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# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Digital Re-Enchantment: Place Writing, the Smartphone & Social Media

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### Abstract:

Contemporary place writing, in Britain and Ireland, is characterised by a phenomenological concern with the materiality of both the authorial self and the landscapes through which that body moves. This article, however, opens up literary geographical thinking by offering a post-phenomenological interrogation of the imbrications of place, the practice of everyday life, and the smartphone in a range of non-fiction prose texts. In examining these relationships, the article is structured around four main sections in two interconnected parts. The first half considers the literary representation of digital technologies. The opening section considers the role that enchantment plays in contemporary place writing – and introduces the sub-genre of the geo-memoir - before exploring some key writings (including Tim Dee's anthology *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People* (2018) and Rob Cowen's *Common Ground* (2015)) in which smartphones are framed as problematically distancing the self from place. In section two, the article interrogates writings – as exemplified by Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* (2016) - in which place is co-constituted through a knotty entangling of the material and the digital. The second part of the paper then shifts the critical focus to digital cultural production in the form of Twitter. The third section maps out a five-part typology of ways contemporary place writers employ the social media platform. Building on this, the fourth and final section examines how the Cumbrian shepherd, James Rebanks (*The Shepherd's Life*, 2015), has used Twitter, accessed via his smartphone, to document the quotidian experience of being-in-place. Ultimately, then, this article is interested in a core literary geographical question: how have recent creative non-fiction writers integrated the smartphone within a wider re-enchanting of the places and rhythms of everyday life?

**Keywords:** Place writing; re-enchantment; geo-memoirs; smartphones; digital literary geographies; Twitter.

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What saps the possibilities of rooted or detained or placed life is the untextured places we increasingly live among: the umuddy world of the depthless screen and the sealed space. (Dee 2018: 3)

In the islands in the age of digital media, we often find that, although it seems contradictory, technology can bring us even closer to the wild. (Liptrot 2016: 184)

## Introduction

In an article published in 2015, Neal Alexander asserts that: ‘Some of the most engrossing literary geographies of the past three decades can be found in non-fiction prose texts that stretch the definition of literature itself in a variety of ways’ (Alexander 2015: 1). Alexander is right. In Britain and Ireland, we have been living through what John Wylie has characterised as ‘something of a golden age’ (Wylie 2007: 207) for such writings: difficult-to-define texts that draw upon ‘several distinct genres’ to think through ‘the relationships between self and place, natural and cultural resources’ (Alexander 2015: 1). The proliferation of such creative non-fiction has unfolded, of course, within a complex coalescence of geographical, environmental, political, social, and cultural contexts. Threaded through much of this writing, however, has been a preoccupation with the ways that literary language, and creative non-fictional forms, can be pushed and pulled in an attempt to encapsulate at least something of what it means to be-in-the-world. That is to say, much of this writing has been informed by a phenomenological concern with the materiality of both the authorial self and the places and landscapes through which that body moves: a concern that has often been predicated on a scepticism towards digital technologies and practices.

The past decade, however, has witnessed a technological development that has had a profound impact on the embodied practice of everyday life and, by extension, the geographical imagination: the development of the smartphone. As Amit Birenboim and Noam Shoval explain: ‘Modern smartphones began to appear on the market in the mid-2000s’ (Birenboim and Shoval 2016: 284). Saliiently, though, it was the ‘launch of the first-generation iPhone on 29 June 2007, and the widespread adoption of the Android operating system one year later’, that ‘opened a new phase in the history of mobile phones and mobile computing’ (284). In 2006, Adam Greenfield posited his influential concept of ‘everyware’ (Greenfield 2006): ‘the notion that computational power will soon be distributed and

available at any point on the planet' (Kitchin and Dodge 2011: 216). Writing five years later, Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva asserted that: 'The web is all around us. We no longer "enter" the web; we carry it with us' (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 172). The development of the smartphone, therefore, enhanced the capacity for the user – the phenomenological body-in-place – to remain simultaneously, and constantly, connected to the immaterial networked space of the internet.

How, then, has the commonplaceness of the multi-functional smartphone – 'the modern day Swiss Army knife' (Goggin 2012: 20) – inflected the types of non-fictional writing celebrated by both Wylie and Alexander? How have contemporary writers reflected on the ways that mobile technologies have reconfigured geographical knowledges, practices, and imaginaries? It would be possible to address these questions by examining a range of born-digital creative projects that have harnessed the technological and spatial affordances of smartphone technologies. Instead, however, this article seeks to expand the literary geographical exploration of contemporary place writing by interrogating how such technologies have impacted upon non-fictional writing in which the codex – the physical book – remains the privileged literary product. In thinking about this relationship, the article will be structured around four sections in two interconnected parts. The first half focuses on the literary representation of digital technologies. The opening section considers the role that 'enchantment' plays in contemporary place writing before exploring texts in which smartphones are framed as problematically distancing the self from place: writings that largely draw upon images and vocabularies commonly associated with phenomenological thinking. In section two, the article interrogates writings – as exemplified by Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* – in which place is co-constituted through a knotty entangling of the material and the digital. Then, in the second part of the article, the critical focus shifts to digital cultural production and, more particularly, the use of Twitter. The third section maps out a five-part typology of the ways place writers use Twitter. Finally, the fourth section examines how the Cumbrian shepherd, James Rebanks, has used Twitter, accessed via his smartphone, to document the everyday experience of being-in-place. In exploring non-fictional writing that allows for the digital, the article draws upon post-phenomenological geographical readings of 'digital technology as a form and force of meditation now inseparable from everyday living' (Ash et al 2018: 177): theorised analyses through which the perceived dualism between the authenticity of embodied experiences and the inauthenticity of digital meditation have been dismantled. Ultimately, then, this article is interested in a core literary geographical question: how have recent creative non-fiction writers integrated the smartphone within a wider re-enchanting of the places of quotidian life?

