

*'Try to follow the sound of my footsteps...'*

**'Try to follow the sound of my footsteps...': Walking and the Theatricality of Imaginative Geographies in Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)***

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**Abstract**

This paper interrogates the theatricality of walking and its contributions to the construction of imaginative geographies, defined by Derek Gregory as 'accumulations of time, sedimentations of successive histories [... but] also *performances of space*' (18, original emphasis). Focusing on the kinesthetic sensation of moving in the city, Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)* becomes a means to investigate how walking in a city produces new performances while also provoking the reappearance of past narratives. This article positions walking as a temporary and subjective participation in the theatricality of a city's imaginative geographies. I question how the kinesthetic experience of walking in a city contributes to our imaginings of place and the extent to which these understandings are contingent on the physical 'knowing' of a space. I argue that walking is a tactic that enables us to differently perform and construct the imaginative geographies of a city.

The embodied experience of a city offers alternative information towards understanding how space is constructed through presence. Examining these embodied experiences troubles the disembodied narratives that dictate how spaces are imagined. Every kind of urban movement – walking, cycling, taking cabs, taking buses, taking the tube, skateboarding – is organized by the physical spaces of a city. Through my own walking of Janet Cardiff's *The Missing Voice (Case Study B)*, I will examine how the kinesthetic experience of moving affects how we might understand place. I take kinesthetic experience to mean the sensation of movement as analogous with other sensory experiences; as Carrie Noland posits in *Agency and Embodiment*, 'the body is a source of sensory feedback that intervenes between the external world and the internal world either

to filter out or focus on certain elements' (63). Noland suggests that the sensory feedback of a body in space is integral to how we imagine and construct meaningful geographies. I argue that it is difficult to separate our bodies' movements from our knowledge of the city; the embodied experiences of space expose the construction of our imaginings of place through physical presence. Using *The Missing Voice*, I will examine how the corporeal experience of walking participates in and performs a city. *The Missing Voice* is an audio walk created by Cardiff as an ArtAngel commission in 1999. The walk moves through a corner of East London that begins in the Whitechapel Library (now the Whitechapel Gallery) and the areas surrounding Brick Lane and Spitalfields before ending at Liverpool Street Station.

To walk *The Missing Voice* is to actively participate in the imagining of geographies of East London. When I walk, my experience builds on the concrete reality of the space as it folds into the iterations that Cardiff imagines and those that I know and remember. The 'sensory feedback' of the present city is refracted through Cardiff. The physical reality of my movement intensifies as I account for the differences and for the similarities. East London has historically been thought of as deprived in contrast to the affluence and influence of West London. Whitechapel, where Cardiff's walk takes place, has a history that includes Jack the Ripper, the opium dens of Dorian Gray and the infamous Kray twins. The demographics that make up this space, the politics – global and local – that govern it have shifted and changed how this space is imagined. Near the beginning of *The Missing Voice*, Cardiff says, 'I want you to walk with me. There are some things I need to show you' (*The Missing Voice*). Throughout the piece the instructions given expose the process of constructing the city, while reminding me that I am participating in Cardiff's reconstruction of the subjective experience of walking in this place.

### **1. '...there's something I want to show you': *The Missing Voice* (Case Study B)**

Using Cardiff's *The Missing Voice*, I want to consider how the physical sensation of moving through the city becomes generative of a particular knowledge of that space. To this end, I will focus on how walking makes tangible the theatricality of imaginative

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geographies – that is, how corporeal presence in the city exposes and participates in the construction of its places. My own experience of walking *The Missing Voice* will be the corporeal example I use to interrogate how performance can provoke an awareness of the – my – embodied engagement as it performs and participates in the imagining of a city. *The Missing Voice* sends the walker from the Whitechapel Gallery to Liverpool Street Station by way of Brick Lane. Cardiff gives voice to various characters or personae, from whom the walker hears about tactics for walking home at night, memories of these locations days or weeks ago, histories of years gone by, longing for other places, musings about all of these things, a story of the missing red-haired woman and the man trying to follow her (*The Missing Voice*). The kinesthetic sensation of actually moving through the city – of thinking about the spaces, reacting to the cars that drive by or watching the other people who move around me – is tangible as *The Missing Voice* guides me through its version of the city. Cardiff's walk is twelve years old and differences between the 'original' city and the spaces I walk through are evident. The multitude of changes that I encounter as I walk reveals the mutability of a city that underlines an understanding of place.

