Re-Visiting Cottingley Beck: Trash-fairies in the urban gothic

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Introduction

This paper documents, discusses and presents original artistic responses to the site of the Cottingley Fairies hoax produced as part of a practice-based research project exploring the spaces and places of fairies in 21st century post-industrial settings. We grew up in neighbourhoods close to the original geographical site of the famous Cottingley Fairies photographs; a site which both historically and in the 21st century is layered, complex and challenging. In 2003 when the A650 dual-carriageway was re-directed to bypass the town of Bingley, the north part of the beck and Cottingley village (including Cottingley Manor house) were cut off from the beautiful cascading waterfalls of the steep lower part of the valley by a flyover and storm drainage system. The now remote and difficult-to-access valley, while retaining much of its natural beauty and mystical feel, has become a site for waste and fly-tipping, teenage misdemeanours, and the forlorn and forgotten detritus of a post-industrial urban environment. In January 2020 we re-visited this site, known from our childhood, to create a collaborative series of site-specific poetry and photography with a view to exploring the Cottingley Fairy heritage in the context of town planning, waste management, class, and the urban gothic. This paper presents key contexts and critical findings emergent from the research trip and original creative practice; the creative practice is practice-as-research and documents the site and research trip. Both elements of this mini-research project combined go some way to addressing the question 'what does it mean to re-visit Cottingley Beck and the fairy heritage today, and what is the current state of the geographic site?' This paper documents the research field-trip and presents a range of historical and critical contexts which informed it, as well as identifying some of the ways that the practice responds to and attempts to document the site re-visit. The second component of the research, a sequence of poems and photographs, will appear in full in print in 2021. A sample can be accessed at the link provided on the *Revenant* website.

Background

The subject of the research is Cottingley Beck which is the broad geographic location of the Cottingley Fairies episode, a series of five photographs taken by children Elsie Wright and Francis Griffiths between 1917 and 1920. The photographs, now widely reported as a hoax, depicted several fairies interacting with the children, and caused a media sensation at the time. The location, on the North-West side of Bradford is on the edge of Brontë country and is rich with literary heritage, which the fairy episode became a part of when Arthur Conan Doyle wrote publicly vouching for the photographs' authenticity (Doyle 1922). This mythology of the site directly fed the practice, which alongside the principal research concerns, uses imagery of fairies, deception and hoaxes and the idea of things not being quite as they seem, as metaphors and layering techniques for the re-visit in a mythogeographic interrogation of place (Smith, 2010). The precise site of the photographs is difficult to determine; although the children had access to the beck at the back of the garden, judging by the width and volume of the beck, density of woodland, and the height of the waterfall in the 1917 photograph, it seems likely they were taken at various locations downstream of the house where the valley becomes steeper. There is no signage at the site or informational plaque to indicate the history, although there is a 1990s housing estate in Cottingley with names taken from the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare) as referenced in the poem 'titania close' (Devanny and Screeton, 2021).

Immediately after the beck runs past the house where the children were staying it flows for about a half a mile where it joins the river Aire. It runs through the grounds of Cottingley Manor, a historic manor house which was used as Catholic middle school in the twentieth century and is now a private gym and pool complex. From the manor it passes down the rear of the Yorkshire Clinic (a private hospital), and then under the A650 through a concrete tunnel created in the 2003 redirection of the dual carriageway. Comparing contemporary maps with historic maps it is clear the course of the beck has not changed substantially since the 1890s except for alterations directly under the road. The bottom part of the beck passes through a deep and densely wooded gully with tiered waterfalls but since the 2003 road redirection it is difficult-to-access. It is possible to make your way through the dense woodland up from the river, or alternatively wading down through the tunnel itself. At least one of the Cottingley Fairies photographs appears to have been taken downstream of the A650 line.

We both used to visit the site as teenagers, and recent litter and charred wood suggest that is still a site visited by groups of young people. This is perhaps unsurprising: the site is secluded, complex, and aesthetically appealing. Furthermore it choreographs the performance of boundary challenging behaviours, as visitors must subvert the conventions of civic architectural design to reach the location and, whatever the chosen route, pass through several transformative thresholds (passing under bridges, through tunnels, and climbing down a waterfall; or past crash barriers, through dense willow thickets, under a substantial flyover, and climbing up a waterfall). In January 2020, 11 years since our last visit, we re-visited the site as professional practitioners and class migrants, resulting in this research project and body of practice.

