

**Contemporary British Place Writing:
Origins, Definitions, New directions**

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Contemporary British Place Writing: Origins, Definitions, New directions

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Abstract

This PhD by Publication (Route 2) brings together a trilogy of books of which I am the sole author, which share common ground in terms of theme and preoccupation. I seek to demonstrate how these publications have contributed to, and helped to define, the existing body of work that has come to be included within the genre of contemporary place writing. For the purposes of this commentary I am considering my work within a British context and focusing solely on works of creative nonfiction.

The submission includes my publications: *On Brick Lane* (2007), *Diamond Street: the Hidden World of Hatton Garden* (2012) and *Estuary: Out from London to the Sea* (2016), all of which are focused on a deep examination of place including urban, edgeland and estuarine landscapes. These books have achieved wide international readership, been highly acclaimed in the national press and media, and recognized by critics and other writers in the field as key examples of literary nonfiction creative writing on place. Two of these books have been listed for major place writing prizes in the U.K. *On Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Ondaatje Prize, and *Estuary* was longlisted for the Gordon Burns Prize.

In addition to demonstrating where my practice overlaps with the work of other authors, my aim in this thesis is to articulate the unique ways in which my working practices contribute to the development and definitions of place writing. Specifically, I will argue that my work has made a unique contribution through a multi-modal community-engaged site-specific creative praxis that focuses on the geographical, cultural and social history of these urban and peri-urban spaces, paying particular attention to describing these locations through the oral testimonies of people who have lived and worked there over time, in order to reveal new and previously hidden histories.

Introduction

This PhD by Publication (Route 2) brings together a trilogy of books of which I am the sole author, which share common ground in terms of theme and preoccupation. I seek to demonstrate how these publications have contributed to the existing body of work in contemporary British place writing and to examine the ways in which my practice overlaps with and differs from the work of other authors publishing in this field. Specifically, I will argue that my multi-media community-engaged site-specific creative praxis has: contributed to extant definitions of place writing; develops a historiography of place through its focus on the social, geographical and cultural/social history of urban and peri-urban spaces, and diverges from the work of other (predominantly male) authors working in the genre today in its focus on the human stories of place through the oral testimonies of people who have lived and worked there over time.

The submission includes my three most recent major publications, in chronological order (i) *On Brick Lane* (2007), (ii) *Diamond Street: the Hidden World of Hatton Garden* (2012) and (iii) *Estuary: Out from London to the Sea* (2016). These monographs are classified as creative nonfiction and sit firmly within the place writing genre. These books have achieved wide international readership, have been highly acclaimed in the national press and media, and have been recognized by critics and other writers as key examples of literary nonfiction creative writing on place. Two have been listed for major place writing prizes in the U.K. *On Brick Lane* was shortlisted for the Ondaatje Prize for works that recognize ‘the spirit of a place’ (Royal Society of Literature 2019). *Estuary* was longlisted for the Gordon Burns Prize, which includes a nonfiction category for books that ‘are adventurous enough to inhabit characters and events to create new and vivid realities’ (New Writing North 2019).

(i) *On Brick Lane* (2007)

On Brick Lane explores the historical past, the present and the emerging future of one of Britain's most mythologized streets - Brick Lane in East London. Home to successive waves of immigrants, from eighteenth century Huguenot weavers, to Jewish refugees then the Bangladeshi community in the twentieth century Brick Lane is now one of the most fashionable areas in the city. The story of this street is told through archival research, oral testimony, reportage and memoir, interspersed with photographs and excerpts from literature.

(ii) *Diamond Street: the Hidden World of Hatton Garden* (2012)

Diamond Street describes London's secretive jewellery quarter through the history and stories that bring Hatton Garden and its environs to life. During the course of my research I visited: the London diamond bourse, underground vaults and Dickensian-looking jewellery workshops, as well as subterranean rivers, ancient burial sites and medieval crypts. I spent time with the people who have lived and worked there including: members of my own family, diamond dealers, goldsmiths, jewellers, lapidaries, sewer flushers, artists, geologists, historians and writers.

(iii) *Estuary: Out from London to the Sea* (2016)

Estuary surveys the stories, legends, ecology, wildlife and history of the Thames Estuary. During my research I travelled along this historic waterway many times in a variety of vessels, gathering these experiences in film, photography and audio recordings, capturing stories of mudlarkers, fishermen, radio pirates and champion sailors amongst others. *Estuary* is a portrait of both the community and the environment of this place, examining how each has shaped and continues to shape the other. This monograph is classified within the popular sub-genre of place writing, called the 'new nature writing', but with a more focused engagement on human

interactions within the natural spaces described than most books about this locale or within this genre.

All three books contribute to the emerging canon of contemporary British place writing, and share many of the different concerns and methodologies used by authors working in this field today, including the practices of psychogeography, deep topography, oral history and historical geography. These publications move in focus from a single city street; to a wider metropolitan area; to a vast geographical space, that encompasses the entire stretch of the Thames Estuary. Over time both the scale and scope of the places I have examined in my monographs has expanded exponentially, directly in line with my understanding of the methodologies and practices required to create works within this genre.

Thesis structure

In order to establish the contribution to knowledge my work has made in this field it is necessary to place my work into the context of the wider genre of contemporary place writing in the U.K. This context is established in the first chapter, 'Place Writing and Creative Nonfiction: Origins and Definitions.' The chapter begins with a broad definition of place writing then creative nonfiction, before identifying the emergence of the genre through an investigation of W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), a landmark work of place writing in the U.K. The chapter then demonstrates how this groundbreaking text became the catalyst for the first writers' symposium on place 'After Sebald: Place and Re-Enchantment: A Weekend Exploration' (January 28th-30th, 2011, Snape Maltings). I seek to demonstrate through this chapter the advent of place writing and how this genre is one of the key trends in contemporary creative nonfiction in the U.K.

The second chapter, 'Place Writing: Practices, Methodologies and Sub-genres,' illustrates the diversity of the landscapes being explored and the practices, methods, techniques and sub-genres within place writing via an examination of the some of the creative nonfiction contributions in the anthology *Towards Re-enchantment:*

Place and its Meanings (2010) and Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley's *Edgelands* (2011).

To determine how my own work has contributed to the field, the third chapter, 'Lichtenstein's Place Writing: Practice, Outputs and Outcomes,' examines the ways my unique creative-critical practice emerged before evidencing the similarities to and differences in, the focuses and methodologies used within the above texts to those within my submitted monographs. This chapter substantiates the ways in which my writing about both London and the Thames Estuary has played a crucial cultural role in retrieving the diverse histories of these places afresh, placing them in new and unusual contexts to reveal different meanings and associations in the present. I seek to demonstrate through this chapter how: my writing on these places has generated new knowledge, and unearthed new perspectives and information through a deep and intense engagement with these sites; my submitted works are preoccupied with the political, cultural and historical significance of these places and that my publications submitted for this thesis contribute significantly to wider debates on place and its meanings.

The conclusion provides evidence of how the publications submitted for this PhD by Publication (Route 2) have already made a significant contribution to knowledge in the field of place writing. This will be achieved through: citing responses to these works by my peers, in reviews, articles, publications, other media and influential blog sites, and detailing my contributions to national and international debates on writing and place. The chapter concludes with a discussion that draws together the key aspects of my three publications in order to articulate the unique ways in which my working practices contribute to the development and definitions of contemporary British place writing and how my work differs from others in the field.

Chapter 1

Place Writing and Creative Nonfiction: Origins and Definitions

The origins of British place-based writing could be traced as far back as Anglo-Saxon times, when poets and scalds (including the female nun Hildr of Whitby for example) were creating notable works about place and their spiritual worlds. However there is not the space here to discuss the historiography of place writing in the U.K. but to note that place has pre-occupied British writers and poets for centuries.

Place writing today is practiced in the fields of literature, urban studies, cultural history, anthropology, sociology, geography and other subjects besides. Again there is not room here to examine all these different disciplines and their particular understanding of place writing but rather to observe the multi-disciplinary nature of the field and how literary place writing often crosses over into other areas of study, particularly geography, which, as Nick Hutchinson notes, 'identifies place as one of the pivotal concepts' (Hutchinson, 2012:32).

A precise critical definition of contemporary British place writing, 'a term that has crept into the cultural consciousness, and the literary critical lexicon in Britain over the first two decades of this century' (Cooper, 2020:forthcoming), is still emerging. Creative-critical academic David Cooper from the Centre for Place Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), along with Tim Dee, the editor of *Ground Work: Writings on People and Place* (2018), Gareth Evans, co-editor of *Towards Re-enchantment*, and a number of other writers, critics and academics connected to the genre, have attempted, in different ways, to outline the distinctive nature of this prevalent form of current literature. However, this genre is still developing and changing, and therefore hard to categorically define but there are distinctive features, methodologies and practices that share common ground.

In the introduction to *Ground Work* (2018), 'a book of writing about places,' (Dee, 2018:1) it is, writes Dee, 'our attention' (Dee, 2018:1) to places that defines works within the genre. Discussing Dee's claims in his chapter 'Contemporary British Place Writing: Towards a Definition' in *The Routledge Handbook of Place* (Cooper 2020: forthcoming), Cooper writes:

Dee uses the compound 'place-writing' to refer to both earlier work and the new work that he has brought together. Dee doesn't trace the lineage of this term nor does he self-reflexively interrogate his own use of the label. Yet, through this absence of editorial contextualisation, he implicitly assumes that the reader will share his understanding of what place writing (hyphenated or not) might be and do (Cooper 2020:forthcoming).

As Cooper suggests, is it necessary to ask if the term place writing is entirely self-explanatory? Is place writing simply writing that takes place as its primary subject? If so, would that mean that place writing includes almost all literature with a setting? Beyond Cooper's description above, the brief account in the introduction to *Ground Work* by Dee, and discussions on 'Articulating Place' in the introduction to *Contemporary Literary Landscapes* (2016) by Daniel Weston, an in-depth critical definition of literary place writing is yet to be published. Subsequently multiple references in this thesis are cited from newspaper articles, in particular the *Guardian*, with key figures in the field, such as Kathleen Jamie, Robert Macfarlane, Ken Worpole and Iain Sinclair for example, regularly contributing reviews and articles discussing contemporary British place writing in this review section of this newspaper. However, despite the scarcity of rigorous critical theory on place writing to date, it is clear that within this genre there is a shift of focus, moving setting from the background of narratives to the foreground – essentially figuring place as the foremost topic. This 'spatial turn' has been evident in recent years in narrative theory in the humanities and social sciences. As Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu note in *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (2016):

Whereas space had traditionally been taken as the mere backdrop to the characters and the events of a plot, which by definition involved the temporal order of incidents, recent spatially oriented critics have insisted that space and spatial relations have a much more significant role in narrative, making them worthy of enhanced critical attention (Azaryahu et al. 2016:781).