Cardiff's walk starts in the old Whitechapel Library, which is now represented by a shelf on the first floor of the Whitechapel Gallery. As I stand in front of the four books piled on the small shelf to the right of the gallery coat check, I can watch art students drop off their large portfolios before they enter the galleries. As Cardiff describes a man taking a book off the shelf and putting it back, the difference between the imagined library and the small shelf in front of me is palpable (*The Missing Voice*). There are no crappy old paperbacks here; instead there are large gorgeous art books in the pristine shop to my left. It is appropriate to begin *The Missing Voice* in a place that has shifted, where a shelf attempts to anchor the space to the past. As I stand, I wonder about the differences between a library and a gallery. From the shelf, I can see an installation to my right, the white clean walls and openness at odds with the dusty crowded spaces of the library I frequent in Stoke Newington. As Cardiff narrates her movements through the Whitechapel Library, I imagine my library where the air feels heavy with dust and there is the subtle yet inescapable smell of mildew and body odour and I get a vague sense of physical claustrophobia and ennui. Then it

passes, but I am newly aware of how it feels to stand in this gallery instead of that library, of the physical quality of the spaces that I participate in by continuing to imagine. Cardiff instructs me to follow her out of the gallery and I step onto Whitechapel Road.

The kinesthetic experience of walking this performance, like the experience of walking any city, is subjective and specific. Understanding is created not only by the material changes to these places but also by the particular bodies that imagine the importance of these changes. As I moved out of the Whitechapel Gallery, Cardiff tells me to ‘Try to follow the sound of my footsteps so we can stay together’ (*The Missing Voice*). Later, as instructions are given to turn or continue along the sidewalk, I realise I have. Or, more importantly, I have tried to: the rhythm Cardiff’s footsteps creates is mirrored in my own, the shifting cityscape keeps us syncopated. As a young, white woman who studies the politics of bodies in performance, I am hyper-aware of the unmarked privilege and mobility my body allows, offset by the risk of sexual violence that accrues to any female body in certain public spaces. London is still new for me, still filled with surprise and wonder. Like Cardiff, I am a Canadian woman in London navigating the mythology of this city. Unlike Cardiff,\* I have moved to London from Toronto, the urban centre I grew up in and so perhaps I am more prepared for the movement of a big city. *The Missing Voice* plays at overlapping spaces, times and bodies, which make it necessary to think about difference and similarity as I walk. I follow the sound of Cardiff’s footsteps. Cardiff is followed by a man looking for a woman in a red wig. Suddenly, there are the sounds of gunfire and helicopters, which just as quickly become the sound of a car alarm. Walking with this multiplicity makes me acutely aware of how I am articulating *my* self in *my* present. My footsteps fall in line with Cardiff’s, but they are still my footsteps – my cold feet in the March sun. The sound of a man following me produces a familiar tightening of my stomach, before I can acknowledge that it is an imagined body behind me. Still I consider

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\* ‘Normally I live in a small town in Canada, so the London experience enhanced the paranoia that I think is quite common to a lot of people, especially women, as they adjust to a strange city’ (Cardiff, ‘Stranger in a Strange City’).

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the speed with which my body tenses and the slight adrenaline that even the suggestion of danger produced. My current present and her past present rub shoulders. I become aware of the sensation of moving through these places. I am attentive to the difference in how one moves through these spaces and how one understands how one is meant to move through these spaces. Walking with *The Missing Voice* this particularity resonates through my kinesthetic experience of this corner of East London. Noland argues that 'if moving bodies perform in innovative ways, it is not because they managed to move without acquired gestural routines but because they gain knowledge *as a result of performing them*' (7, original emphasis). This kinesthetic particularity, imagined through place and thus through its changes, intertwines with mobility to create and perform the imaginative geographies of East London.