### **The Threat of the Virtual: Place Writing, Re-enchantment, & Technoscepticism**

In an article published in *Green Letters* in 2013, Jos Smith interrogates 'new nature writing' – the influential term coined by Jason Cowley, in a 2008 special issue of *Granta*, to describe contemporary non-fictional texts that seek to present the reader with 'new ways of seeing' (Cowley 2008: 11) the Anthropocenic world. In his prefatory Editor's Letter, Cowley declares his interest in 'voice-driven narratives told in the first-person' and in which the

writer is ‘present [ . . . ] if sometimes only bashfully’; and he articulates his similar enthusiasm for creative non-fictional writing that is an ‘experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue’ (10). Crucially, Cowley also brings together writing that documents, and celebrates, a pluralistic range of terrains: the city, the country, and those topographies found in-between. For Smith, however, Cowley’s label fails ‘to acknowledge the fact that the desecration that it is endeavouring to counter is as much cultural as it natural’ (Smith 2013: 6). Smith draws upon recent archipelagic criticism to reframe ‘the new nature writing’, then, as ‘a literature concerned with the diverse and distinct cultures of Britain and Ireland as much as with its nature’ (5). By extension, he contends that such writing is unified by a creative preoccupation with place ‘in all the fusion of human and non-human that the word implies’ (7). Smith recognises that place, too, ‘does not come without its own complicated baggage’ (8). Ultimately, however, he argues that the collocation ‘place writing’ encapsulates how such texts are invariably preoccupied with the enmeshing of human cultures and more-than-human phenomena.

Smith illustrates the contemporary pull of place by citing *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*: a 2010 collection edited by Gareth Evans and Di Robson. The eleven pieces of writing in this volume are characterised by creative and topographical heterogeneity; and the overarching effect is the production of a literary map of the British Isles in which urban and rural landscapes, prose and poetry, exist cheek-by-jowl. Unifying all of the contributions, though, is a collective concern with what the co-editors describe – in a three-sentence note on the front cover of the book – as ‘the importance of “place” to creative possibility in life and art’ (Evans and Robson 2010: n.p). Moreover, the writings are all concerned with ‘the potential for “re-enchantment”, whether personal or collective, cultural, ecological or spiritual’ (n.p). As a result, this landmark collection – that brings together writers as various as Iain Sinclair and Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey and Ken Worpole – projects and promotes a sense of wonder in the material geographies of particular places.

The increasing cultural currency of the label, place writing, can be traced in another collection: *Ground Work: Writings on Places and People*, edited by Tim Dee and published in 2018. In contrast to *Towards Re-Enchantment*, *Ground Work* is prefaced by an expansive introduction in which Dee examines the idea that places are ‘anthropogenic creations called into being by the meeting of humans and their environment’ (Dee 2018: 1). Dee explains how the ‘place-writing’ that he has commissioned ‘shares one constant: every description and every thought arises from someone being detained’: ‘It seems, broadly, good to be stopped by a place. And this is one way a place comes into being. Our attention to them makes places significant’ (1). As in *Towards Re-Enchantment*, place writing is framed as a creative methodology for articulating the experience of everyday enchantment; and, vitally, this literary writing then imbues the geographical world with cultural significance. Dee builds upon such ideas, and implicitly draws upon the language of Heideggerian phenomenology, to suggest that environmental attentiveness facilitates an understanding of what might be meant by ‘the *place-ness* of place’ (3) in an age in which ‘most of the time most of us are *unplaced*’ (1). Dee’s geographical anxiety is generated, at least in part, by the proliferation of the globalised non-place: ‘we traffic along roads, through airports, in offices, hospitals, supermarkets’ (2). Unsurprisingly, though, his geographical anxiety is

also Anthropocenic as he is even more profoundly concerned with ‘the fate of place’ (Casey 1997) as a result of ‘the mess that we have made’ (Dee 2018: 1) of the planet that is our home.

The dominant literary mode in *Ground Work* is non-fictional prose; and the majority of the prose contributions are first-person essays in which the writer-speaker reflects, through the prism of a named location, on the entanglements of memory and at-homeness. Dee’s anthology thereby records a key development in creative non-fiction since the publication of *Towards Re-Enchantment*: a widespread move towards the textual deep mapping of places that have been thickened through the practice of everyday life. Dee’s collection, therefore, illustrates how contemporary place writing is characterised by an openness to the wonder of the quotidian: a ‘ready-to-be surprised “disposition” before, in, with the world’ (Woodyer and Geoghegan 2012: 196), to apply terms that have been used to celebrate the role that enchantment can play in human geographical research. Even more strikingly, such contributions highlight how far-from-bashful first-person autobiographical reflections have come to play an increasingly prominent role in contemporary place writing: a heightened emphasis on selfhood that has resulted in the growing dominance of a sub-genre that might be defined as geo-memoir. Feeding off the post-postmodern cultural obsession with memoir and the literary meditation of public and private worlds (Anderson 2011: 113-24), geo-memoirs are texts in which the deep mappings of both place and person are inextricably interlaced and mutually co-constitutive. In other words, they are works in which the writer reflects on what Casey describes as ‘the geographical self – ‘the nature of the human subject who is oriented and situated in place’ (Casey 2001: 683) - in order to develop an understanding of the ways that particular locations, and specific spatial experiences, have formed and forged authorial identity. When applied to such writings, then, the concept of deep mapping carries a dual, and inextricably interlinked, meaning in that it simultaneously refers to the textual representation of a particular place *and* the retrospective narration of a personal subjectivity that has often been shaped by some form of rupture or even trauma.