If place is taking a 'significant role in narrative' (Azaryahu et al., 2016:781), the question is why there is such a widespread cultural 'turn' towards place as a central

theme and motif, and for the purposes of this thesis, why specifically in contemporary creative nonfiction literature? Gareth Evans responded to this question by stating that ‘the ecological crisis, neo-liberal commodification, globalised homogenisation and gentrification, property speculation and numerous erasures - whether demolitions or landscape loss – have all played their part’ (Evans 2019, personal communication, 14 October). I agree with Evans’s analysis, to which I would add regeneration, global displacement, the loss of community and the desire for a sense of belonging, are also factors, ideas that will be explored during chapter 2.

The next question is what kind of places might be suitable subject matter for the genre? New nature writer and poet Jean Sprackland argues that ‘what characterizes recent work in this field, particularly in prose non-fiction texts’ is that the ‘focus is often local rather than exotic, and there is a sustained attention to specific location, which may be rural or urban’ (Sprackland, 2016:7). Sprackland is correct in suggesting that the majority of works of contemporary British creative nonfiction place writing center on places that are either local to, or have significance for, the authors writing these texts. For example: Madeline Bunting’s *The Plot* (2010), Richard Deakin’s *Wildwood* (2007), Kathleen Jamie’s *Findings* (2005), Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun* (2016), Iain Sinclair’s *The Last London* (2017), Jean Sprackland’s *Strands* (2013), Ken Worpole’s *350 Miles: An Essex Journey* (2015), and all three of my submitted publications for this thesis. This argument is further supported through the essays commissioned for *Granta* issue 102 ‘The New Nature Writing’ (2008), which were, according to editor Jason Cowley, ‘studies in the local or parochial’ (Cowley, 2008:11). However, there are exceptions. In *Wild* (2007), an impassioned nature-memoir, Jay Griffiths explores a range of diverse global landscapes, far from her home in Wales, including parts of the Canadian Arctic, the jungles of Peru and the Australian bush. In *The Old Ways* (2012a), Robert Macfarlane walks local routes in his hometown of Cambridge alongside pathways in the Himalayas and other places. Similarly, the array of locations described in *Ground Work* includes local sites, such as a London park and international places, including a wood in eastern Finland.

This raises the question, that if British place writers are examining locations across the world then how does place writing differ from travel writing? Evans stated at an event *Rising Ground: Place Writing Now* (18th November, 2014) at the London

Review Bookshop (LRB) that writing about place is ‘a sub-genre of travel writing that subverts it by being about staying put, rather than moving’ (2014:presentation).

The LRB event included the work of Philip Marsden, a well-known travel writer who crossed over into the genre of place writing with his publication *Rising Ground: A Search for the Spirit of Place* (2014). This book explores in depth the area of Cornwall where Marsden lives, combining historical research with personal observations, exquisite prose on the natural landscape, references to archaeology, and walking. Kate Kellaway, in her review for the *Guardian* recognized that Marsden must have had a ‘sudden awareness that the unexplored place – as deserving of attention as any distant destination – is home’ (Kellaway, 2014:36), her words illustrating both the move from travel to place writing for Marsden and also the point where these two genres intersect.

During the LRB event Marsden stated: ‘when one is struck by a landscape and responds to place the way it takes you is backwards in time, to unravel the accumulated experiences which have gone on in that place’ (2014:presentation). Marsden’s description of unravelling ‘accumulated experiences’ in a specific location clearly articulates the way in which place writing responds to, and emerges from, a collective experience (the plural ‘experiences’ is significant) that is grounded in historical layers of memory and events and bound by geography. In other words, works of creative nonfiction place writing tell stories of place through a collaborative process, which includes multiple voices and encounters, with wildlife, nature and people, past and present, who are in different ways connected to the places of the work. During the research the author attempts to uncover current issues relating to a place, which can often be environmental, ecological or political; whilst also exploring that place’s deep-historical past, through memory, historical geography, geological, archival and archeological investigations and psychogeographic practices. Some works include the gathered testimony of those that have lived or worked in that place overtime. Elements of these methodologies, concerns and practices, are evident in my own submitted works and all the other works cited in this thesis, as we shall see evidenced below.

Despite the fact that ‘accumulated experiences’ are an essential factor of creative nonfiction place writing, another defining feature is that works in this field

are led by 'the authorial I.' Accordingly, these texts arise from, and recount, the author's exploring the location (often on foot) in real time, as they walk across it, during multiple visits whilst researching the text. Sometimes the author lives or works in the place they have chosen to write about, meaning their knowledge is based on years of intimate acquaintance, memory and personal experience (such texts have a more autobiographical element than others where the author ventures out to explore a place anew).

Place writing can include poetry, novels, scriptwriting and creative nonfiction works and, as mentioned above, can cross over into other disciplines. As this suggests, and as I will argue below, place writing is a hybrid form of literature, which can, in the words of Evans 'collapse rigid boundaries between travel and 'nature' writing, between memoir and history, between essay and fiction' (Evans 2019, personal communication, 4 October). The wider discipline of place writing is therefore not bound to form but rather defined by a sustained focus on place and elements of the methodologies mentioned above, which are further explored in Chapter 2. However creative nonfiction place writing is bound by the requirement to truthfulness as we will see below.

Creative Nonfiction

To understand creative nonfiction place writing, it is necessary define the broader category of creative nonfiction, out of which it has emerged. Creative nonfiction can encompass memoir, narrative or literary journalism, factual essays, travel writing and quest biography, to name just a few of the sub-genres and styles within this wide-ranging category, which essentially means, 'the literature of reality,' a term Gay Talese takes as the subtitle of his book *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality* (1995). Creative nonfiction has been described by Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard in *Writing Creative Nonfiction* (2001) as 'fact-based writing that remains compelling, undiminished by the passage of time, that has at heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to *truthfulness*' (Forché et. al., 2001:1). According to these definitions, for a text to be considered creative nonfiction, the work must be based in fact, i.e. not 'invented from the writer's mind'

(Lounsberry, 1990:p.xiii) and thoroughly researched. As Barbara Lounsberry notes in *The Art of Fact* (1990), this emphasis on fidelity requires authors 'to establish the credibility of their narratives through verifiable references in their texts' (Lounsberry, 1990:xiii-xiv).

Distinguishing creative nonfiction from nonfictional writing more generally are the further requirements that it is literary in style with an attention to well-crafted prose. A third criterion is that it can be subjective. As Lee Gutkind, the founder of *Creative Nonfiction Magazine* (in 1993) and the first MFA in Creative Nonfiction (University of Pittsburgh, U.S.A., 1978), states: 'subjectivity is not required in creative nonfiction, but specific, personal points of view, based on fact and conjecture, are definitely encouraged' (Gutkind, 2005:xxiii). Accordingly, the narrative structure of creative nonfiction often employs literary devices utilized by novelists, such as a first-person narrative and/or experimental arrangements; but within works of this genre the author has an ethical responsibility to tell the truth, much like a journalist. However, works of creative nonfiction differ from journalism because they often include excursive material and individual opinions, and are generally longer in form than magazine or newspaper articles.

Early pioneers of the genre include American narrative journalists Gay Talese, Joan Didion, and Joseph Mitchell, who worked for *Esquire Magazine*, *Vogue*, and *The New Yorker* respectively before moving into long-form works of creative nonfiction. Mitchell's acclaimed collection *Up In The Old Hotel* (written between 1943 – 1965) was a groundbreaking text that did much to define the genre. These sharply observed, often humorous essays (written originally for *The New Yorker*), in Mitchell's trademark 'short declarative prose' (Carrington, 1996:1), focus on hidden aspects of downtown New York. Whilst aptly describing that specific locale, they are more character than place led, and focus on subjects including a Bowery matron, a street preacher and 'the famed Mohawk Indians who work without fear on New York's steel high-rises' (Carrington, 1996:50).

Within Mitchell's creative nonfiction publications many of the techniques and methodologies later employed by British place writers can be observed, in particular; walking in place, observational writing, elements of autobiography and well-crafted prose. Another distinctive aspect of Mitchell's writing is 'his melancholy and his

sense of time and loss and change' (Adams, 2012:37), themes and preoccupations which constantly recur in the work of W. G. Sebald, whose *The Rings of Saturn* (originally published in German in 1995 as *Die Ringe des Saturn*) is widely considered to be *the* landmark work of place writing in the U.K.

The Rings of Saturn

The Rings of Saturn is offered here as a case study for the emergence of place writing in Britain. The book tracks a circuitous walk by a melancholy narrator (presumed to be Sebald) around the East Anglian coastline in Sebald's distinctive 'haunting prose style' (O'Connell, 2011:online). The walk is used as a literary device to guide the reader through Suffolk, whilst the narrator imparts an incredible array of loosely connected stories, on a vast range of subjects, from silk production to an anatomy lesson by Rembrandt, along with impressions of the landscape, the weather, his own internal musings and various 'historico-political and ecological disasters' (Jacobs, 2015:x).

The book appears on first reading to be a work of creative nonfiction, which documents the author's 'account of that walk, and the people and places the writer encounters' (Hoare, 2013:29) but on close examination the text is: 'full of fictional devices: the emptying out of landscapes, the repetition of images, the elision of characters, the de-familiarizing of the real and the invention of details' (Prosser, 2011:10).

The Rings of Saturn created a new hybrid literary form that merges: 'fiction, biography, autobiography, travel-writing, history, memoir, poetry, documentary, essay, theory, illustration, natural history' (Smith, 2011:10). This groundbreaking book, which still resists categorization, has been instrumental in the emergence of contemporary British place writing in multiple ways. Many key figures in the field have publicly acknowledged the influence of *The Rings of Saturn* on their work. Philip Hoare (author of works within the 'new nature writing' category) selected *The Rings of Saturn* for his 'book of a lifetime' (Hoare, 2013:29) and said reading it freed him from the traditional confines of nonfiction, inspiring him to be more innovative with

his narrative structure. Former poet laureate Andrew Motion noted in his review of Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* (2007) that the method Macfarlane employed within 'owes an obvious debt to Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*' (Motion, 2007:6) with 'reflections on climate change, on destruction of habitat, on individuals met along the way and others who hover on the wings of history, on kindred-spirit writers, and on larger matters of time and belonging' (Motion, 2007:6). Macfarlane spoke in Grant Gee's essay-film *Patience: After Sebald* (2011) of 'the spell of enchantment' (*Patience* 2011:17mins 28) cast on him on first reading this book. Ken Worpole described *The Rings of Saturn* as 'crucial to the re-imagining' of place, particularly in the way that Sebald 'has woven East Anglia back into the European narrative' (Lichtenstein, 2016:75).

The Rings of Saturn has also had a tremendous impact on my own working practise. Specifically in how Sebald intertwines the narrative of a contemporary walk, with beautifully written observations on place, threaded through with historical episodes. Furthermore the underlying themes of loss and a sense of displacement, individual and collective memory and exile, which shadow the stories of Suffolk in *The Rings of Saturn* are recurrent themes explored in all my submitted works.

