



Slow Violence and the Representational Politics of Song

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Abstract

In Nixon's analysis of slow violence (2011: 7) 'attritional catastrophes...are marked above all by displacements'. Our research witnessed the sudden auction of social (public) housing in 2015-16 in a former coalmining community in North East England, after decades of managed decline by a voluntary sector Housing Association now operating by market principles. Earlier state violence prior to and during the 1980s coalmine closures not only did long term social damage, but anticipated the form and manner of subsequent assaults through welfare reform and increasingly inequitable national housing policies. Our enquiry includes song as a methodology to explore and represent this context of growing housing insecurity, deteriorating physical environment and fragmenting community, as well as the many everyday ways in which residents are contesting these changes. Reflecting on our participatory action research project, we discuss the practice and political possibilities of song in representing place, making slow violence visible and supporting resistance. The paper is authored by two songwriter/performers and

the social geographer leading the wider project. It includes song lyrics and links to the collection of ten Horden songs and videos, “Our Streets Are Numbered”. . Our intention is that you listen before and while you read.

Keywords

Slow violence; housing; music

Introduction

As two songwriter/performers and a social geographer working together, we have located our recent research and music in Horden, a village that grew up on coalmining in County Durham in North East England. We use Nixon’s (2011) ‘slow violence’ to help explain the changes witnessed in this area, that result from the harmful actions of recent UK Government housing policies and trace back to earlier forms of social and political damage that are closely related. For Nixon (2011), slow violence describes the delayed repercussions and gradual unfolding of the contemporary effects of globalization, and the invisibility of the chronic social and environmental harm that is the flipside of the increasing visibility of spectacular violence. Slow violence manifests in sharply uneven geographies (Cahill and Pain, this issue), and former coalmining areas in the UK experience some of the greatest challenges. Our research became part of resistance to the sudden auction of 159 social (public) housing properties in Horden in 2015-16. In this paper we tell the story of the housing and the research, and as musicians we reflect on our role. Song writing became integral to our project, as a method that enhanced research and activism.

The participatory action research project took place over three years. Initially, Rachel began to work with local residents to see how research might support efforts to protect and reinvigorate former miners’ housing in the ‘Numbered Streets’ area of Horden. Five members of the local Residents Association devised the initial questions with Rachel, and in the early stages we used a range of participatory methods, interviews, observation and documentary research with individuals and groups living in and around the Numbered Streets. Local photographer Carl Joyce joined the research collective, documenting the streets (see <http://www.carljoyce.com/our-streets-are-numbered>), and the first report was published on the history and current situation of the housing (Pain et al 2016). Shortly afterwards, Brenda and Geoff Heslop of folk band Ribbon Road (www.ribbonroadmusic.com) joined us as Artists in Residence, writing songs and eventually performing these alongside Carl’s films. In 2017, further research using ethnography and interviews was conducted to assess the impact of the auctions a year on (Pain et al 2017).

The songs, on the album “Our Streets Are Numbered”, are available via the links below. Our intention is that you listen before and while you read this article.

- “Sons of Horden” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/sons-of-horden>
- “Our Streets Are Numbered” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/the-numbered-streets>
- “Daddy For You” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/daddy-for-you>
- “Kiss All Me Trouble Goodbye” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/kiss-all-me-troubles-goodbye>
- “Eddie’s Tattoo Studio” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/eddies-tattoo-studio>
- “A Place Where You Can Be” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/a-place-where-you-can-be>
- “The Ghost” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/the-ghost>
- “Easy Pickings” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/easy-pickings>

- “When Times Are Tough” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/when-times-are-tough>
- “All The Difference In The World” <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/track/all-the-difference-in-the-world>

Understanding slow violence: historical continuities and uneven impacts of housing dispossession

As Cahill et al (2016) and Kern (2016) have identified, the concept of slow violence describes well the processes of housing decline and redevelopment in poorer urban neighbourhoods. We find especial resonance in Nixon’s (2011: 8) chapter on ‘ecologies of the aftermath’, where he details the ways that ‘ongoing intergenerational slow violence...(inflicted by, say, unexplored land mines or carcinogens from an arms dump) may continue hostilities by other means’. Damage becomes hardwired into the material and emotional fabric of the ecologies of places (Fullilove 2004). Elsewhere, Rachel considers this as ‘chronic urban trauma’, key to the sustenance of slow violence, always contested by residents but under conditions of repeated assault (Pain 2019). Today in Horden, the violences of industrialism are compounded by violences of post-industrialism: these are layered up and clustered in the central area of the village.

