Porous Places

Tmrw and porous dramaturgy. Speaking there – very briefly – but it's given me a hook for this seminar paper. Not using it in the same way as the PI and Co-I are intending.
Take a jug and a sponge.

I want to do two things here:
1. Talk a little bit about my current research project – in an entirely appropriate bid to disseminate it. To pour it out to others. To be a 'good researcher' and not be sent to the naughty step at the end of the project.
2. Talk about the fragile, leaky, sponge-like state of my current research project – its porosity. And the littoral space it inhabits currently.

[Start to make my place – building from scraps of stuff. At the end – hide myself in that place trace somewhere.]

In Jan 2011, I was awarded a £127,000 AHRC research grant for a three-year project called: Challenging concepts of 'liquid' place through performance practices in community contexts.

This research investigates ways in which specific communities experience and relate to the concept of 'place' by testing models of performance practices, originally derived within research-based environments. While some in the academy claim we live in 'liquid times' (Bauman 2007) and in an age characterised by mobility (Cresswell, 2006), three case studies have been identified to test and challenge mainstream theories about place and the meaning of 'dislocation' in contemporary society. These community groups have been selected because of their different relationships to locality and migration although they share an element of social vulnerability. The models of performance practices will be designed to address and alleviate this vulnerability if appropriate. Following the practical research, the models of performance practice will be refined and rolled out for use to large numbers of community-related organisations through a symposium and web pages. The research will also lead to the dissemination of further theories of performance, dislocation and place through academic fora.

So, I'm starting by telling you a little bit about the current funded research project although there are no arguments to make yet about this work because it's barely started. 3 community arts organisations, myself, two co-investigators and the people these three companies work with. SLIDE (Map) The three companies I'm working with are in London, Oldham (near Manchester in the north of England) and Aberystwyth – which is on the isolated and rural part of west Wales.

Half Moon Theatre is on the borders of Tower Hamlets and Limehouse. A community-based theatre with roots back to Berkoff and others, we worked with their youth theatre. Cyrff Ystwyth is a disabled and non-disabled adult dance-based company in Aberystwyth run by Margaret Ames. Their project took place last year completing in July. OTW is a youth and community organisation. We will be working

with migrants: refugees and asylum seekers in the area and alongside community cohesion council and charity-based organisations.

So this research project asks how the 'real world' performs place and whether such performances might alleviate dis-ease – as might be useful for the refugees in Oldham. I am taking into these projects a range of experience and practice from previous research, along with my Co-Is – Mike and Margaret.

I've also just started a new AHRC project, as Co-I, taking the work further in a project called 'Performing Abergavenny' with sociologist Prof Valerie Walkerdine.

So there's a couple of things to do in this pouring section of the talk. What do I mean by challenging place and what do these projects look like?

Place is a live and critical topic outside and within the academy. Refugees, migrants, and second-generation citizens wrestle with reconciling 'new' and 'old' places. As Bauman suggests (2001), those who sense a threat to their security-of-place sometimes retaliate with entrenchment and territorialisation. Unhappiness and violence can result from dis-ease with place; lack of place (atopia) may lead to a desire for belonging. In the academy, 'mobility' is understood as iconic of contemporary existence in contrast to 'traditional' place, often defined as static, bounded and permanent. Geographical movements of people are seen to be a result of both choice ('exterritorialism') and enforcement (deterritorialisation), while dislocation is perceived as a negative result of such mobility.

Such assumptions about 'traditional' place and 'contemporary' mobility need further scrutiny. What is the reality of these claims? How do those who might be perceived as vulnerable or at risk in their locations actually perceive 'place'? If dislocated from place, how does this impact upon their daily lives? What other forms of dislocation exist? The *performance* of place is an emergent area of interest in performance studies and practice. Can performance, first, facilitate responses to these questions and second, assuage dislocations where they exist?

I interpret 'place' as having more import than material 'site' for inhabitants.
Place becomes 'a perceived environment or geographical area with which individuals (or groups) believe they have a personal relationship; there is a psychological interaction between person and location' (Mackey 2007a: 181).
A performance of place, then, might demonstrate, inflect, respond to, interrogate or challenge the material and psychological construction of a particular locus, and can be interpreted as a series of performative operations as well as constructed performances. In using the term 'performative', I refer to the post-Butler interpretation of the term as 'conventional cultural behavior' (Taylor 2003: 6), suggesting that place can be created through the repetition of normative behaviours – in addition to a constructed, framed, developed 'performance' that might be created in and of that location. Whilst site-based performance may well be performed by 'visitors' (e.g. professional practitioners, students), I argue that a performance of place is enacted by

inhabitants. It is more likely to comprise the reframing of a moment in an inhabitant's everyday than, for example, a devised performance in response to a site's mytho-geography.

