of punctuation, compels the reader's eye to continue drifting down the page; but the carving up of quotidian words (for example, 'milk/ y') continually disrupts this rhythmical flow as we are pulled up short by the intrinsic strangeness of the typographical arrangement. The result is a reading experience which is characterised by fluidity but which is punctuated by moments of playful defamiliarisation: a reading experience which, in turn, replicates the stop-start course 'of this thing [the Wye]/ that is still/ flowing' through the landscape. In this formally adventurous poem, the riverscape of Chee Dale is both reassuringly recognisable and disorientatingly strange.

For the most part, though, the geographical gaze in 'River Through Names, Chee Dale' is vertical, rather than horizontal, as the first-person speaker looks up at the limestone cliffs

through which the Wye has carved its path. In thinking vertically, the perceiving subject begins to name:

Call to Arms,
Nemesis, Cry
of Despair,
Naïve & Sent
imental Lover

This toponymical poetry has been brought-into-being by extreme bodily play as each name refers to a buttress which has been climbed and subsequently – and triumphantly - labelled. The limestone cliffs, therefore, have become textualised topographies; the climbers have imprinted their own word maps onto the sheer surfaces. Crucially, however, the first-person speaker is deeply sceptical of the masculinist discourse - or ‘mach/o bol/ locks’ - embedded within climbing culture: a culture which is predicated, in the speaker’s terms, on ascending, ‘sub/ duing’, ‘winning’ and, of course, naming. Symbolically, he reflects on personal experience to declare that his preferred physical practice in this landscape was ‘sports climbing’: ‘a low risk but extremely gymnastic form of rock climbing’, as Goodwin points out in an explanatory endnote, ‘that makes use of pre-placed protection in the form of bolts drilled into the rock’ (Goodwin, 2011). The speaker, then, recalls how he self-consciously rejected what he perceived to be the egocentric practices and discourses of climbing-as-conquering in favour of a mode of playing-in-the-landscape which necessarily relied on the procedures of those who have gone before. The joy of sports climbing, for the speaker, was predicated on ‘per/ fecting technique / & move/ ment to/ wards an i/ deal’ (Goodwin, 2011). It was a playful performance which allowed him to reflect on his own corporeality and the haptic knowledge produced by the ‘inter/ action with/ this thing/ with this/ bone-grey/ stone’ (Goodwin, 2011). By retracing the movements of previous practitioners, and by ‘interacting’ with the limestone surface, the speaker’s bodily play was founded upon ideas and experiences of connectedness rather than self-aggrandising exceptionalism.

‘River Through Names, Chee Dale’ was written as part of *The Seven Wonders*: an ambitious project in which the landscape painter, Paul Evans, and several poets offered visual and textual responses to Peak District sites celebrated in Thomas Hobbes’s 1636 ‘journey poem’ (Edwards, 2012), *De Mirabilibus Pecci: Being the Wonders of the Peak in Darbyshire*. As

Evans explains, the commission prompted a heterogeneous range of collaboratively creative responses:

[. . .] in some cases the writing has evolved out of the poets' direct responses to the landscape, in others the response has been mediated through experience of the paintings as 'work in progress' or through historical research. A number of the paintings respond as much to the poetry and the ideas within the texts as they do to the landscape features themselves. (Evans, 2014).

The project was unusual for the Peak District in that it was predicated on a hyper-awareness of the intertextuality of place. For the most part, however, the contributors were not imaginatively stifled by the felt need to reflect exclusively on the power and/or limitations of Hobbes's 'early modern preoccupation with the marvellous in nature' (Edwards, 2012, p. 2). Instead, the commission was primarily used as a platform for exploring, through collaborative processes, the more general conviction that an understanding of landscape invariably emerges out of an impossible-to-disentangle fusion of perceptual and cultural experiences and practices. At the end of Goodwin's 'River Through Names, Chee Dale', it becomes evident that the self-reflexive investigation of different collaborative processes has, in fact, been central to the way this landscape poem has been brought-into-being. 'River Through Names, Chee Dale' is not a straightforwardly ekphrastic poem in which the writer offers a textual response to an extant pictorial representation of the landscape; but, rather, this landscape text has emerged out of a casual conversation between painter and poet. As Goodwin explains: 'This poem consists largely of transcription from an interview with Paul Evans in his studio' (Goodwin, 2011). At the end of the poem, then, the questions proliferate. What was the precise process through which the conversation provided the basis for a poem? What is buried behind Goodwin's use of the equivocal adverb 'largely'? More fundamentally, whose poem is this? As Macfarlane has highlighted, Goodwin's poetry is characterised by the 'aggressive' dismantling of the lyrical 'I' which dominates the tradition of landscape poetry (Macfarlane, 2011). Here, in 'River Through Names, Chee Dale', the use of the first-person *is* in evidence; but the explanatory note destabilises any readerly sense of an identifiable, fixed self-in-landscape. Ultimately, then, a poem which is superficially concerned with bodily play in the Peak District is equally preoccupied with the exploration of a playfully conversational landscape poetics.