How, though, do *Towards Re-Enchantment* and *Ground Work* – as key collections of contemporary place writing – account for the role played by digital technologies within contemporary ‘placial’ (Casey 2002: 351) experience? Evans and Robson, in their introductory note, frame their anthology’s creative content as phenomenological panacea (‘Here are paths, offered like an open hand, towards a new way of being in the world’) for ‘the multiple alienations of modern society [that] threaten our sense of belonging’ (Evans and Robson 2010: n.p.). Ultimately, however, they do not explicitly identify the precise nature of these ‘multiple alienations’. Dee, on the other hand, plainly sets up a phenomenology-inflected dualism between the thick textuality of ‘the hard matter of the world’ and ‘the unmuddy world of the depthless screen’ in which an ever-growing number of our waking hours are spent (Dee 2018: 2-3). According to Dee, ‘the untextured places’ of ‘virtual life’ represent a significant threat to ‘lived life’ (3): ‘An oblong of flat glassy space is now our most common go-to place’; and the worrying product of this obsession with digital surfaces is the inhabitation of a world in which ‘mediation is all’ (3). For Dee, the power of place writing resides in its potential as an antidote to what Casey described, in 2001, as the ‘thinned-out place’ of the Internet (Casey 2001: 684).

In voicing this technoscepticism, Dee reinscribes a trope that is evident in the work of other prominent place writers. A dualistic framing of the phenomenological and the digital is integral, for example, to ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’: Macfarlane’s contribution to *Towards Re-enchantment*. In this essay, Macfarlane reflects on words that had been excised from the 2008 edition of the Oxford *Junior Dictionary*: a list that included ‘brook’, ‘buttercup’, and ‘blackberry’. He similarly reflects on the new words that had been added including ‘block graph, attachment and database’ (Macfarlane 2010: 116). Macfarlane uses these substitutions to lament the falling away of ‘a basic language-literacy of nature’: ‘Children are now adept ecologists of the technoscape, with a dozen words for font-types and emoticons – but with none for the fruit of the chestnut tree or the bramble’ (116). Here, then, Macfarlane frames the ‘perpetual contact’ (Katz and Aakhus 2002) of digital technologies as responsible for a diminishing of geographical knowledge and the language for articulating the felt understanding of being-in-the-world.

Macfarlane revisits these ideas in the opening chapter of *Landmarks* (2015), and, in revising his prose, he both qualifies and strengthens the digital-phenomenological dialectic that he first proposed in *Towards Re-enchantment*. On the one hand, he acknowledges – albeit parenthetically – that there is a value to children’s status as ‘adept ecologists of the technoscape’. On the other, he now baldly states: ‘For *blackberry*, read *BlackBerry*’ (Macfarlane 2015: 3): a formulation that indicates how, in the everyday vocabularies of children, the language of nature has been replaced by a global brand name. The implication is that mobile technologies are responsible, at least in part, for ‘the simulated life we increasingly live’ (3). In the textual morphology of this particular passage, therefore, the smartphone evolves into the ultimate symbol of what Casey disparagingly refers to as ‘the *scattered self* of postmodern society’: a ‘deeply distracted self’ that is ‘correlated with the *disarray of place*’ (Casey 2001: 684). For Macfarlane, then, networked mobile technologies appear to problematise the potential for a re-enchantment of place in that they remove the user from the phenomenological now by pulling them into the groundlessness of glocalised space: a phenomenon that the American psychologist, Kenneth J. Gergen, has described as ‘absent presence’ (Gergen 2002: 240). The omissions from the *Oxford Junior Dictionary*, therefore, are, for Macfarlane, linguistic warnings of a dystopically digitised future.

Comparable anxieties are threaded through *Common Ground*: a geo-memoir in which Rob Cowen documents his enchantment with an ‘edge-land’ site in the Yorkshire spa town of Harrogate to which he has relocated from London. Cowen’s determination to reconnect with ‘nature and the natural world that surrounds us’ (Cowen and Critchley 2013: 4) was first signalled in *Skimming Stones and Other Ways of Being in the World*: a book in which Cowen and Leo Critchley ‘share simple techniques we can all practise that help us to really *be* in the terrains that lie outside our day-to-day lives’ (5). As with the Introduction to *Ground Work*, the language is distinctly Heideggerian; but, unlike the contents of Dee’s collection, the hyper-masculinist *Skimming Stones* is concerned with environmental practices – foraging, animal tracking, igloo building, and so on – that ordinarily take place, for the authors and their assumed readers, outside of the routine of everyday life. In contrast, *Common Ground* is predicated on quotidian experience and the attempt to feel at home. In the opening pages, Cowen sets out from his new house and heads towards a blank space that has caught his eye on a ‘second-hand Ordnance Survey’ map (Cowen 2015: 1). Here,

in this ‘no-man’s land between town and country’ (3), Cowen instinctively turns to his mobile phone to provide the artificial light needed to locate himself on the map that he has ‘zipped into [his] jacket pocket’ (6). It is an unselfconscious act that gestures towards what Ingrid Richardson describes, via the phenomenological thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as ‘the body’s capacity to intertwine with the world, to integrate, internalize or *intercorporealize* seemingly external objects, spaces and environments into our corporeal activities’ (Richardson 2012: 135). In other words, Cowen unthinkingly relies on his mobile device to illuminate the hard-to-read paper map whose materiality and provenance he implicitly valorises.

