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FORUM ON ATTUNEMENT: PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

Exhausted Futures

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This experimental photo essay responds to a growing foreboding that the future has been occupied, colonized, or destroyed. It is a methodological experiment with attunement and futurity, aiming not to retune to authentic forms of temporality or to rediscover lost forms of imagination and memory, but to make creative use of our temporal misattunements and disconnections. Drawing on research in a postindustrial neighbourhood of Cardiff, the essay dwells on the new temporalities that might emerge from an inertia of time. **Key Words:** *aesthetics, affect, attunement, exhaustion, future.*

This experiment in “writing the city” responds to a growing foreboding that the future has been occupied, colonized, or destroyed. A number of writers have argued that we are participating in capitalist social dynamics that erase our capacity to imagine the future otherwise (Fisher 2009), destroy our ability to imagine utopian alternatives (Jameson 1982), saturate or capitalize the future through speculative debt (Lazzarato 2012; Atkins 2014), and lure us into an optimism that exhausts us through our debilitating attachments (Berlant 2011). Such arguments participate in a diagnosis of contemporary societies as being fundamentally misattuned to the materialities and sensibilities of time, unable to engage with the future meaningfully or productively. This essay is a methodological experiment with attunement and futurity. The aim is not to retune to authentic forms of temporality or to rediscover lost forms of imagination and memory, but to make creative use of our temporal misattunements and disconnections.

Recent work in cultural geography, sociology, and anthropology has drawn attention to the ways in which urban spaces are saturated with multiple, nonlinear, and partly nonhuman temporalities (Wylie 2009; Edensor 2013; Hetherington 2013). They are home to multiple forms of voice and material agency. Cities are haunted by past events that reverberate through places long after they have occurred. Spaces and times are folded together, allowing distant presences, events, people, and things to gather together into unsettling forms of intimacy (Maddern and Adey 2008). Whereas such hauntings have most often been considered in terms of the lingering presence of the past in the future, here my emphasis is on the haunting of the

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present by lost futures. We are haunted by lost futures and betrayed descendants. As we are increasingly told, we are even in debt to future generations (see Brigstocke 2016).

The essay makes creative use of data generated during research with residents of Tremorfa, Cardiff, that identified material spaces that inhabit pasts and futures in specific ways, whether through hope, foreboding, memory, or other temporalities (Anderson 2010). The research was particularly concerned with the cultural geographies and geopoetics of climate change, echoing Brace and Geoghegan's (2011) call for further research that incorporates themes of climate change, temporality, and lay knowledge into the study of cultural landscapes, generating an understanding of how a variety of publics make sense of climate change in relation to the places they call home. Tremorfa is a postindustrialized area of Cardiff that has been poor and stigmatized, although there are signs of gentrification. I interviewed residents about how they see the future, not only metaphorically, but also literally: In which spaces do imagined or lost futures make themselves palpable? We explored perceptions of climate change, flooding, and how they imagine the future of their neighborhood in 50 or 100 years' time. Participants were also invited to imagine what they would say to future generations of people living in the area, and what those future generations might ask back. This was put in the context of the Well-Being of Future Generations Act that was passed by the Welsh Assembly in 2015, which appointed a Commissioner to represent and act in the interests of future generations. The data have been creatively reinterpreted (with permission of the participants), extending scholarly traditions of "ficto-criticism" (e.g., Taussig, 1997).