Mapping: Alec Finlay's *white peak / dark peak*

The creative potential afforded by dialogic exchange is also central to the final textual example: *white peak / dark peak* by the Edinburgh-based writer and artist, Alec Finlay. Funded by Derbyshire Arts Development Group, *white peak / dark peak* is founded on the composition of '70 poems – or *renga-view*, so named because they are composed in the traditional Japanese linked-verse form, *renga*, and each belongs to a place to see from, or to, a *view*' (Finlay, 2010, n.p). The result is the creation of 'a *word-map* of the Peak District': a form which Finlay defines as, simply, 'a descriptive poem of location' (Finlay, 2010, n.p). As the reader turns the pages of the catalogue, then, he or she encounters Peak District locations which have been subjected to precise geo-referencing. [Figure 1] So, for example, one named site is Burbage Moor: open moorland, to the north-east of Hathersage, which is just a few miles from the edeglands of suburban Sheffield:

Burbage Moor

LB: located in Surprise View carpark
 (53°19'1.55"N) (1°37'24.24"W)
 SK 251801

Beneath this geographical data, the reader finds the co-ordinates of, and brief textual directions to, three *renga-views*; and, in the case of Burbage Moor, these places are listed as Ox Stones, Higger Tor and Carl Wark. Then, on the facing page of the catalogue, the reader encounters poetic accounts of the landscapes, including the following description indexed to the Ox Stones:

swifts weave
 faience wings
 riding Burbage rump

 contra white
 cirrus wisps

cattle-backs
 over the green
 banked lane

 dappled light-
 horses on the fell (Finlay, 2010, n.p.)

This phenomenological dedication to seeing and recording the particularities of landscape corresponds with Matless's framing of 'geographical description' as a creative form of knowledge-making which 'concentrates attention, gathers experience, observes and inscribes' (Matless, 2015, p. 8). However, of even greater interest, in the present context, is the way that the three renga-views at Burbage Moor are attributed to different creators: India McKellar and Alec Finlay; Alec Finlay and Ian Storr; and Alec Finlay. The 'renga view' of the Ox Stones begins on a note of uncertainty - 'what's it like/ up where/ my legs can't go' (Finlay, 2010, n.p.) – which raises fundamental questions about physical access and what it means to experience landscape. By extension, the fact that this poem has been written by both McKellar and Finlay raises questions about the identity of the authorial voice: just who is the first-person speaker whose legs are unable to take him or her to the high places of Burbage Moor?

Finlay's choice of poetic form demonstrates his commitment to 'collaborative shared writing' (Finlay, 2010, n.p.). As Claude Roy explains, renga is a collective form of Japanese connected or linked poetry which moves between different authorial voices yet in which 'everything in the poem – its diction, the use of homonyms and anagrams was subject to definite rules' (Roy, 1979, p. 9). Jacques Roubaud offers further clarification by emphasising how each contributor to the 'chain of poems' was expected to build, thematically, upon the preceding section (Roubaud, 1979, p. 33). The concatenated composition of renga, then, has always relied upon an open attentiveness to the words of others and an awareness of the authorial self as a link in a chain. In his introduction to an anthology of renga poems, Finlay discusses his attraction to a dynamic poetic form which 'offers a *via activa* and *via contemplativa*, a structure within which people can sit, listen and write, sharing in the decision-making' (Finlay, 2005, p. 9). The writing of renga is founded on the principles of generosity and democracy; and, for Finlay, the creative practice thereby 'goes beyond poetry: it is an art of communalism' (Finlay, 2005, p. 9). By extension, renga is a playful poetic

practice which is ideally suited to the development of a composite, polyphonic portrait of landscape.