Elsewhere in *Common Ground*, however, Cowen shares the belief, articulated by both Dee and Macfarlane, that writing predicated on a deliberately slow digging deep into place can provide a vital corrective to the ‘breadth’ and ‘shallowness’ that characterises our daily swims through ‘cyberspace’: a digital environment that is all ‘speed and surface’ (Cowen 2015: 12). In seeking to forge a meaningful connection with his edge-land therefore, Cowen increasingly questions his own inhabitation of digital space and laments how, with each passing year, ‘we become more insular and inward-focused, at once connected to an amazing virtual global multiplicity yet often detached from the world in any physical, emotional and moral sense’ (135). *Common Ground*, therefore, cautions that the inhabitation of cyberspace can lead to the damaging separation of the self from other human subjects and - to continue to draw upon the Heideggerian language with which Cowen’s own prose is infused - the earth on which we dwell. As Cowen polemically puts it: ‘We’re the landless and the listless, so estranged from our planet [ . . . ] that we’re seemingly unable to come together and prevent global human and environmental catastrophe’ (135). In thinking this through, Cowen turns to the spatial history of his edge-land site to provide a metaphor for what he perceives to be the digital deracination of the twenty-first century technological self: ‘We’re still being divided and conquered by enclosure, only now the fences are invisible and internal too’ (135-36). Cowen, then, configures the inhabitation of digital space in terms of boundedness rather than networks.

### **Towards Digital Re-Enchantment: Place Writing & the Affordances of the Smartphone**

Not all recent place writers, however, share the techno-anxiety that is evident in Cowen’s *Common Ground*. For some, the mobile phone is primarily perceived as a communication tool that is unselfconsciously embedded within the rhythms of family life. For example, in *Sightlines* – Kathleen Jamie’s second book of ‘literary essays’ (Alexander 2015: 10) – the author records contacting her teenage son, back home in Fife, whilst she is in Shetland watching a colony of gannets: ‘Later I sent him a text, “Saw 5 killer whales!”, and he came back, “Not bad a for a day’s work”’ (Jamie 2012: 83). Jamie’s prose, in both *Findings* (Jamie 2005) and *Sightlines*, is predicated on journeys away from home and into landscapes both in her native Scotland and overseas. In this fleeting reference to the mobile phone, however, Jamie offers an implicit antidote to the culturally entrenched trope of the place writer pursuing solitariness in the wild: a trope that she deconstructs in a much-quoted feminist-postcolonial critique of Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places* as an account of the ‘lone



enraptured male' seeking isolation in the Scottish Highlands (Jamie 2008). Here, in *Sightlines*, the mobile phone draws attention to the fact that journeys to places on the outermost fringes of the archipelago do not necessarily require a disconnectedness from the domestic.

Amy Liptrot goes further by offering, in her geo-memoir *The Outrun*, a sustained meditation on the inextricable indivisibility of the geographical and the digital, the phenomenological and the virtual, in the practice of everyday life. Liptrot begins with the recollection of a childhood spent on a farm 'on the west edge of the main and largest island in Orkney' (Liptrot 2016: 1). She then explains that the titular *Outrun* refers to 'the largest of the fields [. . .] a stretch of coastland at the top of the farm where the grass is always short, pummelled by wind and sea spray year-round (2). *The Outrun* opens, therefore, with Liptrot establishing the layered liminality of her childhood landscape as she recalls growing up on the edge of an island that is itself on the edge of the map of the British Isles. Liptrot then documents a spatial rupture as she recounts moving to London after graduating from university. Here, the author clearly locates her book as a memoir by detailing her profound 'unsettledness' (93) in the city, and, crucially, her subsequent alcoholism. Even in this section, though, *The Outrun* is a *geo*-memoir, as her autobiographical reflections are invariably linked to the spatial imagination. For example, the built environment is overlaid with memories of physical phenomena from Liptrot's native Orkney: London Fields becomes equated with the vanishing isle of Hether Blether (33); One Canada Square in Canary Wharf – an office block that, for almost twenty years, was the tallest building in the United Kingdom – is figuratively recalibrated as 'the tallest cliffs in the UK' at 'St John's Head on Hoy' (49). The third and longest part of the geo-memoir then focuses on the author's relocation to her 'natural habitat' of the 'flat open coastal places' of the Orcadian archipelago (171): a process of reinhabitation that involves solving 'the problem of what I'm meant to be doing with my body now that I'm not lifting a drink' (151). In this section, Liptrot is preoccupied with the pull of home and the endeavour 'to find my own place' (137), both literally and metaphorically, in the islands of Orkney.

Digital technologies – and especially the smartphone – play a key, if slippery, role in Liptrot's geo-memoir. In the retrospective reconstruction of a particularly difficult period in London, Liptrot identifies how she developed 'an aggressive obsession with my mobile phone' (Liptrot 2016: 44-5). Whereas Jamie recounts picking up her phone to share an extraordinary geographical experience with her son, Liptrot recalls using the same device as a portal to escape from the material and mental reality of her immediate present. Upon her return to the family farm on the Orcadian Mainland, however, Liptrot does not completely reject the digital: 'I take breaks in the only place on the farm where I can get mobile reception: sitting on an upturned bucket out in a field, texting and posting online' (115). The author thereby underlines her interest in how the experience of place is produced through a coalescing of the phenomenological and the virtual: an intertwining of 'sheep shit on my wellies' (115) and the social networks opened up via digital clouds. Liptrot's hybridised geographical imagination, therefore, emerges out a constant intertwining of one place into another: during her time in London, she imaginatively dwelt in the recollected landscapes of Orkney; and now, back on Mainland, she continues to inhabit digital places that connect her with friends in the city.