Theoretical Contexts: Psycogeography and gothic re-visiting

This is an exploratory practice-based research project. Practice-based research is defined as an 'investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice' (Candy 2006: 1). This is a useful definition especially in contrast to practice-led research which is concerned with the very nature of practice and its 'operational significance' (1); in other words, the practice in this project can be seen as 'practice-as-research' in its exploratory and documentary capacity. This practice emerges from and documents a geographic site (of historic and cultural significance) and documents the process of 're-visiting' that site (a site known to us from childhood). As such it might also be considered an act of psychogeography, which is in Debord's original articulation, the study of 'specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (1955: 1). Indeed, it is Debord's original articulation of psychogeography which is useful to this project, as it emerges from a study of the effects and class implications of urbanism and civil engineering especially in response to 'a rapidly increasing number of motor vehicles' (1). The 2003 redirection of the A650 known as the Bingley Bypass elicited the usual concerns about impact on the environment and town economy but only two of the public objections referred to the Cottingley fairy episode, and there was no formal response to these objections from Bradford District Council. In this case the traffic reduction initiative in this section of the bypass made publicly owned green space of potential cultural significance relatively difficult-to-access. Debord's call to action in his first articulation of psychogeography is to perform 'insubordination to habitual influences' (1). Our exploratory practice which emerges from transgressing the codification of urban design,

climbing under, around, and through spaces not designed with pedestrian access in mind, is such an attempt at insubordination to habitual influences.

Although the fieldtrip was not technically trespass, the publicly owned land having been designated recreational green space, the inaccessibility required us to travel against the coercive impact of the built environment. This has similarities with urban exploration, which McFarlane defines as 'recreational trespass in the built environment' (2013). Urban exploration, or Urbex, is a pastime and subcultural practice which involves actions analogous to psychogeography, and indeed these two sets of practices have been proffered as analogous in recent critical work, for example in the work of Benzaoui (2014). Moreover urban exploration seems to be particularly concerned with that psychogeography that engages with 'derps,' an acronym for 'derelict and ruined places' (McFarlane 2013: 1), which ties in with the Gothic themes of the practice and the urban gothic questions it raises. Consequently as well as psychogeography this practice-based project also draws on the subcultural practices and critical contexts of urban exploration.

As with much psychogeography and site-specific practice, or indeed just generally art created in the age of the Anthropocene, this project involved a self-conscious engagement with current ecological contexts. The strategy was to produce work that expressionistically represents a site and human interactions with it, in a way which is attentive to landscape and does not gloss over environmental disruption, habitat loss and pollution. This is particularly prescient as the site in question has become saturated by non-biodegradable waste products (tyres, cones, cans, plastic sheeting, etc.) that make a persistent appearance in the poems and photographs. These waste items are presented in the creative work as a constituent part of the complex aesthetic of the site. Rather than a strategic attempt to create art that persuades (i.e. eco-poetics) this is a mode of practice similar to that articulated in Tarlo's definition of 'Radical Landscape Poetry' which sits in contrast with the pastoral as it is 'more realistic in its view of contemporary landscape' and if engaging with the rural depicts 'the harsh realities of rural life' (Tarlo 2013: 11). The suggestion here is that landscape art is 'haunted by bygone pastoral images' (11) and this layering and slippage between aesthetic systems and historical periods informs both the photographic and poetic practices in the project.

The final critical context which both fed into and emerges out of this practice-based project is an engagement with the gothic, especially the New Urban Gothic. The Gothic, with its concern with layers, ruins, and the re-emergence of the past, is an excellent creative framework through

which to engage with ‘re-visiting’ a site of dereliction (and possibly a site of supernatural activity). The New Urban Gothic (Heholt & Millette 2020) often presents those concerns in relation to post-industrial, marginalised and/or post-colonial landscapes. The Cottingley Fairy site falls within the district of Bradford, which is the 5th most income deprived and the 6th most employment deprived local authority in England (Colborn 2019) with an estimated 54,000 children living in poverty and high levels of both underemployment and unemployment (Macnamara 2019). Bradford a major 19th century industrial hub and once the richest city in Europe (Ahad 2013), began its economic decline in the aftermath of the First World War and this was accelerated by mill closures in the 1970s and 1980s (Critchlow 2014). The dramatic decay of a wealthy colonial infrastructure, and accelerated faded grandeur, sets up a gothic tension, as nature reclaims man-made spaces, the past literally and symbolically collapses in the present, and even waste products in poverty become valued commodities. This backdrop and economic tension is beautifully depicted in Clio Barnard’s *The Selfish Giant* (2013), which adapts Oscar Wilde’s paradise to a scrap yard in contemporary Bradford. It is at this point, where the urban gothic intersects with conceptions of reclamation (of the past by the present, of the man-made by nature, of derelict sites by urban explorers, of waste products as the basis of a material economy), where the critical context is particularly useful for informing the practice.

