Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain: A case study

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What follows is an account of the collaboratively undertaken Practice as Research PhD Whalley and Miller completed in 2003 out of the Department of Contemporary Arts, MMU, Cheshire

It is difficult to know how best to begin writing an account of our PhD, not because writing about our research is an alien experience (after all, we submitted over 95,000 words upon completion), but precisely because of the weight of words already attached to our thinking about it. As one might expect, our post-doctoral research has grown out of and been informed by the formative experience of our PhD, and much of our subsequent work has borrowed from, developed out of, or strip-mined ideas that belong to our PhD. How we might begin to offer a perspective in this context, in a context where what we think now is so heavily informed by what was written then?

It is not just what we have already written that haunts us; there is also the spectre of things not said. Of the pony that only does the one trick and the fear that we will forever be **that** couple. You know, the ones who pick up bottles of piss, the ones who got married in the service station, the ones who cannot seem to do anything by themselves.

Since the completion of our PhD, all our subsequent Practice as Research has inhabited spaces that tend to be transactional in some way – that is to say, they are rarely spaces of dwelling, never *home* in the most traditional sense. We could start this account with a discussion of the research imperatives of each piece that has grown out of our doctoral research, but that might not be the most helpful place to begin. Instead, we will slide back into the confessional. Perhaps we are obsessed with journeys, with the things in between A and B simply because we are not well travelled. Well travelled suggests a certain glamour, a movement, a freedom where the world is something with which you are intimately familiar. To us, it speaks of a sophistication that does not sit well in our bodies. We don't do sophisticated, we don't do at ease. We do gauche, we do awkward and we do them very well. No, we are not well travelled. But there are 104,000 miles on the clock of our current car, and we hit 24,000 miles on our last one, 24,000 miles for the second time. No, we aren't *well* travelled, but we are *much* travelled.

As always, we have moved too far forward, and we articulate our concerns before we have offered any context, and we seem to be running the risk of writing something that has nothing to do with our PhD, or our subsequent post-doctoral research or perhaps even with Practice as Research more generally.

Except that it does.

The narrative of our Practice as Research does not start cleanly, and upon reflection, perhaps we were a little confused by the terminology. Whenever we thought about the word 'practice', we thought about giving things another go, about getting things wrong, no judgement, no strings attached. It is fair to say that we have never really been the 'measure twice, cut once' type. It is no surprise that we were initially drawn to the sound of Practice as Research, trying it once, making a 'balls-up' and having another bash. Imagine our surprise when we joined the fray, entered the debate where practice might not mean doing something until you get better at it. It might be about having a practice, a body of practical skills that might be utilised and worked through. A practice was something that we definitely did not have. We were not following a route out of training and into a deeper thinking about that training, nor were we developing ideas formulated from our Masters degree. And we were always, decidedly **we**.

Our context does begin with us, from us. It begins a long way from the academic context one might imagine. It begins on the fifth of December 1995, the date we moved to Penrith. To be accurate, we moved to a house about half a mile outside a small village called Yanwath, about three miles outside of Penrith. A series of mundane life choices, following careers we thought we wanted led us there. But those careers turned out to be something of a mis-step, so we got married, bought a dog and decided to enrol for a Masters at the (relatively) nearby Lancaster University. Because of the costs involved, we both worked for a year to build up our funds, Bob at a local pottery, Lee at a call centre in Carlisle. By early 1997 we had saved enough for one of us to begin the Masters. A coin was tossed and in September Lee began studying full-time for his Masters in Contemporary Theatre Practice. Soon Bob changed jobs and was working split shifts at a local hotel as a chambermaid. As Bob could

not drive a car, it was necessary for Lee to drive her to work before seven in the morning and then begin his commute to Lancaster. Bob would get a lift home at three, and Lee would try to be back from Lancaster in order to take her to the hotel for the beginning of her second shift at seven in the evening. In January 1998, Bob began working for an independent art gallery in Kendal. This meant that Lee could drop her off and pick her up on his way to and from Lancaster.

Without realising it, the road or perhaps more specifically the motorway was becoming a silent partner in our relationship, with the M6 between junctions 40 and 32 becoming an increasingly familiar stretch of road. Following the completion of Lee's MA, Bob began her Masters programme, but because she still could not drive, she took a room on campus and we lived apart from September 1998 to June 1999. The stretch of M6, already familiar, became increasingly significant. It was the road that separated us, and the road that allowed us to meet again. Throughout this entire period (1997-1999), the M6 was undergoing a series of road works. It began in 1997 with resurfacing between Penrith and Shap, and slowly the various plant and people operating it moved down towards Lancaster, as if undertaking the same journey that we so regularly made.