There is a cultural tendency, as evidenced by the writing of both Dee and Cowen, to conceive of digital space in terms of surfaces; but, upon her return to Orkney, Liptrot harnesses mobile technologies to deepen her geographical experience, knowledge, and understanding. The smartphone, for Liptrot, can open up new ways of documenting being-in-place. When recollecting her spatial practices upon her return to Mainland, for example, Liptrot acknowledges that: ‘According to the timestamp on my photograph, it was 1.08am when I saw noctilucent clouds for the first time, on a back road in the Stenness area’ (Liptrot 2016: 127). The mobile phone, then, allows the place writer to maintain a digital journal; a virtual environment for locating her placial experiences in both time and space. Moreover, in *The Outrun*, the smartphone can open up new ways of seeing the world. In the same chapter, Liptrot looks back at an image she took whilst carrying out a nocturnal survey of male corncrakes: ‘In the bottom right-hand corner of my photograph is a pair of bright flashes – the eyes of a sheep I hadn’t even realised was there when I pointed my phone camera into the night’ (126-27). The more-than-human here may not be the killer whales encountered by Jamie to the north in Shetland; but, crucially, the mobile phone unconceals that which was not visible to the naked eye in the middle of the Orcadian night. In this instance, Liptrot reveals what Leighton Evans describes – in a post-phenomenological exploration of ‘place in the digital age’ - as the mobile phone’s capacity to serve ‘as an augmentation’ of the user’s ‘senses’, thereby ‘heightening understanding of the world’ (Evans 2015: 85). The idea that the smartphone can facilitate environmental ‘understanding’ is underlined, a few pages later, when Liptrot confesses that she has changed ‘my ringtone to a corncrake’s call’ and has set ‘a Google alert for corncrake references in the world’s media’ (Liptrot 2016: 130). Here, the mobile phone is ‘part of the user’s attunement to the world’ (Evans 2015: 15-6): news stories reporting the global plight of the corncrake pop up on Liptrot’s smartphone and, by extension, shape her understanding of those birds that co-inhabit her native archipelago.

Liptrot’s interest in the digitisation of place is confirmed by ‘Online’: a chapter in which she explicitly and extensively reflects on digital life on Papay (the smaller Orcadian island to which she has moved) including, inevitably, her relationship with her smartphone. First, Liptrot celebrates how digital technologies can bind together local communities as well as people communicating with each other from opposite sides of the world. As she puts it in her characteristically unadorned prose: ‘When an unusual bird, such as a sea eagle, is seen in the sky above Orkney, or a pod of orca along the coastline, people pass messages immediately via a local birding forum or text-message groups so that others can rush out to see them’ (Liptrot 2016: 184). Digital technologies, then, can have a meaningful and material impact upon what Yi-Fu Tuan refers to as a sense of ‘group belongingness’ in place, as well as that community’s shared knowledge of its immediate environment (Tuan 2004: 40). Liptrot also celebrates the smartphone’s capacity for geolocation as she recalls how she used ‘the GPS app on my phone to track my daily walks around Papay, along sheep trails and high-water lines’ (Liptrot 2016: 185). The result is the creation of a personal cartography of the island as Liptrot notes that ‘overlaid on satellite maps: a story emerges’ (185). More particularly, Liptrot notices how, over time, her walks have ‘become slower and more exploratory, covering smaller areas in greater detail’ (185): a deep mapping of an

increasingly circumscribed space that is revealed through the digital tracking of pedestrian practice.

In thinking about the digital, Liptrot moves beyond egocentric mappings. To begin, she critically reflects on the cartographic convention of placing ‘Orkney and Shetland [. . .] in a box at the side of the map, to the east of Britain rather than the north’ (Liptrot 2016: 185): an example of how geography can be all-too-readily distorted due to the limitations of the chosen cartographic space. The ‘slippy’ nature of Google Maps, however, means that Orkney and Shetland are now in their rightful places to the north-east of the British mainland (della Dora 2012). In addition, Liptrot reflects on the power of names and naming. First, she acknowledges how her toponymical knowledge of ‘the inlets and outcrops around the North Hill’ (Liptrot 2016: 185) on Papay has been expanded through digital maps. She also transcends the terrestrial to consider how the Sky Map app has expanded her knowledge of celestial space: ‘I am able to point my phone at the night sky and name which stars and planets are in that direction’ (186). Moreover, there is a significant socio-economic underpinning to Liptrot’s meditations on the digital as she indicates how, ‘in the past decade or so, the internet has made island life possible for more people, able to work remotely for employers down south’ (183). Clearly, ensuring that there is access to mobile networks is integral to the ‘hope that the fragile populations of some of the smaller islands will not only stabilise but grow’ (183). In other words, digital technologies can help to ensure that islands are centres of everyday living as well as places of out-of-the-way wildness for the city-dweller.

Liptrot’s position is not unequivocally celebratory as she also articulates her anxieties on the effects of ‘all this hyper-connection’ (Liptrot 2016: 188). In keeping with the memoir categorisation, many of these concerns are intrinsically personal. Liptrot worries about ‘cross-addiction’ (189) and the potential correlation between her alcoholism and the amount of time she spends within virtual social spaces. By extension, she is concerned that she has simply replaced the temporary highs provided by drink with the ‘small jolts of dopamine’ that are apparently generated by the ‘beeps and notifications and vibrations’ (189) that emanate from her digital device. Although such anxieties demonstrably emerge out of personal experience, however, Liptrot’s chapter simultaneously raises wider questions about the evolution of human subjectivity in the digital age. More specifically, she expresses a note of caution about the gaps between the virtual and the actual: ‘Chatting on Skype, looking at the screen rather than the camera, creates a shifty dissociation, a not-quite-eye contact. Meeting in real life, we are unsure, blinking and leaving too long before responses’ (188). Liptrot, therefore, remains consistently sensitive to the potential problems generated by the habitual use of digital technologies. In the final analysis, though, such technologies – in contrast to the reactionary position articulated by Dee – are absolutely integral to Liptrot’s understanding of the world and her position within it: ‘I’m using technology to take myself to the centre of something from my spot at the edge of the ocean. I’m trying to make sense of my environment. With my digital devices, the planes and birds and stars seem more quantifiable and trackable’ (191). Ultimately, and paradoxically, immaterial digital data – code that travels at speed across the world, via satellites in the skies, and into the smartphone that she holds in the palm of her hand – helps to anchor Liptrot’s body in place.