Practice: Trash trolls and toad pools

The practice element of this research project consists of two components produced collaboratively: a series of photographs produced primarily by Becky Screeton and a sequence of poems produced primarily by David Devanny. We have worked together previously on poetry and visual art collaborative projects and this collaboration followed a similar process, sharing research materials and collectively deciding the direction of the project early on, before separately producing elements, and then matching/selecting/editing as appropriate to resolve into one work. As the photographs were taken on site and the visuals were not substantially adjusted thereafter, and as most of the poems were written after the site visit (instructed by notes), there is a sense in which the poems respond to and recall the images (perhaps ekphrastically). This mode of collaborative practice draws on a rich heritage of interleaved poetry and visual art sequences which interrogate the Yorkshire landscape including Harriet Tarlo and Judith Tucker’s *Sound Unseen* (2013), which consists of landscape poems alternating with monochrome charcoal drawings, and of course famously Ted Hughes and Fay Godwin’s

Remains of Elmet (1979), which interleaves black and white film photographs of the Calderdale moorland with responsive and unusually sparse poems from Hughes.

The photography in this sequence references the origin of the Cottingley Fairies episode. It is thought that the original photographs were created using scaled cardboard cut-outs of fairy illustrations from children's books (Shepherd 2019). This method of creating intermedia photographic images was used widely in the surrealist and fantastical images of Patrick Woodroffe (1986), (including extensive fairy images), whose neologism for the form is a 'tomograph' (not to be confused with tomography – a type of medical imaging). In addition to the incisive formal definition, Woodroffe is of interest to us both as practioner-researchers, through his similar class and trans-local migration: Woodroffe also moved from post-industrial West Yorkshire to the idyllic Cornish coastal town of Falmouth. And indeed Screeton has previously used expressionistic tomographic process in creative practice, including this image from *The Cabinet* (2010):

Figure 1 – Image from *The Cabinet* (2010), Becky Screeton

The captivating expressionistic 1909 black and white short film *Princess Nicotine or The Smoke Fairy* (Blackton 1909) also uses the tomographic process, alongside scaling techniques and several other optical illusions, to tell the story of small fairy creatures who appear (from a nostalgic past) and interpose in modern life, performing tricks on the film's human protagonist. The photography in the project, references this rich heritage of tomographic processes and optical illusion in relation to fairies and the fantastical.

However, the photographs in the project are not tomographs and they do not use designed or constructed optical illusions: there is no digital editing or image manipulation at work. The photographs were taken on an old film camera, which due to a loose casing produced light leaks and other incidental phenomena (for instance the use of sprocket holes exposed in one of the prints). This experimental process was intended to produce work that is more organic and site responsive than heavily constructed and edited visual compositions, in line with the poetics directing the project, and the aim of attending closely to the reality of the landscape, while giving space for the analogue to fortuitously or serendipitously intervene. The photographs attempt to re-present the landscape with its complex tensions, such that the organic and inorganic materials of the scene appear within one textured image. Artificial items in the photographs are defamiliarized as the attrition of nature shifts them out of their functional human context. Similarly, the juxtaposition leads to the potential for organic matter to be considered somehow monstrous, systematic and threatening.

The poetry in this sequence presents an expressionistic and ekphrastic response to the research field trip and early prints of the photographs. The poems reference some of the non-mammalian forms observed in the valley, such as fungi, algae and frogspawn, to create a defamiliarizing organic texture. This is an attempt at a fungal poetics where images sprout and duplicate across the texture of the sequence. Within poems words and images are reproduced in clumps for instance the iterations of 'vampire' and 'lullaby' in the poem 'on the pristine condition of tyres over time' (Devanny and Screeton). But words and images also re-occur in different contexts throughout the whole sequence (such as the brick, 'fomo', the beer can) performing a similar patterning to fungal growth, and also the way a visitor to the site stumbles across distributed litter. Furthermore, there is a conscious attempt to 'revisit' and 'repurpose' words and sounds, to mimic those functions which are thematically important to this project. For example in the poem 'water demolition' (Devanny and Screeton) 'waffle mallets' slips to 'wafers,' 'waders,' and 'wagers;' and the 'next umpire' recalls the 'lullaby vampire' (Devanny and Screeton).