Roger Deakin described Sebald as the 'great writer of Landscape and Memory: an archaeologist forever trowelling his way through the layers of the stories he always senses beneath every meadow or pavement' (Deakin, 2011:14) articulating some of the methods evident within *The Rings of Saturn*. Others include: a story told by a narrator who is 'a shadow-self of the writer' (Silverblatt, 2007:78); a narrative based on a long walk or journey; multiple encounters by a narrator with people and locations; detailed descriptions of landscape, weather, nature; thoroughly researched information on historical events interwoven into the narrative of a walk; a deep engagement with walking and place; stories relating to a landscape, past and present; autobiographical details, use of the pathetic fallacy and exquisitely crafted prose where Sebald 'devotes a great deal of care and attention to each individual page, very much the way a poet has to do' (Silverblatt, 2007:78). Collectively these methodologies and techniques are the defining traits in works of contemporary British place writing.

The significance of Sebald's book to the place writing genre is further evidenced by the 'After Sebald: Place and Re-Enchantment' symposium in 2011, part of the wider *Re-enchantment Project*, 'a pioneering national arts project exploring our relationship to place across the U.K.' (Caught by The River, 2010:online). This four year project, produced by Di Robson and Gareth Evans of Artevents (core-funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation), aimed to deliver an imaginative response through art, live-performance, film and writing to 'that most neglected of human emotions, a sense of place' (Cussons, 2010:online) and included multiple public events, large scale artworks, live performance, the production of Grant's *Patience*, the anthology *Towards Re-enchantment*, and culminated in the *After Sebald* PLACE weekend.

Many writers, artists and thinkers with a shared interest in the significance of place took part in this symposium, which was described in the press release as: 'a rich enquiry into the landscapes of Suffolk, the spirit of place and its various readings, taking Sebald as its foundation, through presentations and discussions with acclaimed writers' (Evans et. al., 2010b) including Richard Mabey, Robert Macfarlane, Marina Warner, Iain Sinclair and Ken Worpole amongst others.

The PLACE weekend was hugely important to the emergence of the genre because; it was the first national symposium dedicated to the discussion of contemporary British place writing; it included, in the words of co-curator Evans, 'a gathering of a number of writers, among many more who could have been included, identifiable for their extended attention to the nature/s of place in diverse ways' (Evans 2019, personal communication, 4 October) that acknowledged the pioneering work of Sebald and included the 'new wave of place/nature writers' (Evans, 2019, personal communication, 4 October) working across the many sub-genres in the field, much like the anthology *Towards Re-enchantment*, which I will discuss in depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Place Writing: Practices, Methodology and Subgenres

In this chapter I aim to further establish the key features of place writing through readings of four creative nonfiction contributions from the anthology *Towards Re-enchantment: Place and its meanings* (2010). Specifically (i) 'Water Walks' by Iain Sinclair, (ii) Ken Worpole's 'East of Eden,' (iii) Kathleen Jamie's 'On Rona' and (iv) Robert Macfarlane's 'A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook.' *Towards Re-enchantment* is important to include here because of its connection to the wider *Re-Enchantment Project* mentioned above, and because within this text the co-editors brought together for the first time 'the disparate work of psychogeographers, nature writers, architectural historians and landscape poets' (Cooper, 2020:forthcoming) covering a broad representation of place writing in this anthology.

To further illustrate the type of landscapes being written about in contemporary place writing, which are not included in *Towards Re-enchantment*, I will briefly discuss Paul Farley and Michael Symmons-Roberts' (v) *Edgelands* (2011). Collectively these readings will demonstrate the: various sub-genres of place writing; the topographies being explored; techniques and methodologies used and the themes and preoccupations of those working within the genre. I will conclude this chapter by summarizing these findings.

(i) Iain Sinclair: 'Water Walks'

'Water Walks' is the only contribution in *Towards Re-enchantment* which explores an urban landscape (although it is a park) and is rooted in the London borough of Hackney, where Sinclair has lived since the 1960s. Within this essay, he utilizes many of the techniques evident in his earlier nonfiction texts on place, including 'psychogeography – a surrealist ploy for divining the spirit of a place' (Hunter-Tilney, 2018:6). Guy Debord, a founding member of the Situationist International (a group of avant-garde artists, writers and thinkers involved in radical public-art interventions in 1950s Paris) defined psychogeography as 'the study of the precise

laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (Debord, 1955:8). The idea of the *dérive* or 'drift' as a way of exploring an urban environment is at the core of this multi-disciplinary practice, which dates back to the nineteenth-century *flâneurs* of Paris but according to Merlin Coverley, the author of *Psychogeography* (2010), the term still resists 'definition[...]and [is] constantly being reshaped by its practitioners' (Coverley, 2010:10).

Psychogeography has been consciously used as a literary approach by a number of London writers including Peter Ackroyd, Will Self, Stewart Home, and, most noticeably, Iain Sinclair. 'All of these figures' can, according to Coverley, 'be corralled into a loose allegiance of overlapping themes' (Coverley, 2010:33) including the search for hidden ley lines, lost rivers, and the mystical and occultist past of the city, which they explore through critically engaged urban walking. What marks Sinclair out 'is his ability to see patterns, signs and correspondences where perhaps the rest of us see dog shit, broken fencing and inane graffiti' (Talbot, 2014:online). For example, in 'Water Walks' Sinclair interprets a muddy flooded pathway near the Olympic Stadium into: 'a beautifully charged metaphor, a waterfall as wide as Niagra turning the footpath into a vertical river' (Sinclair, 2010b:19).

Lights Out for the Territory (1997) centers around nine long walks across London, a methodology which according to Sinclair's introduction to the book in *The Telegraph* became 'a model for future projects: the walk as a narrative, as a moving film made from static images' (Sinclair, 2010a:online). Sinclair also notes in this article that, whilst walking and researching the essays for *Lights Out*, he had 'unconsciously[...]been operating, all along, as a disenfranchised psychogeographer' (Sinclair, 2010a:online). After publication of this text Sinclair rather reluctantly became known as 'the godfather of contemporary psychogeography' (Richardson, 2015:9) although recently he has distanced himself from the term, which he feels has become 'very overused,' as Nick Talbot writes:

Sinclair urges that psychogeography had relevance when the Situationists used it as an aggressive way of dealing with the city [...] but eventually it became a 'nasty brand name' used to describe almost anything to do with cities or walking. He has instead signed up to Nick Papadimitriou's notion of

‘Deep Topography,’ which brings the tradition back to that of the British naturalist, the wanderer of edges who is not so preoccupied with the concept of his practice (Talbot, 2014:online).

In *Scarp* (2012) Papadimitriou describes deep topography as ‘the land’s very structure and memory unfurling in the mind’ (Papadimitriou, 2012:255). The methodology combines the drift or aimless walking associated with psychogeography but is, as Talbot notes above, less ‘preoccupied with the concept’ of that practice. Deep topography is further described by Papadimitriou in John Roger’s documentary *The London Perambulator: Afoot in London’s Edgelands* (2009) as ‘finding the overlooked’ whilst examining a place for signs of the past, which can provide ‘a portal or window into other possibilities, which are embedded in the landscape’ (Papadimitriou in Rogers, 2009: 16:19 – 16:22). To summarise, the practise involves repetitive aimless walking, gathering material and information *en route* (found objects, books/maps from second-hand bookshops, taking photographs etc.) whilst searching for evidence of previous human habitation. These elements are merged with subjective observations and additional data, gleaned both during and after the walk, which are then woven into a narrative based on a walk.

Within Sinclair’s essay for *Towards Re-enchantment* these methodologies are visible throughout. For example, he includes contemporary observations ‘Water clogs the football pitches where Orthodox boys, ringlets, white shirts, black waistcoats, stagger about with Sunday afternoon abandon’ (Sinclair, 2010b:16) with information on former local industry in the area from gravel extraction to brickmaking. This information is merged with details of his contemporary walk around the park and another visit in the 1890s by Benjamin Clarke, a ‘medical man and local historian’ who ‘records his speculative walks through the territory,’ (Sinclair, 2010b:19) mirroring Sinclair’s perambulations today.

Whether Sinclair’s walking-based narratives around the metropolis are described as psychogeographic or deep topographic explorations, they follow on from an earlier tradition of writers who explored the city on foot, such as William Blake, Thomas De-Quincey and Charles Dickens, and inspired an explosion of further urban explorations by writers including Self and Ackroyd as mentioned above.

Sinclair uses the walk as a literary device to guide the reader both through a place and keep the story moving forward. His walk through Springfield Park forms the structure for his essay in *Towards Re-enchantment* which also includes autobiographical details: 'From the start of my life in Hackney, I explored the canal system, and beyond that, the River Lea. Springfield Park, and the café beside the boathouse, became the natural conclusion to a morning session, to the plotting of a story or a script' (Sinclair, 2010b:18). Sinclair is also the narrator of this piece, as are all the authors in *Towards Re-Enchantment*, which led Cooper to observe: 'that the prose exploration of the authorial self-in-place is *the* dominant and defining mode of contemporary place writing' (Cooper, 2020:forthcoming).

Sinclair's 'trademark' writing style, 'apocalyptic mysticism and hard-boiled legwork' (Lezard, 2000:11) is utterly unique, his dense, poetic prose unmistakable: 'Within the grim stone canyons, blackened lungs and lips, a sudden shift out of place and time can be achieved' (Sinclair, 2010b:14). His influence on other writers and the wider genre is far reaching.

(ii) Ken Worpole: 'East of Eden'

Worpole, 'one of the most eloquent and forward thinking writers in Britain,' (Sandhu, 2014:113) is best known for writing about landscape and public policy as well as the often derided county of Essex, where he grew up. As I note in *Estuary* his:

essay 'East of Eden' (in the anthology *Towards Re-enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*, 2010) focused on the particular qualities of East Mersea, one of several inhabited Essex islands, with its dusty roads and little cottages, where people still in the summer put out boxes of apples or plums on tables to sell or give away (Lichtenstein 2016:105).

'East of Eden' combines Worpole's childhood memories of this place, with contemporary walks and cycle rides, along with archival research and geographical details, which connect the coastal pastoral Mersea with the urban centre of London further upriver:

Travelling out to Essex from London one moves from the vast docks and warehouses of the Pool of London, thick in the 1950s with ships' funnels and tugboats (which I recall from accompanying my father during school holidays when he collected timber from the docks) to Ford's at Dagenham, in Essex proper, just a few miles downriver (Worpole, 2010:65).

Worpole's part in this anthology, is, according to Weston in *Contemporary Literary Landscapes* (2016), 'the most explicit of the contributions in formulating a new set of values for landscape, and in providing a rationale for doing so' (Weston, 2016:112). Worpole's writing often has a specific focus on landscape aesthetics and which places are 'valued' and which remain 'unloved' in the British psyche today. In his publications *350 Miles* (2005) and *The New English Landscape* (2013) he 'weaves personal reflection, literary criticism, and a professional knowledge of the European Landscape Convention, to think about the aesthetics of 'the Essex coastal landscape' (Cooper, 2020:forthcoming) alongside discussing the 'urgent need to interpret and value contemporary landscapes anew, especially those that resist traditional categories of taste and approbation' (Cooper, 2020:forthcoming) like Essex.

Within this essay, as in his other publications mentioned above, Worpole also 'draws attention to how chroniclers of these estuarine landscapes often portray them shorn of their inhabitants or labourers, and in doing so erase a vital dimension of their identities' (Sandhu, 2014:113). Unlike many other place writers Worpole's work is filled with stories of people, human habitation, disappearing trades and industry, leading on from his earlier work as an oral historian and a frequent contributor to the *History Workshop Journal* (established in 1976 to promote radical and working-class histories).