## **2. 'The city is infinite...': Imaginative Geographies & Theatricality**

I use the term 'imaginative geographies' – or 'imaginaries' – to refer to the constructed understandings of place. The corporeal experience of walking *The Missing Voice* makes the theatricality of these constructions palpable. As I walk, the geography that Cardiff imagines cuts into the geography I imagine and I can feel the difference between the spaces we move in. Or I am aware of how it feels to move in London in 2011 because it is different to how Cardiff performs moving in London in 1999. 'Imaginative geographies' is a term Derek Gregory theorises in *The Colonial Present*, where he offers the following definition: 'Imaginative geographies are not only accumulations of time, sedimentations of successive histories; they are also *performances of space*' (18, original emphasis). I draw on Gregory's definition for a number of reasons: most significantly for his understanding of – and emphasis on – imaginative geographies as '*performances of space*', since my specific concern is with how Cardiff's piece uses the kinesthetic experience of walking to engage with the theatricality of the city. But it is also important to note that in *The Colonial Present*, which focuses on the post 9/11 Middle East, Gregory is writing about how imaginative geographies link the vast geopolitical landscape of the contemporary west to the daily reality of life in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq. Although Cardiff's walk has a less overt political agenda, the relationship

between the movements of our bodies, the spaces we inhabit and the histories of those spaces are always political. Although I will not focus on the ‘sedimentations of successive histories’ at play in East London, the use of Gregory’s succinct definition gestures to both the importance of concepts travelling between disciplines (see Bal and Marx-MacDonald) as well as to inescapable links between global geopolitics and daily movement on the street. As Gregory argues, these imaginaries matter because ‘representations are not mere mirrors of the world, they enter directly into its fabrication’ (121). His understanding that imaginaries as ‘performances of space’ are social, cultural and political realities, is a reminder that these constructions – despite their supposed fixity or ephemerality – are lived experiences and possess the potential for reimagining. Our imaginations and performances are the means through which we create, for better or worse, the world we live in.

Following this, my critical kinesthetic engagement with the particular geography of London enables me to engage with the construction of imaginaries and their weight as performed realities. I argue that an awareness of our kinesthetic interaction challenges a totalising view of the city by offering a way to account for a creation of place through multiple, corporeally contingent imaginaries. The construction of space through performance provides a means for interrogating how a kinesthetic presence is implicated in geographical imaginings. By participating in performances such as Cardiff’s, it is possible to court a theatricality that illustrates how space performs itself and how we engage corporeally with, and assist in, that performance.

I sit outside a church near Liverpool St Station as Cardiff talks about a man on the other side of the Atlantic who asks her if it is true there is a blue sky over London today. I am overwhelmed by the sensation of being on the other side of the world – I experience the moment of feeling the physical distance between myself and someone I love on the other side of the Atlantic. Cardiff continues to talk. She walks naked across a floor. She dreams she is a soldier. Cardiff and I sit in the churchyard park, a decade apart, daydreaming. I think about my cold body, underdressed for London’s winter, and wondering if she did better. Something feels predictable about sitting in a churchyard park daydreaming. *The Missing Voice*, by staging its performance in the streets of London,

makes the daily space of the city the subject of this scrutiny. Josette Feral, in 'Performance and Theatricality: the Subject Demystified', posits that performance 'rejects the symbolic organization dominating theatre and exposes the conditions of theatricality as they are. Theatricality is made up of (...) the position of the subject in process within an imaginary constructive space' (177; see also Fischer-Lichte; Davis). Theatricality is a mode of representation in which the structures that create meaning are rendered visible and the spectator's role in the construction of this meaning is exposed.

Half way through *The Missing Voice*, Cardiff points out a banana peel on the ground (*The Missing Voice*). It is not there in my walk, but I look and prepare to shift to avoid it while still walking in sync with footsteps that underlie the whole piece. The construction of London's imaginative geography is not only visible but physically tangible as the performance is walked, the actual street and the imagined street exposing each other's construction. I am in London where Cardiff was in London, reacting to my own concrete space as well as Cardiff's, both narratives colluding in the imaginative geography of this place. For this performance, the audience is one person who becomes increasingly aware of how her aural and kinesthetic experiences contribute to the imagining of the city. Within the highly performative context of the city, where the meanings and values of a space are 'generated' through interactions with and in that place, theatricality extends and challenges performativity's citational 'doing' of an imaginary. A body as 'sensory feedback' becomes the product of the tension between citationality and spectatorial awareness. Moving *within* these iterations, one comes to see the processes that construct and characterise these performances. The kinesthetic experience of participating in the physical space of the city creates knowledge through interaction with the (often self-authored) encountered.