Part of the aim of the essay is to dwell on a kind of inertia of time that I encountered while talking to my research participants: a sense of lost or absent futures, of time standing still, waiting. My intention is to explore whether new temporalities could emerge from this inertia, this exhausted temporality, that might ease the weight pressing on us by the deeply unsettling knowledges and experiences of climate change. It is still common, despite well-rehearsed critiques (e.g., Massey 2005), implicitly to view space as the form of stasis and objects, and time as the form of movement and becoming. Research in human geography, in particular, has done much to reveal the liveliness of space. But what of the inertia of time? What are the forms of time that do not take the form of movement or vitality? What kind of energies, temporal but inert, might be inherent in everyday lives, objects, animals, atmospheres, and buildings? Perhaps we might wonder, along with writers like Kaufman (2012) or Pelbart (2015), whether there is a curious kind of potentiality that emerges from the saturation of the present and a sterility of time, from the evacuation of possibility. What forms of time are there that exist beyond movement? Times that are decentred, aberrant, suspended, floating, or exhausted? The lines of new materialist and speculative realist thought invite us to attune our embodied (and disembodied) sensibilities toward the vitality and active agency of objects and the nonhuman. Within the sterile, the unmoving, the inert, though, there is a different kind of authority, an authority that is productive of new forms of time. In this essay I attempt to give a sense of the ways in which futures haunt everyday spaces, gesturing not toward the possible, or to escape, but to little inflections of time, to use Cache's (1995) evocative concept. In these inflections of time, perhaps new modes of futurity might be glimpsed.

Rover Way, Cardiff. Waiting, listening, on a sliver of concrete sidewalk, cars roaring by on the overpass. Inhabiting the noise, waiting to hear a sign, listening for a pattern, a tentative coherence, a solidifying shape. The air is thick and dirty, heavy with the grime of traffic. Time losing its gravity, suspended in the air, no weight or anchor, dancing by the abyss, swirling through the valley, listing in the breeze. I listen to catch a breath of the future.

* * *

We listen to futures in everyday landscapes, smells, objects, atmospheres. They call to us in unsettling perturbations of the weather and the air. They speak to me in the bare, overgrown patches of grass and rubble, of little financial value as the flood risk makes development impossible. A new development plan was once mooted for this area, but abandoned when the flood reports came in. Another spectral future.



I see the future in the seagulls, an interviewee tells me. Look at that one. *What are you doing here? Why haven't you left?* Waiting, listening. Look at them, they're everywhere, scavenging. Seagulls used to eat fish from the oceans. Now they scavenge for food in places like this, eating plastic, diseasing themselves.

I feel it in the weather, says another. The seasons aren't right anymore; summer isn't summer. Weather isn't like it used to be. Look at all the rain. It doesn't feel right.

Another interviewee: I see it in the sea—every time I look at Cardiff Bay. Sea levels are rising. You can't see the Bay from Tremorfa, but it is very close, and I can feel it there. The industrial development here was originally built to use the dockyard.

I see it in my garden, which I try to keep beautiful. In the recycling—I do my bit, as much as I can.

I see it in the library. The park. The police station. In the factory smoke.

Listening for signs. Nature is visible but unsettling; there is something not right that can't be named, something that resists identification, a worrying ambience. Could climate change affect you? I don't know; I will be leaving here soon, I don't know where I'll be.

Plastic bottle, stretching to
eternity

An abandoned toaster,
rusting, gold glowing in the falling light.

A 10-pence coin,
a minor promise.

Graffiti wall. Birds.



* * *

I interview some residents of Tremorfa. What are their hopes for the future? How do they feel about climate change? Does it affect them? Where, if anywhere, does it make itself palpable? Where can they hear the signs of the future? If you could speak to someone living here in a hundred years' time, what question would you ask them? What will the future look like here? Does the threat of climate change provoke action? Where does time flow here, and where does it remain, still, static, knotted?

Tremorfa is a small area of Cardiff, still poor and stigmatized after struggling for years with the effects of deindustrialization. A small steelworks remains nearby, a reminder of once-powerful futures. It is also at risk from the effects of climate change. The river Rhymney, running through the less prosperous eastern areas of the city, is the smallest of the three tidal rivers in Cardiff but also the least protected, and Tremorfa is now one of the areas that is worst threatened in a city with a history of severe flooding. Today, at low tide, the river looks placid enough as it shuffles, a thick muddy worm, past red-brick terraced houses, industrial estates, and under the bridge. But the river inhabits a different temporality, a more somnolent rhythm, to the speeding traffic and the everyday lives of the residents. Or rather, these clashing rhythms all contribute to the *noise* of the city, its roaring multiplicity and cacophony.