Worpole's impact in the wider genre of contemporary British place writing is significant in multiple ways: he often connects the rural and the urban through memory, historical geography and archival research; his work highlights public attitudes to places like Essex, a county once awarded zero points out of ten for landscape quality in an article in *Country Life*, after which Ken started writing a counter narrative of his own; he unearths rich histories about landscapes and their

cultural traditions; and most significantly, he describes the relationship between ecology, environments and human settlement, trade and industry in his work. And as a policy maker and prominent public speaker across many disciplines, Worpole has managed to expand the message that ‘a growing appreciation of the importance of place now goes to the heart of politics, public aesthetics and cultural identity’ as stated in his interview with Little Toller Books (Worpole, 2013:online).

(iv) Robert Macfarlane: ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’

Macfarlane’s work has, according to Cooper, ‘captured and created the sense that, in British literary culture, we are living in a period of place’ (Cooper, 2020:forthcoming). He is undoubtedly the most successful contemporary author working in the genre today, whose multi-award winning international best-selling books on ‘language, place and nature’ have changed the literary landscape particularly in the popular sub-genre of ‘the new nature writing.’ A term coined by Jason Cowley in his introduction to *Granta* 102, ‘The New Nature Writing’ (2008), which featured specially commissioned articles by Macfarlane, Richard Deakin, Paul Farley, Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey and others. Cowley described the ‘best new nature writing’ as ‘an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue[....] something urgent, vital and alert to the defining particulars of our times’ (Cowley, 2008:10). Weston described Macfarlane in *Contemporary Literary Landscapes* (2016) as ‘the pivotal figure around whom this movement [the new nature writing] has recently turned’ (Weston, 2016: 106).

The *Granta* 102 issue was published after *The Wild Places* (2007), Macfarlane’s second major work in the ‘new nature writing’ genre, which followed on from *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) and merges Macfarlane’s ‘accounts of visits to various remote places in order to evoke their spirit of wildness’ (Motion, 2007:6) via a multi-layered deep-time evocation of place, past and present, with walking and archival research. Many of the techniques, concerns, themes and methodologies employed in *The Wild Places* and Macfarlane’s later works, are evident in ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook,’ which begins with a quote by David Abram to write

‘language back into the land’ – a call to arms really, and an on-going concern for Macfarlane, who has been collecting unusual words for landscapes and natural phenomena for decades. ‘It’s a lexicon we need to cherish in an age when a junior dictionary finds room for ‘broadband’ but has no place for ‘bluebell’ writes Macfarlane in an article for the *Guardian* (Macfarlane, 2015:2).

Whilst visiting the Isle of Lewis, Macfarlane received a ‘Peat Glossary’, whose poetic Gaelic terms, with their ‘striking visual poetry’ (Macfarlane, 2015:2) ran to over 126 terms. This book becomes the narrative hook for his essay in *Towards Re-enchantment*, which combines Macfarlane’s elegiac prose, with his description of his journey to the island, the people and places he encounters during this visit, alongside his observations and analysis of the collected language of this place, from the ‘memory-maps’ of those who had once inhabited this terrain, to the ‘place-language’ which is currently being lost on the island, to the specifics of the gifted phrasebook. His evocative description of the *Glossary* discloses as much about Macfarlane’s unique command of the English language as the lost language of the moor he seeks to find: ‘The *Glossary* reveals the Moor to be a terrain so intricate that it has generated a vocabulary devoted to the finessing and division of its perception and practise. A slow capillary creep of knowledge has occurred here, up out of landscape and into knowledge’ (Macfarlane, 2010:110). His writing can also be seen as a form of archiving, of both disappearing language[s] and place[s], whilst intimately describing these places, which are often remote and wild. Macfarlane’s unique combination of deep academic inquiry, vigorous and sometimes physically dangerous expeditions into natural landscapes often alone, lyrical prose style and wide popular appeal, set him apart from, and at times against, others in the ‘new nature writing’ field as we shall see below.

(v) Kathleen Jamie: ‘On Rona’

Kathleen Jamie’s contribution for *Towards Re-enchantment* also sits firmly within the ‘new nature writing’ genre. Her essay records her visit to an island in the Scottish Hebrides, with Stuart (a self-taught naturalist) and Jill (an archaeologist), who had

come to document and observe changes in that remote place. The author, who is also an award-winning poet, combines exceptionally well-crafted prose with detailed descriptions of Rona, to create, for example, an evocative soundscape of that place: 'There are no beaches, all is cliff, swooping now high, now low, and cut with many geos. The sea prowled into every geo; by night its sound seemed muted, though now and then the breeze brought whoops of seal-song' (Jamie, 2010:138). Jamie pays sharp attention in all her nonfiction texts to listening and looking as noted throughout Weston's Chapter 5 'Noticing: Kathleen Jamie' (Weston, 2016:127 – 143) in *Contemporary Literary Landscapes* (2016), where he states 'Jamie's writing offers differently accented refractions of a similar set of concerns to those of Robert Macfarlane, maintaining a more sustained critique of habitual ways of seeing' (Weston, 2016:127). Throughout her creative nonfiction texts Jamie also threads elements of autobiography and travel writing, alongside investigations into the diversity of/and threat to the natural world and the historical past of places. 'Rona inhabited once, but now the island is returned to birds and seals' (Jamie, 2010:137). She notes soon after her arrival 'a long abandoned village surrounded by a swirl of field systems, and a very early Christian chapel' (Jamie, 2010:137) and is knowingly aware throughout her two-week stay on the island of what lies beneath.

Jamie has written about her irritation with male writers operating within the 'new nature writing' genre, in particular Macfarlane, and his claim that the places he encountered in the Celtic countries were 'empty,' whilst researching and writing *The Wild Places*. 'These landscapes have been humanized for thousands of years' said Jamie in an interview for the *Scottish Review of Books*, 'there've been Mesolithic people, Neolithic people, bronze-age people' (Jamie, 2012:8). She was uncomfortable with the idea of Macfarlane's project, which appeared to her 'like an act of colonial adventuring' and she 'got annoyed with this figure thinking that the only way you can participate in our landscapes is to be male and stride and swim and be macho' (Jamie, 2012:8).

Jamie is notably the only female author cited in this chapter, although others are included in the *Towards Re-enchantment* anthology (such as Jay Griffiths, Jane Rendell and Alice Oswald). There are many highly influential female writers in the wider place writing field (such as American authors Annie Dillard, Winifred Gallagher,

Robin Wall Kimmerer, the late poet Mary Oliver and the great writer of walking and place Rebecca Solnit for example) but there still remains a considerable gender imbalance to date in contemporary British place writing (which is beginning to be readdressed with the arrival of British writers such as Helen McDonald, Melissa Harrison, Juliet Blaxland and Amy Liptrot).

Jamie's writing, both critical and creative, highlights the problematic male 'macho' sense of exploration of place she describes above, which is not unique to Macfarlane, and could be applied to many other works of contemporary place writing, which are overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) written by men. Her work complicates and disrupts this approach by meticulously documenting the constant human interactions and intrusions in so called 'wild places' including her own relationship to these places, which can be of a domestic nature: 'Between the laundry and the fetching kids from school, that's how birds enter my life' (Jamie, 2005:39). Another focus for Jamie, as noted by Jos Smith in *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* (2017), is the 'survival of marginalised histories in a wild landscape,' (Smith, 2017:88) seen for example, in her descriptions of the decommissioned mining village she visits during her submission for *Granta's* 'The New Nature Writing' edition. These elements are as Smith states 'part of the cultural geography of the place for Jamie and they prevent what she sees as the 'lone enraptured male' experience of the wild' (Smith, 2017:89). This quotation references her much discussed review of *The Wild Places* in *The London Review of Books* entitled 'A Lone Enraptured Male' (2008), which (discussed in her interview for the *Scottish Review of Books*) and stresses the fallacy of the idea of 'wildness' in the twenty-first century in the U.K.:

There's nothing wild in this country: every square inch of it is 'owned', much has seen centuries of bitter dispute; the whole landscape is man-made [...] and if we do come unstuck there's a fair chance that, like the man on Ben Nevis, we'll get a mobile signal and be rescued (Jamie 2008:26).

Since the publication of this article, writers working within the genre have been far more conscious of the risk of overlooking the complex layering of stories in even the remotest places, which are in fact, 'littered with human history' and 'peopled by

ghosts' (Jamie 2008:26). As Weston notes in *Contemporary Literary Landscapes* (2016) 'where Macfarlane's work is enraptured, Jamie's highlights 'attention' (Weston, 2016:128) offering a more community focused 'human' centric approach to landscape 'as an interrupted genre, which is part of being a woman' (Smith, 2017:90) for Jamie.

To summarise, the *Towards Re-enchantment* collection has been seminal in its defining of the field and evidences: many of the practises, techniques and methodologies used by British place writers today; the divide between the pastoral and the urban (Sinclair and Macfarlane); the connection between the rural and the metropolis (Worpole) and the early conflicts in the genre, with the approach of the kind of 'into the wild' masculinity of Macfarlane and the more human focused nature based work of Jamie, which raises important issues of gender in place writing that I will expand on later in this commentary.

(vi) Moving beyond *Towards Re-enchantment: Edgelands*

The edgelands, the inter-zone places 'characterised by rubbish tips and warehouses, superstores and derelict industrial plant, office parks and gypsy encampments, golf courses, allotments and fragmented, frequently scruffy, farmland' (Shoard, 2002:117) have not been referred to in *Towards Re-enchantment*. However they feature heavily in the work of some of its contributors, for example Sinclair's *London Orbital* (2003), Worpole's *350 Miles* (2005) and most significantly Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973), a ground-breaking work of nature writing, which records the year Mabey spent reconnoitring England's inner city canals, car parks, docksides, sewage works and gravel pits.

The more recent chroniclers of these topographies, Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, describe these landscapes in *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* (2012) as the places 'where urban and rural negotiate their borders' (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012:5). The authors recognise Mabey as 'the presiding spirit' (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012:5) of *Edgelands*, although they note his focus in *The Unofficial Countryside* was 'the resilience of nature in these

places, rather than a celebration of these places themselves' (Farley and Symmons-Roberts, 2012:5), which is the focus of their joyful book.

The detailed descriptions of the dens, tree houses and rubbish dumps, where they played as children on the outskirts of Liverpool and Manchester are a welcome and much overlooked addition to the literature of place. The 'wider spaces of dereliction and waste left behind in the aftermath of industrialization' (Farley and Symmons-Roberts, 2012:7) are also heavily documented as the authors explore container parks, sewage farms, abandoned power stations and industrial sites.

The British geographer and environmentalist Marion Shoard was the first to name these marginal zones as the edgeland in *Remaking the Landscape* (2002) although, as noted above, Mabey had written about these territories decades before in *The Unofficial Countryside*. His methodology 'writing by walking' became, according to Sinclair, 'the template for a gathering school of writers, many of them associated with the East Anglian countryside: W.G. Sebald, Ronald Blythe, Roger Deakin, Robert Macfarlane' (Sinclair, 2010c:20). Mabey was the first contemporary nature writer to adopt this practise, although Sinclair was making parallel urban investigations on foot at the same time, whilst researching cartographic connections between Hawksmoor's six churches in London for his work of prose poetry *Lud Heat* (1974).