The slippage between recurring versions of phrases, words, and phonemes can also be seen as representative of a general strategy to introduce decay and misdirection in the poems; on visiting the site we felt a sense that things are not quite right, or things are not in quite in the right place – and yet the components seem to blend into one textured landscape. Some of the methods to represent the slippery quality of this texture include the use of surprising juxtapositions which re-occur in permutations, and words and phrases that look like mis-spellings (or at least look or sound slightly wrong or out of place), for example 'toad pools' in

the title evokes ‘tadpoles’, ‘statue’ is anticipated rather than ‘statute’ in ‘titania close’ (Devanny and Screeton); these slippages may lead a reader to ‘look twice.’ Strategies to re-present the slippery quality of this texture also included disruptive techniques borrowed from Process Poetry (Bernstein 1990: 830) and Oulipo (Matthews 2005: 11), such as cut-up and ‘N+7’ techniques, in addition to Devanny’s own devised processes including computational randomisation (Devanny and Fentham, 2019). The poems are disrupted so substantially that in many cases they perform as abstract expressionism (re-presenting a landscape as texture) rather than a lyric which can be followed as a clear and definite narrative.

When combined and drawing on the critical contexts, both photographic and poetic sequences draw on symbolism from and attempt to perform an analogy between the dynamic tensions at work at the site between the written and visual languages of an idealised fairy folklore and contemporary urban and waste management, compared with those tensions at work between idealised childhood memories and adult practitioner-led contemporary fieldwork. The forgotten objects of this liminal space, or rather the trash objects collected by the forgotten valley, become the collections of fairies or, in some cases, slide over fairy symbols in their entirety. In its attentiveness to the post-neoliberal waste (as well as the more conventional natural beauty of the site) the practice attempts to challenge idealised pastoralised re-visits to fairy folklore and the English countryside; in the practice, the fairies are necessarily junk-fairies and, like their junk, they are neglected but nevertheless potent.

Outcomes and Conclusions: Memory, lore and layer

Primarily, this is a practice-based research project which uses an observational and psychogeographic set of practices to document a trip to a quite inaccessible site of historical significance to the fairy cannon. We attempted to document both the landscape and state of the site as it is currently, as well as human responses to re-visiting the site, both through conscious techniques and no doubt also through subconscious interventions and occurrences not immediately obvious to us. Consequently, a substantial proportion of the research is contained within the practice itself; this is the primary record of our observations.

We also made a few other general observations in the ‘re-visit’ which informed the practice to some extent, and especially interacts with how fairy heritage today might be mediated by urban, environmental and waste management concerns. Firstly, like Woodroffe, both researcher-practitioners relocated from the West Yorkshire urban area (Britain’s fourth largest conurbation) to the much less populated and predominantly rural south of Cornwall. Returning

to the Cottingley Fairies site we were reminded of the urban mix of nature and rubbish which occurs across many sites within the conurbation, and is very different to Cornwall which tends to have very separate sites, those which are clean and idyllic, and hidden from the main tourist route those which are deprived, polluted or in a poor state. Secondly, on revisiting the site we were surprised how little had changed. As referenced in both the poems and photographs the nurses from Yorkshire Clinic still smoke just off site along the bank of the beck, the cone is still in the same location, and most alarmingly the tyre (which is directly underneath a substantial waterfall) is in exactly the same location and hasn't degraded at all (nearly 6 million minutes had passed since our last visit, during which the full force of a substantial beck and tributary to the Aire was flowing through and over it). Finally we also noticed some mis-remembering, for instance we had forgotten you can only get through the tunnel in the summer when the water level is lower, and we had forgotten some of the pathways and access points, and we speculated how the mythologizing of childhood experiences might itself be slippery. Overall, the site was in much the same condition as in 2009, it is still difficult-to-access and there is a strange mixture of non-biodegradable waste and natural beauty.

This research project was designed as a self-contained mini project for this special issue and is now concluded. If we were to re-examine the project, further research questions would likely include:

1. How can non-mammalian forms be integrated into poetics?
2. What methods are available in poetry and photography collaborations?
3. How has the tomograph been used in fantasy, sci-fi and gothic arts?
4. What place does and/or should the fairy legacy occupy in Bradford's cultural history?
5. What is the environmental impact of cultural tourism?

This paper and body of practice asks what does it mean to re-visit Cottingley Beck and the fairy heritage today, and what is the current state of the geographic site? It documents a research fieldtrip and a psychogeographic performance which attempts to subvert some of the conventions of urban planning, and it recalls and references a number of childhood trips to that same site. The site is one of slippage and layering, and the fairy folklore intersects with the liminal quality of this space extruded from ease of access and which is increasingly polluted and derelict. This is a site which is rich in cultural heritage and natural beauty, but which is also polluted, difficult-to-access and neglected. It is also a site which is embedded within a complex economic context which evokes the urban gothic. Both practices attempt to model

and document the performative process of the re-visit and the landscape of the site itself and re-present it as embedded within aesthetic, material, economic and environmental contexts.

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