I am trying to listen to this noise more closely, to discern movement ... or its absence. Finding patterns, wells of potential. Listening out for an echo of the future, as it swirls around me in the fug of fumes.

* * *

Scrambling down from the road to the vast Tesco, concrete everywhere. Bringing jobs and erasing memories. It stands on the site of an old Rover factory. In 1991, a powerful theatrical production is performed in the engine-shop of the enormous, derelict building. Fragments of the ancient, 12th-century Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* are sung and spoken in



Bryothonic and English. Entry, prologue, heroics, berserking, arming, journey, battle, lament, epilogue. The outside is folded inside: hundreds of tons of sand, dozens of trees, oil drums, wrecked cars. The performance is physical, Dionysian. Car bonnets are ripped off to make drums and shields. Fires blaze from the oil drums. The scene is focused on the old factory clock—motionless in the tumult of noise and song and drums. The story is of heroism, futility, lost identity, nationalism. Fractured time. Optimism dissipating. Thousands of gallons of water flood the stage: echoes of the future.

* * *

An article in *The Western Mail*, 1891. “The opening of the new [iron] works was an event in the history of Cardiff, and one in which keen interest was taken throughout South Wales, for it is the formal starting of a great industry concerning which much has been said and written ... Having secured a splendid site of 80 acres on the East Moors, in close proximity to the Roath and the East Bute Docks, with wharves and railways and siding accommodation, the Dowlais Company have everything in their favour for further developing their undertaking, and ... [as] the construction of steelworks has already been commenced, it is evident that the men who are at the head of this great industry are bent upon carrying the constructive work to an issue which will be pre-eminently satisfactory to Cardiff, and which will give an impetus to the trade of the Principality ... Dowlais, like a being imbued by the life, as it has been with the traditions, of the past, stretches forth its giant-like industrial hands for new fields, and conquests, and labours, and in the make of steel-plate for shipping the forecast is even of another epoch in Dowlais history.”

“The slackness of the iron and steel trades has had no perceptible effect upon the completion or the present undertaking. Lines have been laid down for a most extensive steelworks ... and operations are going forward without the slightest hesitation or fear of the future.”

* * *

Are we now suffering a crisis of the future? A number of cultural theorists tell us the future has become ever more opaque. We find it impossible to position ourselves within the vast geological timescales of the Anthropocene, we can't imagine alternatives, we can't construct utopian dreams, we can't see the future with anything other than foreboding or horror. We can only cling to more or less comforting memories of the past. As we listen out for the future, we see no signs, and can only wait.

How to become attuned to these dimming temporalities? How to encounter the city as an archive not only of pasts, but also futures?—Of artefacts and signs and practices that speak to us from the not-yet or never-yet? We know that places are haunted by ghosts from the past that make demands on the present. But ghosts do not only come from the past; they also travel from the future. It is not only memory and trauma that are stamped into everyday urban sites and objects, but future-oriented affects: feared futures, hoped-for futures ... absent futures, futures that can't be imagined or described or named, but whose loss is palpable. We are haunted by futures that are exhausted.

* * *

The future is elsewhere. All the people I interview have plans and hopes and dreams for the future, and the futures of their family. A new job, a new house, travel, living abroad. But few of them plan to be here in five years' time. They are saving up to move to the countryside; they are planning to go away; to return "home"; simply to be elsewhere.

I am drawn to this neighbourhood because I think climate change might have a particular resonance for people living in housing that is at risk from flooding. Listening, waiting. I expect (naively?) that this will bring climate futures into sharper visibility. But few of my interviewees have given much or any thought to this. Some are sensitive to environmental issues, doing their recycling, trying not to use too much energy at home. Other issues seem more urgent, though: jobs, crime, drugs, schools. But for others, I am struck by their unwillingness to envisage a future *here*. They are passing through, on their way somewhere else. The here is suspended in the now, and the future is another place. There are myriad imagined and desired futures audible; but Tremorfa itself seems absent. An exhausted future, an inertia of being. And from exhaustion, new potential.

* * *

Now?

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