The edgelands have been explored by many writers working in the place writing genre and connect work across the field. *The Unofficial Countryside* was the first text to examine these landscapes in depth and has become, according to Sinclair the 'unacknowledged pivot between the new nature writers and those others, of a grungier dispensation, who are randomly (and misleadingly) herded together as "psychogeographers,"' (Sinclair, 2010c:20).

Summary Chapter 2

Collectively these readings cover all the key landscapes being explored within contemporary British place writing including: urban, rural, wild, coastal and edgeland places although the suburban remains less examined. Most of the places described

within these texts are either significant for, or local to the authors, such as the park near Iain Sinclair's London home, the island in Essex where Ken Worpole rode his bike as a boy, the edgeland sites near the childhood homes of Farley and Symmonds Roberts on the outskirts of northern cities, and the remote island of Rona in Kathleen Jamie's Scotland. Robert Macfarlane's relationship to the Isle of Lewis is less personal but aligned with the adventurous nature of his work, which features many remote and inaccessible wild places, both in the U.K. and elsewhere, whose disappearing landscapes and cultures he highlights and champions.

The readings of these works illustrate many of the concerns, themes and methodologies of contemporary British place writing including: the practices of psychogeography and deep topography (Sinclair), historical geography, former trades and industry (Worpole), literary criticism (Worpole, Sinclair, Macfarlane and Symmonds Roberts) and autobiographical elements (Sinclair, Worpole, Jamie, Farley and Symmonds Roberts).

The common ground between all these works is that they: are led by 'the authorial I'; have a 'sustained focus on place'; are structured around a walk or visit to a place/s; include observational writing, well-crafted prose, personal reflection, digressive asides and geographical details; contain encounters with local people and culture; highlight ecological and environmental issues; unearth historical information and new insights about the places explored and most significantly, take place as the central theme of the narrative.

Chapter 3:

Lichtenstein's Place Writing: Practice, Outputs and Outcomes

To ascertain how the trilogy of creative nonfiction books *On Brick Lane* (2007), *Diamond Street* (2012), and *Estuary* (2016) submitted for this analytical commentary have contributed to place writing, I will firstly describe how my unique creative-critical praxis emerged. The foundation of my practice as a place writer is based in over a decade of working as a cross-disciplinary artist, curator, archivist and oral historian whose work focused on themes of place, memory and identity. I trained originally as a sculptor. The multi-media, multi-disciplinary practise-led research I developed then combined making objects, with walking, photography, drawing, map-making and filmmaking alongside research in private and public archives and the recording of oral-testimony. This combined methodology (aside from making sculpture) still lies at the heart of my creative practice as a place writer.

After first establishing this practise whilst completing my degree in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University in 1991, I further developed this methodology after taking a position as artist-in-residence at the Princelet Street Synagogue in East London. During this time I explored the local area on foot, where my Polish Jewish paternal grandparents had once lived, taking photographs and recording stories of former Jewish residents of that place, including members of my own family. This research, along with the gathering of archival material and ephemera informed my artworks. For example, *Ner Htmaid* [Eternal Lights] consisted of welded steel frames filled with objects sealed in resin, such as tools from my grandfather's East London watchmaking shop, along with family photographs, material collected on walks and other memorabilia relating to that place.

In 1994 I exhibited these sculptures as part of the Whitechapel Open (curated by the Whitechapel Art Gallery) in the window of C.h.N.Katz's string shop on Brick Lane, one of the last Hasidic-owned businesses in the area. Iain Sinclair saw this installation during one of his 'drifts' through Whitechapel, and later wrote about the artwork in *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997):

Lichtenstein had a direct relationship with the objects she had chosen. A small bayonet bulb, a thimble of inherited light. An unredeemed death ring woven from hair [...] there were many more items in Lichtenstein's back catalogue, her private museum; more than she could show (Sinclair, 1997:241).

I started to collaborate with Sinclair from this time onwards, on various projects, including an experimental film in the attic of the Princelet Street synagogue about the story of David Rodinsky, an orthodox Jewish scholar who had lived in those rooms and disappeared in the 1960s leaving everything in place.

In 1995 I participated in an international Jewish artist's programme in Arad (Israel), where I created a large-scale three-dimensional sculpture *Kirsch Family* (1996) based on a family portrait taken in Poland (c.1915). I meticulously reassembled this image, life-size, from Byzantine and Roman pottery-shards collected from archaeological sites in Israel. This artwork is important to mention here because 'the complex layering of historical experience and memory' (Bohm-Duchen and Grodinski, 1996:48) within, and its direct relation to place, past and present, along with the resonant themes of identity and loss, fragmented histories and the haunting of the disappeared, are leitmotifs that reoccur in all my place based publications.

In 1997 I returned to London to exhibit *Kirsch Family* in the 'Rubies and Rebels: Female Jewish Identity in Contemporary British Art' show held at the Barbican Centre, and to participate in the launch event for *Lights Out for the Territory*. In front of a live audience, in the basement of a former abattoir in Smithfield meat-market, I relayed the story of my research in the Princelet Street Synagogue. I projected the earlier film made with Sinclair of Rodinsky's abandoned attic, played audio clips and described related encounters with people and places connected to the research. Sinclair's literary agent witnessed this performance then suggested I write a book on the subject in collaboration with Iain Sinclair. The multi-layered situated practise and methodologies I had developed and employed as an artist directly informed, and in fact directly led to the publication of *Rodinsky's Room* (1999). Working on this book with Sinclair gave me the unique opportunity to develop my creative writing practice under the guidance of arguably the most influential (and prolific) place writer in the

U.K. today.

Following the critical success of *Rodinsky's Room* much of my work since then has focused on the production of the trilogy of books submitted for this thesis although I continue to make related artworks, which often inform my monographs. For example, in 2000 I was commissioned by the Whitechapel Gallery to create an extensive oral history archive of memories of the Whitechapel Library. This research developed into a multi-media site-specific installation *University of the Ghetto* (shown as part of the Whitechapel Gallery's Centenary Exhibition in 2001), which included nineteenth-century tables and chairs from the former library, exhibited in the gallery space, alongside projected images from the library's collections, photographs from the reading rooms, and recordings from the oral history collection. The deep personal enquiry, extensive archival study, and gathering of audio-visual and historical material in an attempt to understand the meanings of a place, employed whilst researching and constructing this artwork, are the same methodologies I used whilst later researching *On Brick Lane*. In fact excerpts from the oral history collection gathered for this installation were later used in the book.

To summarise, the examples above, just a few of many possible, demonstrate how my multi-disciplinary way of working as an artist has directly informed and often led to the development of my subsequent published works. My creative nonfiction publications submitted for this thesis are a hybrid of artistic investigation, situated practise, creative-critical work and reflection as method, that is a form of research itself, in how it responds to the same imperatives of answering questions and generating knowledge about place.

My contribution to knowledge

On Brick Lane was the first in the London street series; part of a three-book deal for publishers Hamish Hamilton of nonfiction works that examined, through multiple perspectives and methodologies, streets in different areas of London. Volumes on Hatton Garden and Portobello Road were to follow, although the later was replaced by *Estuary* due to a new direction in my work and life.

All of these locations were chosen because of personal and familial connections because for me, as a female writer and a mother, much like Jamie, 'landscape never fully unravels itself from the complications of family, community, work, the home' (Smith, 2017:90). All of the books submitted for this thesis have been written whilst raising my children and partly due to the restrictions of domestic and childcare responsibilities, it has been necessary to write about places near to home. These locations were also selected because of the significant period of change and redevelopment happening in all three at the time of writing. The monographs aimed to both unearth new knowledge about these places, and document the history of these locations before they were either erased through regeneration or the past slipped out of living memory. In this way, all three contribute to knowledge in the field. To evidence how, I will now examine and define my own methodology and practise in creating the three works submitted for this thesis before summarizing these findings.

On Brick Lane

The research for *On Brick Lane* was started whilst holding the award for the first British Library Pearson Creative Research Fellow (2002-04), a residency bestowed on me because of the unique blend of experimental research and oral history based, community-engaged, site-specific creative praxis, which had, as evidenced above, grown directly out of earlier artistic investigations and further developed whilst writing *Rodinsky's Room*. As writer and literary critic Ian Thomson observed, my 'quest for Rodinsky merged into a wider enquiry' and '*On Brick Lane* is part of this journey' (Thomson, 2017:30). In this sense *On Brick Lane* can be seen as a companion book to *Rodinsky's Room*, but it is less autobiographical than the later

and firmly rooted in the place writing genre, with the focus being the east London street Brick Lane, its stories, past and present, with elements of memoir but a focus on the testimony of others.

My multi-disciplinary practise certainly informed *On Brick Lane*. As noted by critic Lianne Kolirin 'Lichtenstein[...]an artist, archivist and writer[...]spent five long years juggling[...]various skills[...]to pull together a magnificent chronicle of one of the capital's most renowned streets' (Kolirin, 2007:50). The approaches used included: 'topographical study, family history and oral testimony illustrated with numerous photographs and extracts from a wide variety of texts' (Sanderson, 2007:41). A further range 'of sources and materials, including psychogeographical wanderings[...]interviews with locals and historians, archival and historical research' (Boettcher, 2013:1) alongside my own memories of the place combined, according to Jo Glanville writing in the *New Statesman* 'to create an endlessly intriguing portrait of Brick Lane, which is as alive and fascinating as the neighbourhood it so movingly celebrates' (Glanville, 2007:47).

Many of the techniques and methodologies used by other place writers such as Sebald (in *The Rings of Saturn*), Jamie, Worpole and Sinclair (in *Towards Re-enchantment*) are also evident in this text. The story is narrated by the authorial I; there are multiple encounters with people who have lived or worked in this place; detailed information on historical events are interwoven into the account along with immersive observational writing; there is consistent evidence throughout of walking in place; and a deep engagement with the histories of communities, past and present, which reveals new knowledge about this place, particularly through the testimonies of those whose stories have not been told before. It is the inclusion of these multiple voices to describe this place, which particularly separates my practise from the authors mentioned above. This testimony serves multiple functions, including, as noted by Lynn Abrams in *Oral History Theory* (2016), giving 'voice to the voice-less, a narrative to the story-less and power to the marginalised' (Abrams, 2016:76). The myriad of transcribed oral recordings in *On Brick Lane* includes previously untold stories of Bangladeshi women, Jewish tailors and white working class residents, such as market traders and brewery workers. According to P.D. Smith, writing in the *Guardian*, the addition of these hidden histories made *On Brick*

Lane, 'a wonderfully evocative and personal portrait. Oral history at its best' (Smith, 2008: 20).