This area, known as the Numbered Streets, comprises fourteen terraces in the centre of Horden that were built for the pit (coalmine) workers over a century ago. After the pit closure in 1986, the social housing properties in the streets were transferred to Accent Housing Association for a reported £1 per house to ensure their future management. Housing Associations in the UK were voluntary sector organisations for decades, often providing wrap-around services for tenants as well as having responsibility for securing their tenancies and maintaining housing fabric. However, recent national Government housing policies encourage them to operate under market-like principles. Our research identified a long process of managed decline of the housing stock, resulting in a rise in the number of empty properties, and promised improvements never materialised (Pain et al 2016). Discussions were underway between a number of parties concerned about the condition of housing and the welfare of residents; the Residents Association, local government, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the local Member of Parliament. But, to everyone’s surprise, Accent Housing Association put the properties up for auction in 2015-6. Permission for disposal was granted by the national Government’s Homes and Communities Agency, with no stipulations or restrictions on sales. These auctions came unannounced, without consultation or information to residents. Private capital moved in with predictable speed, some of it purely speculative, and some for the purpose of private rental to people on state housing benefits (again, recent national Government housing policy has dismantled obligations for private landlords to maintain rentals to decent standards). Our analysis shows that the auctions have had the effects of draining assets out of the village, as most landlords are now based outside North East England, with a concentration in the wealthier South East (Pain et al 2017).

As all this suggests, the origins of the slow violence of housing dispossession are located and manifest at other scales. For example, recent critical analyses of the ‘London clearances’, where social housing tenants have been dispossessed and often forced out of the UK capital (Elmer and Dening 2016), point to long term processes of neoliberalization that prioritise exchange value over use value (Dorling 2014), alongside current-day ‘class war Conservatism’ (Hodkinson and Robbins 2013) that is destroying previously state-owned social housing provision with catastrophic effects for the communities concerned (Goetz 2016). But slow violence in places such as Horden is also locally rooted, taking on particular configurations in historically and culturally distinct locales.

Tracing this slow violence back in time, there is a long history of lack of care, and worse, experienced by working class people in this region and epitomized by the coal industry. As Friedrich Engels wrote in his *Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1845, ‘In the whole British Empire there is no occupation in which a man may meet his end in so many diverse ways as in this one’. When

coalmining increased dramatically in the UK in the nineteenth century, it was without thought for existing residents or for the environment. Houses were built with little concern for the workers who would occupy them, and when it all ended, the pits were closed with no more care than when it had all begun. Miners had to fight for everything they got. In Scotland they became the property of the coalmine owners at birth and were bonded slaves for life, until the *Colliers (Scotland) Act of 1799*. The use of women and children as workers in the industry (at a fraction of men's wages) was only abolished in *The Mines Act of 1842*. One cause of the *General Strike of 1926* was concern over miners' very dangerous working conditions, reduced pay and longer shifts. Miners came from all over Britain to areas like East Durham to find work; housing was thrown up quickly in lines, jammed together and provided only the basics.

From the late nineteenth century, UK miners slowly but surely built strong unions to provide for their needs and purposes. National Government came to resent and fear this power, and began a sustained attack on their industry and their way of life. This was backed by representational violence from the media and, when the miners were pressurised into striking in the 1980s by threatened pit closures, by police and military occupation and force, starvation and finally criminalisation. The 1980s pit closures have been described as 'the most dramatic contemporary example of social transformation in Britain since the Second World War' (Bennett et al 1991:1), having led to geographically-concentrated severe social, economic and emotional harm. Even after this state violence was successful, and there were no more coal mines or union power, it has continued through a lack of assistance for these areas resulting in the slow destruction of the communities themselves:

'The miners' strike of 1984/5 may now be receding into history but the job losses that followed in its wake are still part of the everyday economic reality of most mining communities. The consequences are still all too visible in statistics on jobs, unemployment, benefits and health' (Foden et al 2014).