It was during the time that the road works had made it down as far as Kendal that our Practice as Research PhD took its first faltering steps. In early 1999, the motorway just after junction 31 was reduced to two lanes. Drivers were required to travel along the hard shoulder, and because of the volume of traffic moving through a reduced space, the speeds were often well below the posted 50 mph limit. It was on this South bound stretch of motorway that our PhD really began. Travelling at approximately 10 mph, Lee noticed a bottle resting on the edge of the hard shoulder. It was a two litre, blue plastic mineral water bottle. It had no label, and was half-full with what appeared to be urine.

The next time this journey was made, both of us were in the car, and as we approached the bottle, Lee recounted his observation to Bob. As luck would have it, the traffic came to a standstill just as we drew alongside the bottle. Bob decided that there was only one way to discover if Lee's suspicions were correct, so she swiftly opened her door and picked it up. It was this one action that began the research project that this account discusses, and it was in that one moment that the shape of our research project was decided. Without Lee, Bob would have been unaware of the presence of the bottle, without Bob, Lee would never have thought to pick the bottle up to see if his suspicions were correct. It was in the space between us, sitting in a stationary vehicle on the M6 that it began.

Having seen one bottle, we began to see them at regular intervals along the hard shoulder, and we began to collect them. Knowing that these were the product of people, Bob felt uncomfortable about simply taking them, and so it was decided that we would make an exchange. At first we left behind whatever we had in our pockets (coins, tissues, paid utility bills). This soon developed into keeping a selection of treasured items in the car; items that had been given to us as gifts, things with some provenance, things we could exchange for the bottles of urine we found on our travels. A ritualised behaviour developed around stopping on the hard shoulder, which performed the outward signifiers of mechanical failure. Because of the illegality of stopping unnecessarily on the hardshoulder, Lee would activate the hazard warning lights, open the bonnet, stand in front of the car and scratch his head. Throughout this, Bob would be executing the exchange, collecting the bottle and leaving the treasured item behind.

As we began to talk to people about our growing collection of bottles of urine, we became aware that there was something developing, something that was at that point instinctive, but something that was seeking articulation, looking for a frame that would allow it to develop beyond these small exchanges and become more visible to the general users of the motorway. Our interest in the motorway and the position it occupied within society, and the collaborative manner in which the research project developed was established at the moment we picked up the first bottle of urine. Our resultant Practice as Research grew out of a more formalised articulation of the instincts that fuelled that first exchange, one that would lead to an explicit consideration of the implications of space, place and collaborative practice.

> Joanne/Bob Whalley and Lee Miller Request the pleasure of the company of to celebrate the renewal of their Wedding Vows at Roadchef Sandbach Services M6 Motorway between junctions 16 and 17 on Friday 20 September 2002 at 12.30pm

> > Formal Dress RSVP at your earliest convenience

Entitled *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain*, the practical element of our research was publicly conducted on Friday 20th September 2002 at the Roadchef Sandbach Services in-between junctions 16 and 17 of the M6 motorway. A site-specific, durational performance piece, it included the renewal of our wedding vows, the location of which was intended to problematise Marc Augé's conceptualisation of the motorway as a 'nonplace'. Augé states that:

> [i]f a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place (1995: 78).

We felt that this was only a partial account of the motorway, one that ignored the subversions of its 'normative' usage, and our PhD sought (amongst other things) to challenge the conceptualisation provided by Augé. Thus the project had its inception in an inclination to provide a qualification of the account of the motorway as a 'non-place' and, in its development, contest the notion of postmodern, or to more accurately invoke the language of Augé, supermodern spaces lacking co-ordinates or histories. As the project developed, it expanded to include a consideration of the nature of collaboration through an exploration of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a concomitant challenge to the individualist location of knowledge creation, and a consideration of poststructuralist theories through an examination of dialogism, heteroglossia and the multiaccentuality of the sign, paying particular attention to the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. As one might imagine, given our inclusion within this book, our eventual PhD was what Susan Melrose terms 'mixed mode' (2002)¹ in form, consisting of practice, documentation and a written element. The term 'thesis' was used to describe the relationship between each of these outcomes, a simple strategy employed to resist the reification of the written element. The writing was always seen as one of multiple sites of articulation of the knowledge we generated, and as such, it could only ever be a partial attempt to articulate the knowledge generated throughout three years of our PhD.