Including the testimony of others in *On Brick Lane* also highlights the layers of stories embedded in a place and in this way is akin to the work of Jamie but with a more focused emphasis on conducting historical research through the methodology of recorded interviews, as practised and defined by the *Oral History Society*. The extent of this practise for this publication meant that after many years of conducting such research, which also involved multiple walks across the same territory whilst listening to first-hand accounts of those who had lived and worked in this place, I could eventually 'mentally map the area as it had once been' (Lichtenstein, 2008:1). The inclusion of a hand-drawn map of Brick Lane, on which I superimposed the names of people I had interviewed on various locations, is, as Boettcher suggests, a graphic representation that reveals 'a network of interconnecting, collective memories[...]and] suggests that memory shapes the identity and geography of a neighbourhood' (Boettcher, 2013:2).

My determination to uncover the deep multi-layered history of this place also emphasises according to Boettcher, 'psychogeographical interest in the place's layers of the past' (Boettcher, 2013:3). She further notes that my preoccupation with both 'excavating the past' as well as 'recording the present' (Boettcher, 2013:2) fits neatly with Coverley's description of psychogeography 'the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioral impact of urban place' (Coverley, 2010: 9). Zaltman writing in the *Observer* states *On Brick Lane* is constructed via: 'an archivist's attention to detail with a psychogeographer's visionary fervor' (Zaltman, 2008:26). Psychogeographic practices are clearly evident within all my submitted works and have been noted by a number of critics and academics as mentioned above, although at the time of writing I was not conscious of this practice. However, drilling down through the historical and cultural layers embedded in this place to exhume and examine previously hidden stories that had 'largely vanished' from this continuously inhabited part of the metropolis was certainly a motivation for the research. As noted by Sethi in a review of *On Brick Lane* for the *Independent*, 'Buried beneath newly paved streets are archaeological treasures, and through a mix of archival research and first-hand documentary,

Lichtenstein attempts an excavation before they become erased' (Sethi, 2008:33).

Through extensive research in the Bishopsgate Institute Archives, Local History archives of Tower Hamlets Library and the London Metropolitan Archives, I uncovered the historical past of the street, learning how the place transformed from 'a deep dirty road, frequented chiefly by carts fetching bricks that way into Whitechapel from Brick kilns in those fields' (Lichtenstein, 2008: 24) on the outskirts of the city, to the first port of call to successive waves of immigrants, from eighteenth century Huguenot weavers to the Jewish refugees of the 1880s to the late twentieth-century Bangladeshi community, to becoming one of the most fashionable and expensive areas in London.

The story of Brick Lane is therefore told via 'a cyclical view of history' (Mehmi, 2009:online) with historical anecdotes, maps, contemporary photographs, quotes from literature and poetry, drawings and the gathered oral testimony of many residents, past and present. *On Brick Lane* was further described by Suneel Mehmi in *The Literary London Journal* as 'a heteroglossia or a collage of oral histories and artefacts' (Mehmi, 2009:online) where she observes not only 'voices' are read but also:

Photographs, quotations, short anecdotes, even emails... These diverse elements disrupt a purely linear, monolithic progression of text or history. In a further self-reflexive, postmodernist twist, Lichtenstein recounts how her excavation of community builds momentum by creating a contingent community of its own (Mehmi, 2009:online).

The experimental structure of this text as described by Mehmi, also separates my work from others in the field. As demonstrated above this multidisciplinary, multi-perspective methodology developed from my art practise and also responds to postmodern theory in literature, history and feminist theory. As Laura Wexler states in her chapter 'Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction' (2001): 'Postmodernism shows us the impossibility of the existence of one true version of anything' (Wexler, 2001:27). Furthermore, historian Frank Ankersmit claims that 'historians' narratives and interpretations (as representations) do not refer to what

actually happened in the past, because the real past is not epistemically accessible to us' (Heikki, 2005:5). These postmodern notions of historical and literary representation underpin much of my earlier work as an artist as substantiated by the sculptures I created, which represent how the past is always fragmented and never complete – like a mosaic, or a collage, with gaps and missing pieces.

The inclusion of multiple voices within my monographs to describe a place, including the often previously hidden stories of ethnic, minority, migrant and women's histories, demonstrates a feminist approach to postmodern practise. As noted by Doris Massey in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) 'Postmodernism holds out the potential democracy of a plurality of voices and points of view, the end to a notion of science and society which has in fact[...]been unremittingly male, a patriarchal hierarchy with a claim to truth' (Massey, 1994:212).

On Brick Lane was also noted for the inclusion of 'extracts from a wide variety of texts written by people in whose footsteps Lichtenstein is following' (Glanville, 2007:47). I was aware, as were many critics, that in this well documented area of East London I was just 'the latest in a line of visionary East End chroniclers to rescue that past[...]part of an inspired literary and historical reinvention of the neighbourhood -- along with Iain Sinclair, Patrick Wright and Ackroyd -- which has recast the streets with a resonant symbolism' (Glanville, 2007:47). Female authors are notably absent from this list and currently still very under-represented in the genre, particularly within the field of urban explorations in place writing. However since the publication of *On Brick Lane*, the gender gap has been marginally filled by new writers such as Amy Liptrot, whose work of nature-memoir *The Outrun* (2016) includes explorations of London, and Lauren Elkin's *Flanuese* (2017), which examines female urban investigations around the globe.

On Brick Lane was recognized both by reviewers and authors in the place writing field as achieving specific functions, particularly on the role of cultural memory associated with place. Tarquin Hall, writing in the *Guardian* stated: 'in an age when modern, consumer culture is erasing so much of the past, Lichtenstein's anguish and instinct to preserve memory is admirable' (Hall, 2007:9). *On Brick Lane* was also seen as a 'useful and instructive book [that] catches time's riptide once more on the turn' (Spurling, 2007:25) and Jeanette Winterson stated in *The Times* that I had written

well 'about what it means to shape-shift through faith and culture' (Winterson, 2007:3).

The other particular roles the book has achieved, beyond describing the place at its heart include: retrieving 'the street's past and connect[ing] it to its present' (Thomson, 2007:30); encouraging 'the reader to explore the territory' (Glanville, 2007:47) and most significantly telling the story of this place through a collaborative research process that merges historical research with personal observation and encounters with marginalised or hidden communities.

Diamond Street: The Hidden World of Hatton Garden

Diamond Street describes London's secretive and mysterious jewellery quarter Hatton Garden. Within the book I attempt to reveal the history and stories that bring this vibrant Clerkenwell street and its environs to life. Intimately connected to the area both personally (through family) and professionally (as an archivist of London streets), I was undoubtedly uniquely placed to explore the previously untold stories of this historic part of old London. I walked repeatedly across the same territory whilst conducting the research for this book, gathering new layers of the story with each journey, which, much like *On Brick Lane*, took over five years of investigations to complete.

Within the text I move beyond this single street, and explore the wider area of Hatton Garden 'the fold in the map, a place on the edge of different borderlands that sits on the city fringe somewhere between Clerkenwell, Holborn and Farringdon' (Lichtenstein, 2012:1). I followed the ancient perimeter of the original Hatton Garden estate, which once bordered the lost River Fleet and explored many other places, both above and below ground. I was often guided on my walks by others who knew this place intimately such as archaeologists, sewer flushers, artists, goldsmiths, geologists and visionaries of the city such as Iain Sinclair as noted by The Gentle Author in his review for *The Guardian*:

Pursuing her quest for the essence of the place, Lichtenstein consulted a whole gang of glorious characters, collecting tales, history and lore on her way. And she explored the secret spaces in backstreets and basements where the past appears to linger, and the spirits of Shakespeare, Hogarth, Dick Turpin and Dickens may still be found (The Gentle Author, 2012:42).

Employing the methodologies of psychogeography, historical geography, deep topography, archival research, and 'conscious walking' across this locale with various historical experts I attempted to 'peel back the veil of time, to glimpse a moment of the past, to walk in a landscape from a bygone era' (Lichtenstein, 2012:330) and in so doing learned that Hatton Garden, much like Brick Lane, was once a classic edgeland located on the boundary of the old Roman City wall. This place transformed over time (like most contemporary edgeland sites) from a rural space beyond the metropolis to marginal edgeland filled with wastelands and rubbish dumps, burial sites, artillery grounds and medieval plague pits. Downwind from the commercial centre, the noxious trades of brewing and tanning were also to be found there, alongside slaughterhouses, metal refineries, sawmills, and other early manufacturing sites. Eventually this inter-zone was absorbed back into the municipal centre, which is the most likely future for the contemporary places described in *Edgelands*, which 'are constantly shifting and being redeveloped' (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012:213).

My researches into Hatton Garden stretched much further back in historical time than for *On Brick Lane*. To understand this place it was necessary to learn about the constantly shifting topography of the landscape, which at points in its history had literally been carved anew, as noted by Lucy Popescu in her review in the *Independent*:

Lichtenstein also explores the changing geography of the area. The lower course of the River Fleet once ran through Clerkenwell and into the Thames [...] urban redevelopment contributed to its pollution and eventually it was entombed underground in Joseph Bazalgette's sewer (Popescu, 2012:68).

A shift in practise is evidenced in this monograph. I added to knowledge gleaned on archival trawls by walking with different experts who could help me visualize the areas past; archivists, geologists, archaeologists, and historians, such as Adele

Leffman, who guided me around the former medieval landscape of the River Fleet where: 'wide-open fields, monastic priories, gardens and orchards[...]once existed in the area for centuries' (Lichtenstein, 2012:71) then collapsed after the Dissolution. 'Buildings were abandoned, the land that had been cultivated by the monks became a wasteland' (Lichtenstein, 2012:71). Leffman's stories were merged with historical data and oral testimony to create a collage of information about this place, told, much like Sinclair's contribution in *Towards Re-enchantment*, through the narrative device of the walk.

Through further investigations via historical geography (the branch of geography that studies the ways in which geographic phenomena have changed over time), the deep history of the area began to unfold. Historical geography as a methodology in the U.K. primarily came to the fore in the post-war period through the work of a Cambridge scholar, the historian and geographer Clifford Darby, who stated 'all geography is historical geography, either actual or potential' (Darby, 1953:6). Darby's methodology combined fieldwork, with cartography and historical evidence from archival sources to understand the changing history of landscapes.

The combination of walking with historical experts, examining maps over time, making observations in 'the natural environment' and merging this material with extensive archival searches shows my use of this methodology. Historical geography enabled me to understand this place and how it had transitioned overtime from being a rural area outside the Roman city, to the home of monasteries and orchards, then a purpose built residential estate for the gentry, before becoming the commercial diamond quarter it is today.