Many have observed that it is almost as if the national Government has punished the miners for their resistance, as 'precarity has become, we might say, the everyday context of lives in the former coalmining communities' (Bright, 2015:147). There have also been longstanding attacks on their culture, through attempts to erase and belittle the history and achievements of the working class. As McKenzie (2015) puts it, these attacks are founded in class injustice based on disrespect, where those deemed as valueless are disrespected for being 'themselves'. It has been bolstered since the 1980s as a narrative of individualism has been championed by national Governments, and collective manifestations of working class strength berated as selfish or criminal (Todd 2014).

Many years of this bad treatment have taken their toll on Horden's community. We observed through our fieldwork visits and conversations that the ex-miners who remain are silent and without hope, some working, some not. There is a lack of provision and opportunity where once there was a stable and prosperous community. The older generation talk mainly about the past but there is no room for the young, causing them to be angry and confused about their future. Everyone just manages, or not, held in the grip of successive Governments who fail to acknowledge their existence. The diffusing slow violence of pit closures has been reiterated by subsequent waves of welfare reform and disinvestment in public services, that have not fallen evenly in the UK – Government austerity measures since 2009, for example, have had the worst effects of all in ex-industrial areas of North East England (VONNE 2013). The recent disposal of social housing in Horden has many continuities with this abandonment of the UK's coalfield areas. Our research shows that the auctions were also experienced as material and community dispossession; also preceded by a legacy of misinformation and broken promises that compound the community's deep suspicion around their treatment; and also underpinned by stigmatization reinforced by negative media portrayals (Beynon et al, 1990; Strangleman et al, 1999; Pain 2019).

Representing slow violence through songwriting

A few months into the research, the difficulties and tensions in representing this form of slow violence were apparent. In 2015, the issue of the housing's mismanagement and decline was obvious to all involved in the research. Local councillors and County Council housing officers had limited ability to intervene since cuts to their budgets and their powers. The Residents Association's campaign achieved a little exposure on local television news, but the slant of reporting allowed Accent Housing Association to evade responsibility. More generally, housing policy and management is a pertinent example of the invisibility, as Nixon puts it, of the 'attritional lethality' of slow violence; very occasionally culminating in a moment of 'social murder', as in the 2017 Grenfell tower disaster in London where a social (public) housing block caught fire with the loss of 72 lives (see MacLeod 2018; *The Guardian* 2016), but most often reflected in the chronic malaise of poor living conditions, ill-health and restricted opportunities that largely remains unseen. Social housing has never attracted much public interest or concern, and the UK national media usually portray 'the housing crisis' as one of house prices and the difficulties faced by middle class young people who seek to buy property, rather than the crisis of diminishing and deteriorating social housing (Watt and Minton 2016).

The academic research having told the story of the housing and produced evidence about the recent auctions, and we (Brenda and Geoff) aimed to make a different type of contribution. We had worked in the area before (writing 'No Redemption Songs', a piece about the 1984/5 Miners Strike in nearby Easington Colliery: see <https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/album/no-redemption-songs>), so we were keen to revisit the area to explore the legacy of those events. The six-month timescale of a Leverhulme Artist in Residence Award gave us time to observe and to understand. Our relationship with Rachel was very important, the encouragement she gave and the freedom she allowed enabled us to move through the project in our own way.

We began our work by trying to understand the feelings and the atmosphere of Horden. Our initial research was conducted simply by walking about – soaking in the whole place. We found great paradoxes in Horden – it is by the sea, with boats on the horizon and a beautiful park; then there is the Numbered Streets with its squalor, empty and burnt-out houses, litter, fly-tipping (illegal disposal of garbage) and needles. Without talking to anyone at all, a picture began to build up, however confusing at first, but became clearer the more experiences people shared with us. A lot of background information came from the couple who had been the driving force behind setting up Horden Colliery Residents Association and who had been active in the community for many years. Their house is a hub of its own – we often met and talked with other residents who happened to 'pop in'. Through them we met other people with knowledge and experience of working in the community. We conducted interviews, made recordings and took notes. At this point we started to work with photographer Carl Joyce who was born in Horden during the 1984/5 miners' strike. He gave us a more youthful perspective on how the problems of the last 35 years had affected subsequent generations, and this inspired our first song, "[Sons of Horden](#)". Carl became an important part of our work, putting us in touch with other people and places such as the tattoo parlour ("Eddie's Tattoo Studio"), and the photographs that he took (examples in Figures 1 – 3) informed the song writing process. We have included excerpts of the lyrics of some songs, and links to others throughout the paper.