This idea of partiality and the development of knowledge in the spaces between elements, led us to a consideration of Deleuze and Guattari. The construction of *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain* echoes the construction of *A Thousand Plateaus* in that it encouraged a resistance of the pull of the metanarrative. *A Thousand Plateaus* presents the reader with multiple, seemingly disparate concepts. This multiplicity encourages the text to be read as open, and thus resist closure. By following a similar structure in the construction of *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain*, we encouraged the audience member to resist the closure of an 'either/or' position, and invite her instead to embrace a 'both-and' reading of the performance-wedding event.

¹ In her essay 'Entertaining Other Options...' (2002), Susan Melrose writes about the status of the practical element in relation to the written thesis, in what she terms 'mixed-mode' submissions.

Just as the knowledge generated by the practical element was partial, the written element did not claim to offer a totalising account of accrued and reverberating knowledges. Much has been written about the embodiment of knowledge, and of the tensions between cognitive and haptic processes in the generation of knowledge. These debates were never central to our PhD, and so we will resist rehearsing a debate already skilfully explored by theorists such as Merleau-Ponty (1962), Bourdieu (1990), Foucault (1969) (1980), Lakoff and Johnson (1999), and developed by a range of performance practitioner-researchers.

It was enough for us that the written and practical elements both had differing but interconnected jobs in the overall development of our thesis. Reading the written element of our submission would never replace standing in the service station as we renewed our wedding vows, likewise the renewal of said vows did not seek to provide the wealth of contextual and theoretical material expounded within the writing. Both sites were in dialogue with one another, with knowledge being developed in the interstices. Indeed, the knowledge generated between these two sites was similar to the manner in which knowledge is generated between the two of us, in the manifold conversations, discussions and arguments that constitute both our research and our life partnerships.

Given that ours was the first practice-led PhD research project within the arts to be conducted in an entirely collaborative fashion, the joint nature of our approach was necessarily reflected upon throughout the written element. For the most part, the written submission employed the traditional voice of academic discourse. However, in an attempt to account for the multiplicity involved in its construction, there were occasional ruptures in the discourse, allowing space for a more reflective, playful voice. Perhaps interestingly, we made the decision that within the writing there would be no attempt to indicate if it was 'Whalley' or 'Miller' responsible for the construction of particular sections of text. As with the practice, our writing was collaboratively constructed, with both of us having worked on all sections of the text, ensuring that the knowledge produced within the writing was generated between us in a field of influences. This writing strategy remains, with all of our post-doctoral research having been jointly authored, utilising the strategies developed throughout our PhD. Letters are written, notes are passed. One will speak while the other types, and occasionally we will sit at the same keyboard, our fingers falling over one another in an attempt to get our thoughts out while still responding to the other's ideas.

Since the installation of *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain* we have written and spoken about this event in five different countries, spanning two continents. We have presented the work at conferences, workshops and sessions discussing alternative models of postgraduate research. We have spent more time revisiting this six-hour portion of our life than is healthy, and now we find ourselves returning to it again. But perhaps for the first time, we are encouraged to ask ourselves 'why'? Not why did we stop to collect that first bottle, not why did it develop into a six-hour durational performance that included the presence of a choir, a band, a pianist, twenty performers dressed as brides and grooms, two photographers in our employ, plus another four or five from various media outlets, a TV crew, an Anglican priest, fifty family and friends and the two of us. Rather, the 'why' we are encouraged to address is concerned with the choice to explore any of this through practice.

Following our initial discovery of the abandoned bottle of urine, and the subsequent musings that resulted, we could have offered a perfectly coherent qualification of Augé's thesis, locating it within an appropriate field of enquiry, and leading to a traditionally constructed written thesis. Of course, the conjoined nature of our venture might have been problematic in such a context, but let us park this concern, and focus instead on our pull towards practice. The performance installation referred to above was our attempt to provide the users of the service station with a practical, rather than cognitive challenge to Augé's conceptualisation of the non-place. Although recognising the operational validity of Augé's thesis, the performance of *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain* was our attempt to provide a counter to the behaviours of the non-place (those of transit and transaction) by disrupting the experiencing of the space.