## Place Writers on Twitter: A Brief Typology

*The Outrun* offers an extensive account of the enlacing of the author's embodied and digital geographies. In thinking about the relationship between place writing and mobile technologies, however, there is scope to move beyond the textual space of the book and to head into digital space itself. More specifically, there is scope to explore how contemporary place writers use the forms of social media – and specifically Twitter – that Liptrot regularly discusses in her geo-memoir. To make this literary geographical move is to respond to Gillian Rose's call for the critical examination of the profound 'changes being wrought to the cultural articulations of space, place and landscape' by the ever-presence of digital technologies: changes that necessarily require cultural geographers 'to contribute to the current debates about digital cultural *production* [my italics]' (Rose 2016: 766). To apply Rose's thinking, then, the *literary* geographer ought to explore the creative use of digital media as well as the textual representation of contemporary digital culture. By extension, in turning to the *use* of social media, it is possible to construct a typology of the cardinal ways that contemporary place writers engage with both the form and function of Twitter.

The first type of Twitter use is that of *connecting*. As Katrin Weller et al have explained, the structure of Twitter allows for 'the formation of complex follower networks' that, in turn, open up the possibility of 'exciting new research possibilities' (Weller et al 2014: xxix-xxx). Twitter, then, has emerged as a dynamic social space that allows place writers to enter a network of like-minded writers and readers, artists and activists. The conception of Twitter as a dialogically egalitarian environment has been celebrated by the early-adopter Julian Hoffman: an English-Canadian place writer who has lived in the Prespa Lakes, northern Greece since 2000. According to Hoffman: 'One of the great thrills of [ . . . ] using Twitter these past few years has been the discovery of so many terrific writers and artists that I might not have learned about otherwise. It's a wonderful online community to be a part of' (Lilley 2015). For Hoffman, Twitter is a virtual environment for the expression of environmental ideas and the articulation of urgent arguments; but, above all, it is a space of conversation and connectedness in which non-hierarchical networks are able to unfold. In this typology, Twitter itself is not necessarily utilised by the place writer as a creative space; but, rather, its primary function is understood to be the bringing together of people who share an openness to 'the potential', to return to the terms set out by Evans and Robson, for environmental "'re-enchantment'". Counter-intuitively, then, Twitter is a boundless digital space in which communities can cohere around a collective preoccupation with the material groundedness of place.

Second, *promoting*. Many place writers use the social media platform as a key professional practice tool as they endeavour to generate widespread interest in their latest publication. The process of promotion begins with two standard pre-publication tweets: the initial signing of the book contract; and the documenting of the moment at which the final manuscript – topped with a judiciously selected *objet* relating, almost invariably, to the geographical content of the text – is finally submitted to the publishers. The process continues, of course, once the book is finally out-in-the-world: first editions are celebrated; author events are advertised; and media appearances are publicised.

Third, *hiving*. Some place writers have explored and exploited the affordances of Twitter as digital space in which to disseminate information and to prompt responses to that data in order to generate new knowledge. The most high-profile example of hiving is provided by Macfarlane who, since February 2017, has tweeted ‘Word of the Day’: an habitual practice designed to call attention to the rich diversity of the language that is used to invoke the geographical world. ‘Word of the Day’ is a project that, at the time of writing, reaches over 150,000 followers. It is also a project that is inextricably linked to Macfarlane’s literary publications in that it both emerges out of, and informs, Macfarlane’s long-standing ambition to gather ‘a word-hoard of the astonishing lexis for landscape’ (Macfarlane 2015: 1) in Britain and Ireland. Yet whereas the flow of information in his creative non-fictional books is – to borrow the language of social media theorists – conventionally ‘unidirectional’, Twitter is predicated on ‘bidirectionality’ (Murthy 2018: 8). That is to say, Macfarlane encourages his followers to add to an ever-growing and open-ended lexicon of landscape and place. Clearly, therefore, Macfarlane has moved away from the techno-scepticism evident in some of his earlier writings in order to incorporate Twitter within a multi-platform celebration of the ways language can facilitate ‘the possibility of re-wonderment’ (Macfarlane 2015: 25). As a result, the adoption of Twitter has enabled Macfarlane to enter into dynamic dialogue with his readers and to engage with the type of online communities inhabited by Hoffman.

These first three uses are by no means exclusive to place writers in that each type of tweet could be practised by any kind of writer. At the same time, each of these uses is not reliant on the use of smartphone technology; and, as a result, such tweets are seemingly sent out from the placelessness of digital space. The remaining two types of Twitter use, however, are place-specific and are dependent on access to a smartphone. Fourth, then, is *exploring*. Many writers principally exploit Twitter’s capacity for the marriage of text and image – and its capacity to locate the self-in-place – by documenting extraordinary geographical events and encounters. The experimental geographer, Bradley L. Garrett, for example, has frequently drawn upon the social media strategies of urban explorers to record his practice of ‘place hacking’ (Garrett 2013). His Twitter feed contains texts and images relating to a diverse range of locations: from a handcrafted nineteenth-century drainage ditch in Malta to an abandoned skyscraper in Baja; from a tunnel beneath Battersea Power Station to the vertiginous view from the top of the tallest block of council-owned flats in London. Many of Garrett’s early tweets, therefore, offered a performatively on-the-spot account of the extreme embodied experiences that were later recollected in reflective pieces of critical-creative place writing. In this type, ‘the image-text work’ – to adapt a term used by Jane Rendell in her contribution to *Towards Re-Enchantment* (Rendell 2010: 56) - is used to document and, crucially, to authenticate the writer’s out-of-the-ordinary geographical experiences. By extension, the follower is enchanted by textual accounts and photographic visions of places that, more often than not, she or he is unlikely to encounter first-hand.