The interpretation of performing place suggests a practice situated within the concepts, discourses and practices of applied and social theatre, with its emphasis on community, citizenship and locations (Nicholson 2005), where matters of place might be of particular import to a group of people. Historical legacies of power and ownership, contemporary deterritorialization and migrations, disillusionment or disengagement with locus, or even simply the need to 'create place' in the absence of long-term attachments, might all give cause for applied performances of place. This is the range of practice I have sought to identify, construct and evolve.

So that's what I'm doing within the project although my own interests expand into, for example, the performance of place as a site of environmental issues (partly as a result of working with Steve and Dee Heddon and geographer Steve Daniels). In this project I'm focusing on challenging contemporary theorising about mobility and what I've referred to as 'liquid place' by looking closely at real-world contexts, the existence and operations of the everyday and how performance can offer a reviewing of places for their inhabitants. This is also about nibbling away at a theorising of place - and its performance.

Academic debates about place in the 1990s were characterised by divergent responses to 1970s/80s' theorists of the everyday (de Certeau, Lefebvre, Bourdieu) and were in the context of a comparative relegation of 'place' in the academy. On the one hand, for example, Edward Casey requested that we 'get back into place' (1993), articulating an important role for place in the 'incessant motion' of contemporary existence. Alternatively Marc Augé (1995) regarded 'non-places' - sites of travel and movement - as the referent of 'supermodernity', his phrase for the state beyond postmodernity.

Theorists of place and mobility in the 2000s have interrogated these arguments and responded to late poststructuralist thinking, global movement, local territorialisms and the deliquescent consequences of what Bauman terms 'liquid modernity' (2000; 2006). Two recent AHRC research themes, 'Diasporas, Migration and Identities' (Diasporas) and 'Landscape and Environment' (L&E) encouraged several research projects and networks in this field. In wrestling with definitions of place, academics have looked at: short-term community 'emplacements' as a method of encountering a changing, sometimes translocated world (Amit, 2002); place as a station whilst wayfaring 'up, across and along' (Ingold, 2006); place as needing to take account of mobility rather than languishing as bounded 'placey-place' (Cresswell, 2006); place as a collection of eclectic stories-so-far (Massey, 2005); and an increasing emphasis on the performance of 'cosmopolitan' place (Rebellato, 2009; Gilbert, 2009). 'Challenging liquid place' asks how such contemporary responses to place are manifest in specific – and differing – contexts.

Site-based work was the original basis for developing performance practices that engaged with emergent issues of material place as seen in the work of Cl Pearson

(e.g. 2008; 2006), Misha Myers (2006), the company Wrights and Sites (2006) as well as PI Mackey (2007). Additional related site-based performance research includes the work of Dee Heddon, Carl Lavery, Cathy Turner and Fiona Wilkie, for example, while artist practitioners working in communities on site-based issues include Sarah Cole, Julian Walker and Mark Storor. A focus on setting, location and community also comes into the literature about applying performance in contexts from war zones to museums, as seen in the work of James Thompson, Helen Nicholson, Tony Jackson.

So – what's being done? Web this in with the second approach to porous because I'm going to top each selective analysis with the holes, the fragile leaky bits, etc.

Let me start with Half Moon and just give you the briefest of insights

[GO THROUGH WEBSITE DEMO – explain what this is. JUST for Half Moon.
Show the bit about what it actually was…
Go into Everyday place and show cornflakes].

The porous bits – that will of course lead to interesting thinking through of the research questions eventually:
- That some of the youngsters struggled with fearful place
- That special places didn't go far – the group didn't really anticipate that
- Complexities of working as a practical researcher *through* various layers including the organisation
- The age of the young people. Most of the literature on youth and urban spaces is on those older than this group – or children and responses to stranger danger
- The lack of diversity. Their place didn't need easing! But that wasn't to say there wasn't value in what we did in finding out how youngsters performed their place
- The lack of the digital…

Everything is shaded…

Second – Cyrff Ystwyth.

[Explain the company – if needed again.
Show bits of the process.]
Porosity –
- The style of practice
- Gleaning responses from learning disabled members of the group – interviews etc. Translation!
- Moments of irony: Andrew Green – going away.

OTW
Unusual for the work they do.
- Established the project across the council [slide]
- Three workshops in the library (speaking English)
- Oldham Unity

- Pictures of OTW and the window – explaining it was the first main workshop.

Several holes – working with refugees has a range of histories that are not mine.

Porosity in the practice as research methodology. All over!