As previously stated, the research project began with an observation, a chance encountering of a discarded bottle of urine on the hard shoulder. What followed was not a simple musing, the response did not stop at the conceptual; the project developed out of a physical response to the initial observation, it took the form of a subsequent collection of the bottle, this in turn developed into a series of performative exchanges. From the outset, thought and action were wedded; we could not conceive of a response to the encounter that did not include stopping and collecting the bottle. And as we have already stated, without Lee, Bob would never have seen the bottle; without Bob, Lee would never have stopped to collect it. In that moment, the subsequent nature of our PhD was defined. A thinking found articulation in a doing, a thinking that was shared between two, perhaps akin to what Charles Stivale means when he adopted the term 'pensée à deux' (1998: xi) to write about Deleuze and Guattari. Seeing a bottle of urine, discussing its provenance, picking it up and eventually developing recurrences of the phenomenon into a number of exchanges, was the result of a series of observations and concomitant actions, all of which led us to use Practice as a Research methodology. Even though it began without an explicit contextual framing, it began as the result of a question, a question that eventually necessitated the inclusion of further 'traditional' research methodologies. Both the actions executed on the motorway, and the research undertaken within the Academy were vital to the development of our PhD.

It became clear that two very distinct discourses would need to be employed to the same end; the traditional academic discourse as evident in this piece of writing, and the less overtly academic inscription of the site-specific performance. It is possible to make a case that performance work, created and presented within an academic context, might assume a certain amount of prior knowledge from its audience. While it differs formally from the written articulation, performance work presented as part of a practice led PhD is likely to share something of the established academic context. It could further be argued that practical work presented within an academic context can expect its audience to have experience of, or interest in, the type of performance with which it is engaged. Being located in the public space of the service station, *Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain* could assume no such thing. Despite having invited 50 guests to the venue in advance (including various representatives of the Academy), we were aware that the majority of our audience would encounter the work as part of their daily use of the service station, and thus without any predefined conceptual framework.

This realisation led to an engagement with the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, and particularly the concepts of 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia'. Bakhtin suggests that there are a multiplicity of 'speech genres' at play at any given time, each recognisable to, and appropriate for, different encounters (1994). We were keen that Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain accounted for the differences within our audience, and it was through a consideration of Bakhtin that this became possible. Thus, an exoteric/esoteric aesthetic was developed in the project. The exoteric refers that to which the majority can relate, or understand. It references a populist tradition, as opposed to the esoteric, which suggests understanding from a limited, particular group. Broadly put, the exoteric is the majority of the users of the service station, whereas the esoteric would be the few, probably those invited guests who were operating in their capacity as representatives of the Academy. The majority of PhD research might assume a certain 'expertness' from its reader, indeed its purpose is often to add to the accumulated levels of expertise. The inclusion of practice within our

project meant that we could assume no such expertise, and as a result we needed to develop strategies to account for the various types of audience.

It was this recognition that led to the development of an exoteric/esoteric aesthetic. At the beginning of the project, we had discussed the development of a piece of devised performance that could be installed in a service station. However, it became clear that any piece located in a service station would have to take into account the general users of the site, and therefore needed to be constructed with them in mind. Thus, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia (literally many-voiced) encouraged the construction of a piece that would employ exoteric and esoteric aesthetics, in order that it could be read by as wide an audience as possible.

Of course, by deliberately positioning our research outside of the Academy, coupled with the bottle that began the whole process, it was (and still is) possible to read our project as entirely parodic. While there was always a ludic element to the project, it is vital to state that the research was never simply a 'piss take', a pun all too readily available to the casual observer. While there was a deliberately playful element running throughout the project, there was also a sincere attempt to engage in a series of theoretical debates, and in our own way to add to the 'expertness' of the field. It is this balance between the parodic and the sincere that is most evident in the vow renewal, but something that also ran throughout the entire project. In the case of the vow renewal ceremony, its role was to oscillate, to occupy a both-and position in terms of potential readings. When recounting her experience of the day, Lee's mother still talks about her experience of the vow renewal as a "fluttering" in her perception; one in which she was aware of the event as a performance, but equally aware of its position as a socio-cultural ritual. Her "fluttering" resists settling on one position even as the vow renewal was enacted. In contrast, a colleague referred to the event as a "wacky arts project" prior to the event, and likewise after the event used the same description to articulate the piece. However, in the moment of the vow renewal, she was seen wiping tears from her eyes. These tears suggest that, for the duration of the renewal at least, the event ceased to function as a "wacky arts project" and began to operate more as a sincere act of the affirmation of our love.