The fifth and final type of Twitter use is *noting*. In this typology, the place writer uses Twitter’s yoking of text and image in order to document – again via a smartphone - the relationship of the self and place as it unfolds amidst the ordinariness of the everyday. Liptrot, for example, regularly posts tweets recording the landscapes and environments in

which she lives. At present, this means that Liptrot's followers are presented with image-texts of the moors, woods and reservoirs of West Yorkshire; but, in the past, they have been granted access to image-texts of the Orcadian land- and sea-scapes that provide the placial focus for the second part of *The Outrun*. In this fifth type, therefore, Twitter acts as both digital diary and digital field-book; but, whereas the analogue diary and field-book are conventionally private textual spaces, this particular image-text is made public as soon as the user presses 'Tweet' on his or her smartphone.

Clearly, there are significant intersections and overlaps between the five types of Twitter use proposed here. The feeds of individual place writers will invariably contain tweets belonging to the different categories; and even individual tweets will often be characterised by more than one type of social media use. Moreover, there is a need to think further about some of the questions and issues that are raised by the consideration of the place writer's use of Twitter. So, for example, what model of social media network is created when, as with Macfarlane, an established place writer joins the Twitter community? In what ways are place writers embedding tweets within their compositional processes as a space for the testing out of ideas and even individual sentences? How do place writers use Twitter in association with other forms of social media? Ultimately, though, these wider questions remain beyond the principal aims of this article. Instead, then, the final section will turn to the practices of a geo-memoirist who, perhaps more than any other, has become synonymous with Twitter's status as 'a microblogging-based social medium' (Murthy 2018: 10).

### **Transliterate Place Writing: Twitter, the Authorial Self & Reader-Response**

In the final sentence of her chapter, 'Online', Liptrot acknowledges that the reader of *The Outrun* may also be the recipient of her messages sent through the code that, as Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge have explained, produces 'collective life' in the digital age (Kitchin and Dodge 2011: 9). As Liptrot has it: 'My sky is converted into zeroes and ones, my personal data beamed to satellites, bounced through fibre-optic cables under the sea, through microwaves and copper wire, over islands, to you' (Liptrot 2016: 191). By extension, Liptrot's awareness that her reader is likely to be 'media multitasking' (Aagaard 2015) provides a critical framework for thinking about the practices of James Rebanks: the Cumbrian sheep-farmer who opened an anonymous Twitter account (@herdyshepherd1) in January 2012. As Rebanks recollects, in an article published in *The Atlantic* in the following year, his original intention was to document a particular way of life that he believes, through a complex concatenation of factors, to be facing significant pressures: 'My feed is not really about me: I'm just a narrator. It's about the way my people farm an amazing landscape' (Rebanks 2013). Rebanks's feed, then, is characterised by the repeated use of particular image-texts: accounts of his sheepdogs – Floss, Tan and Meg – at work on the land; posts of his children learning place-specific farming practices; tweets recording habitat restoration projects. The overarching effect is the creation of a deeply personal and palimpsestic documentation of everyday life: a portrait of place in which people, animals and the landscape itself become familiar presences for Rebanks's followers, and which remains consistently underpinned by particular political imperatives. Saliently, Rebanks

makes it clear that he was not entirely comfortable in succumbing to what he derisively refers to as ‘the cult of Apple’. Yet, at the same time, he acknowledges that the iPhone provided him with the ‘tools to connect to thousands of people around the world’ (Rebanks 2013) directly, and without editorial filtration, from his upland farm in the Matteredale valley on the eastern fringes of the Lake District National Park.

Rebanks himself clarifies the personal appeal of Twitter by offering a threefold explanation of its compatibility with his everyday practices. First, the ‘brevity’ of the textual space means that tweets can be constructed and posted in and around the pressures of his working life (Rebanks 2013). Second, the capacity to upload photographs ‘is even quicker’ and allows Rebanks to share images that are ‘exotic, strange and beautiful to other people who are disconnected from the land’ (Rebanks 2013): a process of enchantment that underscores Larissa Hjorth et al’s assertion that ‘camera phone practices amplify the local’ (Hjorth et al 2012: 4). Third, the use of the smartphone means that he ‘can tweet whilst’ working outdoors and ‘without needing to stop work to do so’: ‘My tweeting is, and has to be, quick, dirty and real’ (Rebanks 2013). Rebanks clearly recognises Twitter’s potential, then, as a multi-media cultural space for the in-the-moment articulation of his embodied placement and agricultural labour.

The international popularity of Rebanks’s Twitter account attracted publishers and, in 2015, his debut book, *The Shepherd’s Life: A Tale of the Lake District*, was released. As a work of non-fiction, *The Shepherd’s Life* can be read as an extension of Rebanks’s ‘way of shouting to the sometimes disinterested world’ (Rebanks 2013) to retell ‘the history of the Lake District – from the perspective of the people who live there, and have done for hundreds of years’ (Rebanks 2015: xviii). In other words, it is a narrative of authentic insidership through which Rebanks offers ‘an explanation of our work through the course of the year’ (xviii). That said, the book is also ‘partly a memoir of growing up in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s and the people around me at that time’ (xviii). The text begins with Rebanks reflecting on his adolescent alienation at secondary school in the nearby market town of Penrith. *The Shepherd’s Life* then evolves into a narrative of displacement as Rebanks recollects the three years he spent as a mature student at Magdalen College, Oxford, and reflects on the subsequent pull of home. The writing of the book may have been informed by a wider political agenda; but *The Shepherd’s Life* also contributes to the literary phenomenon of the geo-memoir in that it is framed as a mapping of the authorial self as well as his ‘heft’ in the Cumbrian uplands (ix). It is striking, then, that the book ends with a typically concise first-person affirmation of the author’s ongoing commitment to, and enchantment in, place: ‘This is my life. I want no other’ (287).