In the catalogue for *white peak / dark peak*, the typographical arrangements of the poems on the page generally replicate the visual appearances of the particular landscapes which have been perceived and represented. As a result, Finlay is demonstrably concerned with the way the textuality of the renga poem can render the ocular experience of viewing the valleys and moorlands, caves and caverns, trees and rivers, bridges and skylines of the Peak District. *white peak / dark peak*, therefore, is an exercise in visual landscape poetics. It would be reductive, however, to restrict the critical consideration of the project to the words and images printed in the catalogue alone. Much of the project's innovation lies in the exploratory use of digital technologies as mobile phone users are able to access audio recordings of the renga-views whilst situated out in the weathered landscape. There is an element of digital play at work here as users access this poetry-in-place via QR codes. At the same time, *white peak / dark peak* is informed by the serious impulse to harness mobile technologies to bring readers/users closer to the landscapes which have been subjected to poetic description: 'Strange, isn't it, that we seldom read poems in their places: *Paterson* in Paterson, Oswald's *Dart* by that muddy river; odd, that Wordsworth's *For the spot where the hermitage stood on St Herbert's Island*, *Derwentwater* is rarely read there, on that spot' (Finlay, 2010, n.p.). The 'event' of reading, of course, is always an embodied, geographically situated experience (Hones, 2008); and, through playful experimentation with digital technologies, Finlay opens up thinking about how, in 'an age in which plinths are crowded, bronze scarce, poetry proposes itself as the ideal form of public sculpture' (Finlay, 2010, n.p.). *white peak / dark peak*, therefore, is a project which draws upon processes of creative collaboration to establish an aural connectedness between writers and listeners in locations and landscapes across the Peak District. Poignantly, however, the articulation of this ambition is frequently tempered – as in the above passage from the account of the Ox Stones – by the knowledge that the mobility required for such place-specific reading practices is not always available to all.

Conclusion: Thickening the Poetic Map

This article has endeavoured to open up critical space for a wider interdisciplinary project on the contemporary poetic geographies of the Peak District. This future criticism will necessarily have to engage with a pluralistic range of poets with a heterogeneous range of

creative approaches and responses to the landscapes of the White and Dark Peaks: from the surrealist post-pastoralism of Tony Williams to the ecopoetics of Fay Musselwhite; from the lyrical humour of Jo Bell to the edgelandness of Matthew Clegg. Alongside this, future studies ought to examine both the political imperatives and social impacts of a range of public poetry projects including, amongst others, Derbyshire County Council's Poet Laureate scheme and the Companion Stones project organised by Arts in the Peak and the National Park Authority. Greater consideration also needs to be afforded to the energetic role played by the Sheffield-based publishers, Longbarrow Press, in generating a poetic community in and around the Peak District. Although this article has only scratched the critical surface, however, the readings of landscape poems by Mort, Goodwin and Finlay have drawn attention to the status of the Peak District as a site of creative confluences and cross-currents. The poetry of the three writers explored in the latter half of this article focuses on different landscapes and landscape practices within the Peak District; yet all three poets share a commitment to a playful testing of the imaginative possibilities and potentialities afforded by creative collaboration. By extension, all three writers share a commitment to the exploration of innovative poetic forms for the type of polyphonic, heteroglossic expression more usually associated with both the novel and the fictional representation of urban space (Westphal, 2007, p. 17).

The writers' shared preoccupation with playfully creative collaboration can be seen to feed off and back into a wider literary impulse to question and to destabilise the (post-) Romantic preoccupation with the fixed, lyrical self-in-landscape: an impulse which has assumed the status of an imperative, for many writers, due to the irreversible effects of the Anthropocene. Yet, although the landscape poetry of Mort, Goodwin and Finlay can be placed in wider cultural, political and environmental contexts, I want to end by returning to the particularities of place and to ideas articulated at the beginning of this article. More specifically, I want to reiterate that that the singular (cultural) landscapes of the Peak District have created a mesh of contexts and conditions to facilitate a period of singularly productive poetic hyperactivity. That is to say, the Peak District – with its history as a shared social space, its association with progressive politics, its heterogeneous topographies, and its surprisingly minimal literary heritage – has created the conditions in which the types of polyphonic poetry practised by Mort, Goodwin and Finlay has been able to flourish. Through playful collaboration, then, these three writers, have drawn upon this knotty entanglement of factors to thicken the poetic map of the Peak District.

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Figures

Figure 1. 'Word-maps' of Burbage Moor from the catalogue for Alec Finlay's *white peak / dark peak* project.