Figure 1: Girls having fun at the youth club



Figure 2: A boarded up and burnt out house



Figure 3: Eddie’s Tattoo Studio

Photos: © Carl Joyce (see www.carljoyce.com)

Song has often been described as the thin end of the wedge – it can look and sound one way, while touching deeper feelings and connecting to other experiences. It can communicate many things on many levels at any one time and, when combined with and informed by the academic research and findings, our hope was that music would raise awareness and paint the picture of what had happened to the community in a more accessible way. The multi-layered story of the village, its people and its housing lies under the skin, and songs can help to make the invisible visible:

‘What’s under the skin is kept inside
 What’s under the skin is real and live
 We can draw the dark and light and give it some expression’
 (“[Eddie’s Tattoo Studio](#)”)

In interviews there are layers of narrative, people often use stock phrases or stories, and sometimes they say things they feel you want to hear, but underneath there is always another story, something that you can only feel. In post-mining areas, perhaps a result of the traumas of the past, there are also silences, and we had to give these a voice somehow:

‘There’s a ghost knocking at the door, and he’s asking’ (“The Ghost”)

As we listened and watched and moved among the streets, we opened ourselves to it all and tried to accept what came without judgement or opinion. We immersed ourselves in the place and the people and attempted to put ourselves in their shoes.

It is very difficult to describe the creative process. The things people say, the way they speak, the rhythm of their speech, the tone of a voice (sometimes plaintive, sometimes angry or hurt) - all these feed into the writing process. We listened to the recordings of the interviews, read the notes taken and thoughts

written, tried to remember our own thoughts and feelings and what it was that we had really seen. There is often an experience in our own lives which we can connect to the experiences of others. The necessary approach is a gradual one of working through layers, writing songs which are sketches, then considering whether enough has been said, whether it feels right, asking what is missing or unnecessary? Sometimes this is a long process involving the writing of many songs, sometimes we find we can connect more quickly.

“When Times Are Tough” and “Kiss All My Troubles Goodbye” came directly from some of the stories we were told:

‘There’s a woman on the Numbered Streets
And she hasn’t got much to live on
And her chair’s out in the yard
Well, they’ve seen more times than hard
There’s a man in a second-hand shop
Who says twenty-five pounds for the lot
It’s a lovely three-piece suite
She’s gonna pay me back next week’ (“When Times Are Tough”)

‘When you haven’t got much, you’re alone and you’re frightened
When you haven’t got much, you’ve not many friends
When you’ve sold all your jewellery to buy the potatoes
Your memory of love’s at an end’ (“Kiss All My Troubles Goodbye”)

A visit to the local First School was enlightening and upsetting, and produced the song “A Place Where You Can Be.” The children were bright and forward-looking, despite the difficult situations many experienced just outside the school gates. There were many social problems for them to deal with – alcohol and drug abuse, bereavement, lack of money, family break-up. The ‘place where you can be’ is a designated space in the school where children can take their problems to talk over in private, and receive support:

‘When you have to go to school
But there’s trouble left at home
There’s no-one you can talk to
There’s no money on your phone’ (“A Place Where you Can Be”)

And we tried to represent the generations of sustained attack on ordinary people by the Government and institutions, in “Easy Pickings”:

‘Here they come again
Houses empty shuttered up
Just like the Accent men
They know when their bread is buttered
They weren’t born to care
Never tried or shared their winnings
Never stayed around just legged it
Don’t they love the easy pickings’ (“Easy Pickings”)

The findings of both the academic report and our own research made it obvious that it would have taken very little to bring about changes for the better. In this unforgiving situation, a little kindness goes a long way. Local people do a lot of good work to support the community, but some understanding and consideration from Government would have quickly resulted in great improvements:

‘Someone was kind to me
 I felt different, I felt free
 Someone looked to me
 And saw that I was frightened’ (“All the Difference in the World”)

Resisting slow violence: opposition and self-help

There is a strong history of resistance in the UK’s coalmining areas, through direct opposition to coalmine owners and to the government, and through self-help. During the nineteenth century, the miners came to realise that they needed to represent themselves, to gain an education and to set up their own welfare structures (Bennett et al 2001). The setting up of the unions played a big part in this. In Horden, the miners had their own Welfare Fund, which provided ambulances, doctors, sports facilities and the public park many years before the creation of the UK’s Welfare State, all paid for by contributions from the miners themselves. This was a community based on an industry where workers depended on each other for their lives – and this spirit carried forward into looking after themselves and each other.