#### **4. 'I want you to walk with me': East London and *The Missing Voice***

The difficulty of isolating 'meaning' within a city is what makes the embodied experience of walking through the city so important. Steve Pile, in 'The Problem of London', emphasises invisibility and disappearance as constants in any engagement with the city. Understanding that London is known through 'these experiences

[that] appear to be wholly absent, secret, invisible [...] sharpest at the point of disappearance' (Pile 203), requires an approach to knowing the city that acknowledges a complicity in precariousness. Walking then becomes a way to unearth this precariousness: a body creates knowledge as it walks. It is through the corporeal experience of the city I move in that I imagine and perform it. Its theatricality – the self-reflexive awareness of these performances – makes walking a tactic of engagement: it becomes a critical spatial practice in Jane Rendell's sense, insofar as 'walking proposes a design method that enables one to imagine beyond the present condition without freezing possibility into form' (*Art and Architecture* 188). Instability becomes an aspect of, not detractive from, the structure of an engagement with space and, in doing so, allows the possibilities of alternative imaginative geographies of the city to reveal themselves. At one point Cardiff asks: 'How can we just walk over their footsteps and not remember?' (*The Missing Voice*). The weight of moving in the city, on top of the accumulated histories, becomes overwhelming. Already aware of the attempt to follow Cardiff's footsteps, the question makes me alive to the kinesthetic reality of being in a place layered with the moods and experiences of others.

Walking, as an individual in motion, is well suited to this kind of resistance and yet has a lasting effect that is remembered through its kinesthetic impact, its corporeal existence in muscles. The possibilities of walking as a challenge to normative uses of space is present in a range of works; Cardiff walks to expose the tension between the past geographies and the present in an urban space, other artists achieve 'critical exposure' of the normative in other ways. The walker is co-independent of the city, operating with autonomies that necessarily co-exist and allow the distance that creates theatricality. Lottie Child, for instance, performs a tactical engagement with urban architecture through works such as *Street Training* and *ClimbingClub*, which imagine new ways of moving. *Wrights & Sites* have created various guides, both site-specific and site-generic, for walks that provoke new engagement with space. These artists, like Cardiff, emphasise the kinesthetic complicity of an individual within a city by reorienting the purpose of walking. Destination gives way to mobility. I am given space to be attentive both to the experience of moving now and the 'sedimentations of successive histories' the present is comprised of. Early on, Cardiff



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listens to a recording of her voice and remarks, 'She describes things I don't remember seeing' (*The Missing Voice*). This is what it feels like to walk with Cardiff but also alone. The differences between her presence and my present, the changeable city, are obvious. Less apparent, but still present, is my own knowledge of London and the reoccurring feeling of lost and found I have as I orient myself and then find I am lost again. I am reminded of how physical a feeling it is to know where you are, how tangible the sensation of being located and dislocated is. My walking re-orders my surroundings with each step, re-activates the knowledge generated in movements and thus re-engages with the sites I move through. In doing so, it is possible to contribute to the imagining of these actual geographies as temporary gestures and lasting movements. The space is re-made through these dynamic interactions and a continual process of creation becomes the emphasis.

Cardiff's instructions foreground the isolation of an urban walker; at the end of the first section, I have to cross Commercial Street and Cardiff tells me: 'Wait for the cars to stop and then cross over when you can. I'll meet you on the other side' (*The Missing Voice*). Temporarily abandoned to make my own way across the road, I felt the isolation of the city and experienced the strange sensations of both missing someone as well as the knowledge that I continued to follow/be followed. It is a kind of intermission to the piece, all of the information that is being performed is temporarily suspended and the audience – me alone – reflects on what is happening and how that imaginary world is coming to bear on the actual one. I cross when there are no cars coming, not when the light changes, and I feel the familiar tension, even after eight months in London, as I hope I have looked the right way in my distraction. Later in the walk, Cardiff expresses similar sentiments when she remarks on the necessity of marking 'LOOK RIGHT' or 'LOOK LEFT' across London roads (*The Missing Voice*). Walking across the street, I feel my own footsteps trying to catch up with, and echo in, Cardiff's. These moments expose the planning and control of *The Missing Voice* and, in doing so, allow the walker to contemplate how she is engaged with the city and wonder if participating in another's story is altering that engagement.