Psychogeographic practice was also consciously employed during the research, evident for example in my exploration of Clerkenwell's territorial imperative, a term coined by the writer Peter Ackroyd to describe how 'certain places actively guide or determine the lives of those who live within their bounds, through an underlying energy that connects the actions of the past and present' (Lichtenstein, 2012:83). The dark and illicit history of Turnmill Street in Clerkenwell perfectly illustrated this theory; from its incarnation as a run-down rookery, home to brothels and highwaymen in the late sixteenth century, to the site of the first 24-hour rave club in the 1980s, where shootings and other illegal activities have occurred in the recent

past. Sukhdev Sandhu, in his review for the *Guardian* notes 'Lichtenstein is one of the few prominent female figures operating within the fuzzily defined field of contemporary psychogeography' (Sandhu, 2012:8). Cooper recognised that whilst writing *Diamond Street* I had enacted 'Deep mapping of this circumscribed place through a combination of pedestrian practice, archival research, and personal recollection and reflection' (Cooper, 2016:284) but, he states, 'Arguably the most striking strand of Lichtenstein's methodology, however is her incorporation of extensive interviews with people who live and work in Hatton Garden' (Cooper, 2016:284). Oral history recordings certainly form the core of this monograph as with *On Brick Lane*. Testimony from members of my own family was included along with memories of goldsmiths, diamond merchants, jewellery makers and others who work in the trade, many of who had lived in east London or arrived in Hatton Garden as refugees escaping Nazi occupied Europe.

The inclusion of oral testimony, as a unique strand of my work, has been recognised by my peers in the place writing field. In Ken Worpole's review of the book for the *Independent* he notes that these interviews formed 'a generous heartbeat to the book, as do the testimonies from former inhabitants of Little Italy' (Worpole, 2012:28). And Robert Macfarlane provided a quote for the paperback edition which states: '*Diamond Street* is suffused throughout with Rachel Lichtenstein's fascination with people and place – a fascination which approaches a moral quality, really, in its tenderness, diligence and cultural openness' (Macfarlane, 2013a).

Another distinctive element of my practise, as noted by Laura Barnett in her review for the *Telegraph* (2012) is that the dramatization of my 'painstaking research process' where I describe 'visits to libraries and archives, rather than hiding them away in footnotes' (Barnett, 2012:26). This practise exposes my working methods (and a certain autobiographical awareness) whilst also making manifest the construction of the past from the source materials, which in my case are often other people's recollected versions of the past. This conscious practise, I would argue, also evidences a feminist approach to history, which aims, amongst others agendas, according to Jill Matthews in her journal article 'Feminist History' (1986) to 'challenge the practises of the historical discipline' (Matthews, 1986:150). This

includes, as Susan Pedersen states, 'to re-examine and rewrite the entire historical narrative to reveal the construction and workings' (Penderson, 2000:online).

My methodology as a writer is comparable to my sculptural practice in the way I gather and collect 'fragmented narratives [...] allied with diligent archival trawls' (Sandhu, 2012:8) which are then assembled into an account, which honours and acknowledges the work and opinions of others, exposes and recognizes missing gaps in the story whilst attempting to uncover previously untold histories which would otherwise be lost to time. Macfarlane defined my methodology for *Diamond Street* in his endorsement for the paperback edition as a being 'poised somewhere between deep history, archaeological dig, archive-quest and contemporary documentary,' (Macfarlane, 2013). The writer Linda Grant in her review of *Diamond Street* for the *Times* stated I had: 'written the story of Hatton Garden as a kind of three-dimensional hologram in which she excavates what is above ground, below it and backwards in time: the revolution of London itself' (Grant, 2012:16). Both of these evaluations refer to the archaeological nature of my writing about place, which could be compared to Deakin's observations on Sebald as 'an archaeologist forever trowelling his way through the layers of the stories he always senses beneath every meadow or pavement' (Deakin 2011:14).

Diamond Street was further recognised 'as a multi-layered portrait; both a documentary and a secret history of a vanishing world' (Seymour, 2012:36) that created 'a syncopated momentum that shifts between the personal perspective and the grand picture of history' (The Gentle Author, 2012:42) with its alternating accounts 'between candid interviews with those who carry the recent story of Hatton Garden' (The Gentle Author, 2012:42). Furthermore my multi-disciplinary research, in the form of moving film footage, audio interviews, archival images and other information, was developed into the *Diamond Street App* - a freely downloadable GPS activated rich media digital app for smartphones and tablets (funded by Arts Council England), which takes readers on a journey through both the physical territory of the book, by guiding them through the historic jewellery quarter of Hatton Garden and the stories in *Diamond Street*. The app used content from the book, along with specially developed rich media, soundscapes and specially

commissioned films, which allowed users to go on either a virtual (armchair version) or a real (GPS activated) guided tour around the area.

Estuary: Out from London to the Sea

The expanding territories described within my texts culminate in the final monograph in the trilogy with *Estuary*, a monograph which explores an extensive geographical region of over 800 nautical square miles, stretching from Tower Bridge on the edge of the city of London to the outer reaches of this waterway at the mouth of the North Sea, as well as the bordering coastal landscapes on the Kent and Essex coastlines. The idea for this book developed after I moved back to my birthplace, the fishing town of Leigh-on-sea in Essex, and follows on from a five-day experiential trip along the Thames Estuary in an 80ft Dutch barge called *IDEAAL* (initiated by artists Simon Callery and Ben Eastop and funded by the Arts Council) which sought to examine the Thames Estuary as it underwent a crucial period of change (2011). Further artistic and archival investigations followed, starting with the collaborative film *A Study for the Estuary* (2011) made with James Price, which charts *IDEAAL*'s progress from Queenborough in Kent across the shipping channels, to the pier in Southend and compares this to a similar voyage made by the writer Joseph Conrad in 1902, described in *Mirror of the Sea*. Another short film *Estuary: Working Lives* (shown during the 'Hadleigh in Place' exhibition in 2013 funded by the Arts Council), developed from a series of oral history interviews with: fishermen, oystermen, bargemen, river pilots and the first woman to work on the patrol boats amongst others. This led to multiple trips on the river on various vessels, including tugboats, barges, an ex-S.A.S RIB, sailing boats and container ships. The research expanded to include walks along the coastline with other place writers (Julian Hoffman, Ken Worpole, Iain Sinclair) along with archival research in the Essex Records Office, Southend and Medway Local History Libraries and the archives of the National Maritime Museum.

A long-form article 'Liquid History' (2013) for *Aeon Magazine* and an essay 'Approaching London via estuary' (2014) in *Five Dials* magazine were published before the book was finally launched at Metal's *Estuary Festival 2016*. The story of the development of this research has been included here as a further example of how my written work continues to be informed by, and often develops directly out of, earlier multidisciplinary artistic investigations.

The testimony of the people who work on the river originally collated for the film *Estuary: Working Lives*, later formed the narrative core of *Estuary* as noted by Olivia Laing writing in the *New Statesman*: 'Rachel Lichtenstein begins and ends her estuarine adventure by sail, but hers is not a nostalgic journey. Unlike many place writers, she is keen on people, particularly those engaged in labour' (Laing, 2016:45). Ben McCormick writing for the influential nature blogsite *Caught by the River* (2016) described *Estuary* as being 'awash with poignant, life-affirming tales, intricate detail and striking imagery, [that] documents the history, geography, nature and people that have shaped the ever-changing landscape' (McCormick, 2016:online). McCormick further noted that 'it does this most brilliantly through the eyes of those whose stories bring depth and character to what is often a bleak and desolate place' (McCormick, 2016:online) illustrating again how the inclusion of oral testimony is *the* defining factor that sets my work apart from others in the field.

Alongside being 'a generous listener' of other people's stories I was recognized by Blake Morrison writing for the *Guardian* as 'a diligent reader, too' (Morrison, 2016:9) who had paid 'homage to those who have trodden similar paths before her, including Robert Macfarlane, Ken Worpole, Iain Sinclair and WG Sebald' (Morrison, 2016:9). *Estuary* also includes excerpts from the work of earlier writers who had explored that terrain, such as Charles Dickens, H.G. Wells and Joseph Conrad, and lesser known twentieth century authors, including Sylvia Towner Warner, local writers such as Tom King and the Essex librarian J. A. Baker, 'who spent his life tracking the elusive peregrine falcon, in all weathers, across the Essex marshes, longing, as Robert Macfarlane said in his documentary *The Wild Places of Essex* 'to leave humanity behind, to become a peregrine'' (Lichtenstein, 2016:55). The historiography of the literature about a particular landscape is another common feature in the work of other place writers, in particular Ken Worpole, Robert

Macfarlane and Iain Sinclair, who champion and bring to the fore the lost literature of the places they write about.

Concerns about the changing ecology and environment of the estuary, is 'a leitmotif throughout the book' (Sinclair, 2016:45). My investigations into the impact of the dredging which took place whilst the new super port was being developed on the Essex coast, along with explorations into the natural landscapes, birdlife and wildlife of the estuary led my editor, Simon Prosser of Hamish Hamilton, to state in the press release for the book that '*Estuary* contributes significantly to the 'new nature writing' genre' (Penguin press release, 2016). My involvement in this sub-genre is further evidenced by the chapter 'Neither Land nor Sea' from *Estuary*, which describes a walk with Ken Worpole across 'an intertidal zone of salt marsh and mud-flats' (Lichtenstein, 2016:104) in Essex, which will be included in the forthcoming publication edited by Katherine Norbury *Women on Nature* (Unbound, 2020:online). This long overdue anthology of women's writing fills a gap in knowledge, as noted in the project synopsis of the book on the Unbound website: 'despite the blossoming interest in writing about the natural world, women's voices, especially within our archipelago, have remained very much in the minority' (Unbound:online).

Many of the now much discussed place writing techniques and methodologies commonly used within the genre are apparent in the chapter 'Neither Land nor Sea'. For example, immersive descriptions of the landscape: 'the container ships drifting past in the deep-water channel beyond the flat terrain of mud, water and sky ahead' (Lichtenstein, 2016:101); research unearthed in archives 'earlier marshes and submerged forests can sometimes be seen on the foreshore at low tide, along with bones and shells from the pre-historic era' (Lichtenstein 2016:101); oral testimony, such as Ken Worpole's memories of 'living in a wooden bungalow on stilts near the sea wall [on Canvey Island]' (Lichtenstein, 2016:110) and digressive asides, such as Sebald's contribution to the place writing genre along with autobiographical elements.

Estuary is unique in the place writing genre because it examines all of the 'multifarious forms of landscapes' (MMU Place Writing website:online) described by the Centre for Place Writing including urban, semi-urban, edgeland and rural locations. For example, the book starts with a boat journey from the Pool of London,

beside Tower Bridge:

On the water, the sounds of the city seemed altered. I could hear the distant hum of traffic on the bridge, the clatter of trains rumbling past, the intermittent backdrop of sirens wailing, but it was as if these sounds were coming from another place altogether, not from the great, throbbing metropolis around me (Lichtenstein, 2016:4).

Edgeland locations are explored in *Estuary* including defunct manufacturing sites, container parks, marshlands, non-operational concrete factories, rubbish dumps and gravel pits. For example, in the chapter *Oil City*, which documents a walk around the perimeter of Canvey Island with band manager of *Dr Feelgood* Chris Fenwick, I describe the 'crumbling military installations and gun batteries' (Lichtenstein, 2016:149) we walk past, alongside Calor Gas plants and other abandoned industrial sites. Interwoven within this narrative are detailed descriptions of the natural wildlife of these abandoned places, such as the brownfield site of Canvey Wick on a former oil refinery on the island, which was recently dubbed Britain's rainforest and 'supports more biodiversity per square foot than any other place in the UK' (Lichtenstein, 2016:145).