Recent waves of housing dispossession in the global North, and the disposal of public housing in particular, have seen resistance and activism growing and taking on diverse forms (Goetz 2016; Watt and Minton 2016). Disparities in power, access to media, and the stigma of social housing are significant barriers that some communities have nonetheless overcome (Goetz 2016). It is a brutal reality that the housing auctions have taken place in Horden, despite fierce opposition from the residents, their Member of Parliament, the Parish and County Councils. The auctions’ temporal and more visible nature, as a moment of fast violence, provoked some national media interest, and meetings with local Members of Parliament have discussed using this example to support legislative changes around the protection of social housing and the regulation of private landlords.

On a different scale, the 2017 Grenfell tower disaster in London has raised public awareness of social housing policy and the scale of the dispossession and betrayal of working class communities that it involves (MacLeod 2018). However, Nixon (2011) warns that, given time, collective amnesia enables slow violence to take firmer hold (as Kern 2016 discusses in relation to gentrified communities). In North East England some histories of dispossession are remembered (the annual Durham Miner’s Gala is just one example; see also Bright 2016). But the external view of mining communities in the UK is a negative one: marked by their economic and cultural past, they are widely seen as unable to move forward and to have ‘the wrong sort of culture’ for modernisation (Strangleman et al. 1999). The experience on the ground is that the traumatic effects of pit closures remain because of repeated waves of slow state violence that incrementally deepen the poverty trap (see Pain 2019).

Now that Brenda and Geoff’s songs are written and recorded, they become material reminders of this recent history, and their performance to audiences around the UK has evoked strong emotional responses, among those who are familiar with the story of ex-coalmining communities and those who are not. This has successfully challenged the invisibility of the housing story, and we hope it will support this community in continuing action.

From my (Rachel’s) perspective, the representations of the village and its residents’ lives that come across in Ribbon Road’s completed CD of songs not only raise awareness of the worsening housing situation, but articulate the sense of place and complexity of the lived realities of Horden with residents. The fact that Ribbon Road’s form of folk music is of and for the region we live and work in makes an apt and accessible fit to a local participatory action research project (see Hudson 2006). More widely, artists are playing a growing role in housing activism in the UK (see Minton et al 2016). Because music works through affective registers, offering ‘nonrepresentational, creative, and evanescent qualities’ (Wood et al 2007: 868), academic-activist collaborations with songwriters can be a potent way to express

otherwise arid academic concerns, and evoking greater public awareness and empathy for problematic situations (Hield and Price 2017; Magrane et al 2016).

As performance-based artists, for us (Geoff and Brenda) this part of the process is very important to our work. We like our work to be seen by as many people as possible, and we have performed the song collection “Our Streets Are Numbered” at numerous locations in the UK, including the Edinburgh Festival. In the first performance at the Catholic Club in Horden, we all contributed to the presentation and worked on all fronts – factual analysis, visuals and song. Rachel spoke about the academic research and the findings, the founder of the Residents Association gave the community perspective, Carl Joyce spoke about his work in photography and film. Then Ribbon Road performed the songs alongside Carl’s films, with spoken introductions. The work of the research collective becomes more powerful and personal when presented in this form, it becomes an emotional and embodied experience, not simply musical entertainment or a dry academic report. We have used this method in subsequent work and have found it to be very popular with audiences who are open to feeling as well as knowing more about the issues we have studied.

While the impacts of this kind of community art-making are diffuse and hard to pin down, our hope is that the songs address in a small way Nixon’s (2011) question of how to find new modes of representation; both articulating and intervening in a historical series of subvisible, incremental, still brutal dispossessions.

Notes

*All Songs – © Brenda Heslop (Ribbon Road Music)

All images © Carl Joyce (see www.carljoyce.com)

“The Numbered Streets” by Ribbon Road can be purchased at:
<https://ribbonroad.bandcamp.com/album/our-streets-are-numbered>

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