*The Missing Voice* declares repeatedly that it is guiding me, attempting to provoke a specific, or at least self-reflexive, kinesthetic

experience by drawing my attention to the details of the city that affect my movement. The writing on the road, the sound of the car or being left to cross Commercial Street alone, all underlie the particularity of my experience through the corporeality of the experience. Yet, at the same time, participation in Cardiff's performance emphasises how firmly imbricated in the reality of the city my corporeality is. I walk alone and yet I walk with Cardiff. *The Missing Voice* reminds me that my present is not the only presence. Petra Koppers opens her article 'Moving in the Cityspace', in which she argues that the *flâneur's* walking of a city can be used to resist the metaphorical body that dominates contemporary theory, with the reminder that 'Cities are not just made out of concrete, glass and bricks, but live in the bodies, habits, and movements of their inhabitants' (308). This is what *The Missing Voice* reveals, by repeatedly drawing attention back to the relationship between a body that walks through the city, the concrete spaces of that city and the histories that accumulate. By participating in *The Missing Voice*, I allow my experience of moving through the city to be affected by Cardiff's and, as a result, I recall the other ways the city affects me. I am reminded that to be in the city is intensely physical, that I know the city through my body as it tenses, as it slides between the crowds, as I walk quickly and purposefully through the onslaught of other urban bodies. The kinesthetic experience of walking, the physical feedback between my self and my surroundings is essential to the potential of presence:

[T]he body [...] reasserts itself as always already there – not as something 'brute' or 'hindering' or 'essential', but as something that takes part in the act of watching, essential to the participation in culture. This physicality, the inertia, the being in time and space, can be an insertion point for resistances and re-inscriptions. (316)

Both Kopper's article and Cardiff's walk underline that movement is not any one thing and to move in the city is not simple. It is through presence that a person re-does – re-asserts, re-imagines, re-performs, resists and re-inscribes – the possibilities of a place. To be present in the city is to participate in it and to move in the city is to

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perform it. *The Missing Voice* relies on the always already presence of the subject who, in walking, inserts herself into the imaginative geographies of East London and who, in that participation, sees the construction of and re-constructs that performance.

### **5. 'I have to leave now...'**

*The Missing Voice* ends with Cardiff abandoning me in Liverpool Street Station with the statement: 'I have to leave now. I wanted to walk you back to the library, but there is not enough time' (*The Missing Voice*). There is no longer a library to make one's way back to, which simply underscores the disappearance and change that characterises the city and Cardiff's piece. In the walk back to the Whitechapel Gallery, the effect of the performed walk becomes clear. I am hyper-aware, as I walk through the city, of sensing the pavement and stones that I step on: aware of the men in suits I could choose to follow as Cardiff suggests, or who could be following me. I hear music in shops, I wait for lights to change, I move away from Liverpool Street Station into the gentrified Spitalfields Market and back towards Whitechapel Road. This hyper-awareness means I think I can sense the shifts as I move; I wonder what the other walkers of the city think and feel as they perform their own versions of this stretch of Commercial Street. I think of Cardiff again – 'The city is infinite. No one has ever found an end to the pattern of streets' (*The Missing Voice*) – as I cut a straightforward path back to the Whitechapel Gallery, briefly crossing Cardiff's surreptitious tour of East London, but not re-tracing it.

No longer led by Cardiff's voice, I wonder if I temporarily suspended my agency as a walker in the city to follow her, or if something different happened. Each body/person who moves through the city encounters its spaces differently, but it is in the myriad corporeal engagements that a city comes to exist as the city it is. My movements contribute to the imaginative geographies I move through; however, the 'thought-filled' walking through the city means that movement is not alienating but instead essential to the construction of a subjecthood that is contingent and dynamic. How we imagine our spaces and how our presence constructs those imaginaries matters because 'representations are not mere mirrors of the world, they enter directly into its fabrication' (Gregory 121). Walking *The Missing Voice* makes clear the degree to which we

are corporeally implicated in the fabrication of our spaces – it is not simply visible construction but an indistinguishably embodied and intellectual presence that makes our spaces. The kinesthetic ‘sensory feedback’ imagines new places as it understands those already present. London becomes London as we perform it and it is constantly re-constructed through our performances.

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