Reminiscences of childhood adventures on edgeland sites are also included in *Estuary*. For example, in Chris Fenwick's vivid descriptions of playing with Lee Brilleaux on the Essex marshes as children: 'we built secret camps on stilts which flooded when the tide came in, made hand-drawn maps to buried treasures and launched our boats directly from their back gardens into the creeks and inlets beyond' (Lichtenstein, 2016:144). Farley and Symmons Roberts note the importance of recording 'the great unwritten history of childhood den-building' and play in edgeland places, 'outside of the confines of the adult world' (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012:38) particularly now when most of our children 'live in mediated bubbles and have forgotten what it's like to get messy with nature' (Farley and Symmons Roberts, 2012:38).

Rural landscapes also feature in *Estuary*. *The Marsh Country* documents a walk with emerging new nature writer Julian Hoffman around 'the waterlogged, muddy edges of the Hoo Peninsula' (Lichtenstein, 2016:220) an 'expansive wild tract of land'

along the north Kent coast of the Thames Estuary (Lichtenstein, 2016:221).

Immersive poetic prose is used to describe this haunting natural landscape and the abundance of wildlife and birdlife within:

Tidal waters flow seamlessly in and out of this ever-changing landscape of saltwater wetlands and grazing marshes, home to many rare breeds of birds, including kestrels, buzzards, nightingales and skylarks, as well as butterflies and amphibians (Lichtenstein, 2016:221).

Current political and environmental issues are also interwoven into this chapter with the story of the activists, local housewives Joan Darwell and Gill Moore, who fought for decades to protect both the cultural heritage and 'the beautiful wilderness of this area' (Lichtenstein, 2016:222) a story which is also included in Hoffman's *Irreplaceable: The Fight to Save Our wild Places* (2019).

Semi-urban landscapes are explored in *Estuary* in the chapter *Tilbury Riverside*, where I walked with Iain Sinclair between Tilbury Town and Stanford-le-Hope passing 'boarded-up pubs, a fried-chicken shop and a dubious-looking yard piled with second-hand white goods' (Lichtenstein, 2016:196). Eventually we reached the 'classically liminal' edgeland landscape around Tilbury Docks walking 'past sheds and logistics centres, next to mountain-high piles of brightly coloured containers from Hamburg and China' (Lichtenstein, 2016:197). Embedded within this narrative are excerpts from oral history interviews with others who have worked in these places, such as dock pilot Andrew Francis and Pauline Judd who worked in the cruise terminal. The inclusion of these testimonies makes this chapter distinctively different to similar shared walks in this terrain by Iain Sinclair with the filmmaker Chris Petit in *London Orbital* (2003).

Few (if any other) women working within the place writing genre have examined the 'unwatched territories' of the edgelands. I expect this is for obvious gender specific reasons. These marginal sites are often out of range of CCTV or official monitoring and are usually deserted, meaning they can be potentially unsafe and threatening locations, particularly for a woman alone. Aspects of personal safety are important to discuss within the active research process involved in writing about

place. I ensured I had a companion with me on these excursions, and would advise others to take such precautions when venturing into these peripheral territories.

Prior to the publication of *Estuary*, aside from E. Arnot Robertson, ‘a woman in disguise’ (Lichtenstein, 2016:212) as a man, who wrote a nonfiction book called *Thames Portrait* in 1937, ‘filled with river journeys and conversations with people who worked on the river’ (Lichtenstein, 2016:212) only male writers had written about the various landscapes of the Thames Estuary. These publications include: Robert Macfarlane’s *Silt* (2012), Tom King’s *Thames Estuary Trail* (2001), Jules Pretty’s *This Luminous Coast* (2013) and Ken Worpole’s *350 Miles* (2005). However since *Estuary* recent publications about this locale include Caroline Crampton’s *The Way to the Sea: The Forgotten Histories of the Thames Estuary* (2019) and *Mudlarking* (2019) by Lara Maiklem. These books appear to indicate a new direction in the marked gender divide in works about this landscape and it could therefore be argued that *Estuary* has opened up a space for female authors to explore this territory.

This monograph further contributes to knowledge in the field as it has ‘unearthed some fascinating material’ (Fort, 2016:online) which has been recognised as being ‘assiduously researched’ (Fort, 2016:online) and adds to a new understanding of this place. For example Crampton refers to my research on the damaging effects of the recent dredging for the Thames Gateway super port in *The Way to the Sea*:

Lichtenstein has extensively investigated the possible impact of this vast, continual movement of mud. She has exposed fears that toxins and heavy metals that have been trapped in the seabed for centuries will be stirred up by activity, harming wildlife (Crampton, 2019:36).

As Blake Morrison writes of *Estuary*, ‘in restoring the area’s edgy pride and celebrat[ing] its muddy beauty[...]she rescues its inhabitants from condescension’ (Morrison, 2016:9). The monograph was also praised by Mackay Sinclair in the *Spectator* for its prosaic descriptions of the estuarine landscape ‘what ought to be a grey stretch of post-industrial England is in fact rich in eerie poetry’ (M. Sinclair, 2016: 45).

Summary of chapter 3

To summarise: all three publications have achieved a significant contribution to knowledge in the field and demonstrate many of the common traits of works of contemporary British place writing. They are led by ‘the authorial I;’ have a ‘sustained focus on place;’ structured around a walk or visit to a place/s; include immersive observational writing, well-crafted prose, personal reflection, digressive asides and geographical details; contain encounters with local people and culture; highlight ecological and environmental issues; unearth historical information and new insights about the places explored and most significantly, take place as the central theme of the narrative.

Evidence of the multiple positive critical and scholarly responses to these works by my peers, in reviews, articles, publications, other media and influential blog sites have already been cited in this chapter. My writing on these places has generated new knowledge, and unearthed new perspectives and information through a deep and intense engagement with these sites, as evidenced below:

[*On Brick Lane*] is a comprehensive, deeply researched portrait of the street told through the eyes of the people who live and work there. Every chapter is linked to the next, as each Brick Lane local she interviews guides her to the following encounter (Glanville, 2007:47).

Focal range is important in this book, which alternates between Jewish family history and the quasi-mythical topographies of the monasteries, palaces and orchards once said to dominate this medieval arcadia[...]*Diamond Street* is a lively and rewarding addition to the capital's rich history (Worpole, 2012:28).

Writing about [The Thames Estuary] presents a unique challenge. How do you make such a landscape comprehensible, and how do you render it vividly for the reader? Lichtenstein's outstanding book shows how it should be done (Whitney, 2016:11).

The endorsements of my work by Iain Sinclair and Robert Macfarlane, the two most influential writers working in the genre today, stands here as confirmation of the way my work has contributed significantly to the field. There is also pedagogic

interest in these works. For example *Estuary* is a key text on various university syllabuses including the MA module 'Downriver: Writing the Thames Estuary from 1890 to the Present' run by Professor Patrick Wright (English Department, Kings College London); Manchester Met's MA/MFA in Place Writing and a seminar course on Contemporary British Writing run by Robert Macfarlane at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

Furthermore, the submitted monographs for this thesis have been analysed in various scholarly publications. For example *Diamond Street* is discussed in the collections *The Impact of History: Histories at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2015) and *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2016). My work has also been included in multiple anthologies on place writing: *Women and Nature* (Norbury, 2020), *Radical Essex* (Focal Point, 2018), *London Fictions* (2012), *City Lit London* (2009) and *London: City of Disappearances* (2006).

These publications have generated numerous opportunities for me to speak publicly about these works at events connected to the genre. For example, I presented a paper at the first PLACE winter weekend in 2011 called 'Writing the City: Memory and Landscape,' which featured research from *On Brick Lane* (2007) and *Diamond Street* (which I was writing at the time). According to a reviewer for *Some Landscapes* this presentation 'illustrated the way, that like Sebald, she [Lichtenstein] has listened to the accounts of people marooned by time or who hold memories of worlds that have disappeared forever' (Some Landscapes, 2011).

I have shared a stage with many key figures in the field in various events held in places such as the British Library, the Museum of London and the Maritime Museum; spoken about these submitted monographs at book festivals including Port Eliot, Jewish Book Week and the Essex Book Festival; curated and hosted multiple place writing events, including Metal's Shorelines Festival and given papers at academic conferences nationally and internationally. For example, in July 2019, I presented at the 'International Conference of Caribbean Archaeology' in Barbados, on 'the archaeology of memory' whilst describing my current research project, a work of place writing that explores the Caribbean coastal town of Speightstown (Barbados) using the specific creative-critical practice I have developed to explore and examine place, which has now been described multiple times in this thesis.

Conclusion

To conclude, the work in the three submitted publications for this thesis represents a significant contribution to the fields of place writing and the sub-genre the 'new nature writing.' They have been included in multi-anthologies, widely and positively reviewed, nominated for major place-writing prizes and reached a large readership. They have also generated numerous opportunities for me to participate in public events, symposiums, conferences and debates about place and environment and led to my appointment as Reader in the Centre for Place Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.

All the methodologies practised by writers in the field are collectively represented within these three monographs such as: coalescing autobiographical details, with documentary style writing to tell the story of a place through a collaborative research process that merges historical research, with personal observation and encounters with people and locations. The place writing practises of historical geography, deep topography, psychogeography and archival research are also evident within these texts but it is the inclusion of the oral history interviews, giving voice to the people who live and work in these places, that really sets my work apart from others in the field. My determination to 'preserve memory,' to 'give voice to the voiceless' and include the often previously hidden stories of ethnic, minority, migrant and women's histories, demonstrates a feminist approach to place writing, and provides the most distinctive contribution these works have made to the genre. Another way in which my written work differs to others in the field is the inclusion of the dramatization of my research process, which again can be considered within a feminist context, as described earlier.

Collectively these publications cover all the 'multifarious landscapes' currently being explored within the genre including urban (*On Brick Lane* and *Diamond Street*), semi-urban (*Estuary*), rural (*Estuary*) and edgeland places (*On Brick Lane*, *Diamond Street* and *Estuary*). Uniquely these texts also include representations of historical edgelands places, which have since been absorbed into urban centers (*On Brick Lane* and *Diamond Street*) as well as describing the much overlooked descriptions of the

dens, tree houses and rubbish dumps of the edgelands in Essex and Kent, where children play/ed (*Estuary*). The inclusion of these edgeland sites within these texts are also significant due to the under representation of writing on these landscapes by female authors to date.

I would further add that my multi-disciplinary way of working has helped expand the possibilities of what contemporary British place writing can be, which is undoubtedly a hybrid form, that crosses over not just with travel writing, memoir and the disciplines of geography for example, but can also be developed into multi-media outcomes, such as the documentary film *Estuary: Working Lives*, the site-specific installation *University of the Ghetto* and more recently the GPS activated *Diamond Street App*. When this app was developed in 2013 (for the launch of the paperback edition) it was the first GPS activated app to use new technologies to transform content from a literary non-fiction book about place into a dynamic interactive walk around the city streets.

Finally, it is important to add that my work continues to contribute to the field by opening up space for further debate about the definition of place writing and the importance of addressing the considerable gender imbalance to date in this field through discussions raised in this thesis, which I hope in the future to expand on and publish.

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