There remains a need to move beyond the codex, though, to consider the reader’s response to the multi-media format of Rebanks’s documentation of place. It would be erroneous to only propose a neatly teleological hermeneutic model that explains how readers engage with Rebanks’s diaristic Twitter account, in a process of geographical authentication, *after* reading the memoiristic *The Shepherd’s Life*. First, as has been indicated, the creation of the @herdyshepherd1 Twitter account pre-dates the publication of the geo-memoir; and, as a result, readers may have been familiar with Rebanks’s digital documentation of the quotidian before turning to the more expansive and introspective literary account of his geographical experience. Second, many readers will continually

shuttle back and forth between the literary text and the Twitter as part of a transliterate reception of Rebanks's complementary cultural productions of space, place, and landscape. As Sue Thomas explains, the term 'transliteracy' was coined by the American literary scholar, Alan Liu, to refer to the 'literacy of convergence'; and, in the digital age, this 'convergence' almost invariably means the ability to 'read, write and interact across a range of different platforms and media, including both the virtual and physical universes' (Thomas 2013: 13). The diurnal image-text documentation of Matterdale, therefore, can enable the transliterate reader to visualise the contours of the terrain on which Rebanks farms: a heightened understanding of landscape – generated by the on-the-spot digital diary – that is then folded back into the reading of the more reflective geo-memoir. Crucially, the continual oscillation between literary text and Twitter heightens the illusion of familiarity generated by the autobiographical narrative in *The Shepherd's Life* as the transliterate reader-follower feels as if they are developing an even more intimate – to return to a word used by Hoffman – relationship with both the author and his everyday life. Temporality, as well as spatiality, plays an integral role in this process. *The Shepherd's Life* is ostensibly structured around the passing of the four seasons from summer to spring; but, as a geo-memoir, the autobiographical narrative is inevitably punctuated with imaginative excursions into Rebanks's personal history. The transliterate movement between the literary text and social media, however, adds a further temporal layer as, by tweeting on location, Rebanks documents and disseminates the now-ness of being-in-place. The wider effect is that, the transliterate reader will be exposed to a sense of the quotidian ongoingness of sheep farming in the Cumbrian uplands: a way of life that, for Rebanks, is of singular importance in the spatial history of a cultural landscape that, in 2017, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. *The Shepherd's Life* is a book that is deeply concerned with agricultural heritage; and Rebanks's Twitter feed underlines that the farming of Herdwick sheep remains a living tradition that is always in a state of coming-into-being. By extension, then, it is impossible to decouple the poetics and the politics of Rebanks's multi-media documentation of Matterdale. That is to say, Rebanks's textual-digital portrait of place is inextricably indexed to his regular contributions to contemporary, and contentious, debates about the future management of the Cumbrian uplands. Ultimately, then, Rebanks dissolves the boundaries between both literary text and Twitter *and* his public and private selves.

## Conclusion

Part of the popular appeal of much contemporary place writing resides in its scepticism, and perhaps even hostility, towards digital technologies and cultural practices. In other words, the phenomenological groundedness of such writing offers an antidote to what Casey has dismissed as 'the very desert of the postmodern period': 'the wasteland of a dried-out life-world' (Casey 2001: 686) that has been created, at least to some degree, by the digital. Writing in 2011, however, Gordon and de Souza e Silva argued that: 'Networked interactions permeate our world. And it is becoming increasingly implausible to act as they do not' (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011: 172). Saliently, two place writers discussed in this article – Liptrot and Rebanks – implicitly acknowledge this implausibility to think



about the imbricated relationship between the material and the virtual within their respective places of habitation. The two place writers adopt different creative strategies for exploring this braiding of the geographical and the digital: Liptrot primarily reflects on this relationship within the conventional textual space of a geo-memoir; whilst Rebanks's presentation of the authorial self-in-place has, through his use of Twitter, harnessed the transliteracy of his reader-followers. Clearly, both writers express ambivalence and even anxiety about their use of digital technologies. Liptrot worries, for example, about the effect that the inhabitation of digital places can have on face-to-face social interactions. Rebanks, on the other hand, announced – in June 2018 – that he was withdrawing from Twitter in response to online criticisms that he received following his appointment to a panel, put together by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to carry out a review of England's National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Yet, for both writers, the problem of the 'depthless screen' (Dee 2018: 3), to return to a phrase with which this article began, is largely countered by the affordances of the smartphone. More specifically, both writers use their phones to think about the self-in-place rather than exclusively entering digital environments within the 'sealed space' (Dee 2018: 3) of domestic interiors. For Liptrot and Rebanks, therefore, the use of the smartphone does not translate to a denial of their bodiliness or the granularity of their geographical experience. Instead, both writers share an understanding that 'mood and orientation, embodied practices and the data-infused environment are co-constitutive of place' (Evans 2015: 21). Ultimately, then, this article has argued that, if place is produced out of an impossible-to-disentangle enmeshing of the natural and the cultural (Smith 2013), then contemporary geo-memoirists such as Liptrot and Rebanks have developed new spatial languages and creative processes for dismantling the perceived dualism of phenomenological experience and coded practices. By extension, both writers have opened up the possibility of a digital re-enchantment of place for both themselves and their readers: a possibility that is generated through, rather than in spite of, their smartphones.

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