Which brings us briefly to Ludwig Wittgenstein, specifically his discussion of the duck-rabbit (1968: 194). We came across this simple line drawing in the final throes of writing up our PhD. It slotted into what we had been thinking with an elegance quite unlike anything else we had encountered. As we wrote about it, we became enthralled by the idea that once the rabbit had been seen, the duck is always infected by its presence, and (of course) vice versa. Once seen, it cannot be unseen. The response offered by Lee's mother, and the reading we make of our colleague's tears equate to our 'seeing' of the duck-rabbit. These two responses, offered as anecdotes rather than 'proof' serve to point to the way in which the vow renewal functioned as both a parodic and a sincere act, providing the audience with a dialogic experience that could not simply be reduced to the position of either/or, accounting for both the exoteric/esoteric aesthetic. As both a sincere event and a parody of itself, it conformed to Linda Hutcheon's definition of the postmodern in which she states:

> [p]ostmodernism offers precisely that 'certain use of irony and parody' [...] As form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies (1989: 101).

In order that our qualification of Augé's non-place might be successful, it was necessary that space was provided for the wedding ceremony to function as a sincere event. However, at the same time we needed to provide space for the event to read as parodic, to ensure that we were not simply replacing one monologic conception of space with another. In this way the employing of parody can be articulated as a postmodern strategy of resistance, subverting and affirming that which is represented. By employing parody and sincerity within the same moment, we were ensuring that both the exoteric and esoteric aesthetics were accounted for.

In many ways, it is this fluttering, or at least the potential for fluttering, that practice-led research can offer in a way that more traditional modes and methodologies might struggle with. Of course, the location of our research within what can broadly be termed as poststructuralist discourse afforded us a certain licence. By locating our research within a poststructuralist context we allowed ourselves the opportunity to resist certain fixity of meaning, and also the space to embrace a challenge to individuated notions of knowledge creation. This resistance is further illustrated by our embracing of a both-and approach to the exoteric/esoteric aesthetic and place/non-place.

The consideration of the types of knowledge generated by *Partly Cloudy*, *Chance of Rain* discussed above, perhaps requires us to offer a further consideration of the location of this research project, and more broadly Practice as Research, within the domain of theories of knowledge. Our PhD attempted to resist the closure presented in the acceptance of an either/or response, suggesting that we were developing a thesis² that opened up space for a multiplicity of responses, rather than closing down the text to a singular response. This both-and approach is perhaps most explicitly evidenced in the collaborative nature of the research project. By working collaboratively on both the practical and written dimensions of te research project, we sought to resist the singular position of originary generator of knowledge. In so doing, we further resisted indicating to the reader which of us 'owns' the knowledge generated, in fact our account of the collaboration suggests that neither of us owns the knowledge, noting instead that it is located in the space between us.

By resisting an either/or response to knowledge, by working in an explicitly collaborative manner and locating our research within a

 $^{^2}$ It is important to remember that we offer this term as a definition of the combined outcomes of the project.

poststructuralist frame, we provided little room for the concept of falsifiability as famously outlined by Karl Popper. Popper states that:

[w]e can say of a theory, provided it is falsifiable, that it rules out, or prohibits, not merely one occurrence, but always *at least one event* (2002: 70).

Popper's theory of falsifiability determines what statement/theory can be classified as science, and what can be classified as what he describes as 'non-science'. The deliberate slippage we employed, firmly locates their work under the heading of non-science, with more in common with the 'language analysis' (Popper 2002: xix) of which Popper makes a critique in his preface to the English edition of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. In it he states that falsifiability is required for a system to achieve the status of empirical:

> [b]esides being consistent, an empirical system should satisfy a further condition: it must be *falsifiable*. The two conditions are to a large extent analogous. Statements which do not satisfy the condition of consistency fail to differentiate between any two statements within the totality of all possible statements. Statements which do not satisfy the condition of falsifiability fail to differentiate between any two statements within the totality of all possible empirical basic statements (Popper 2002: 72-3).

From this point of view, it is clear that our Practice as Research PhD cannot possibly be defined as empirical. It is not concerned with falsifiability, and deliberately resists this kind of closure. If Popper's model is accepted as a definition of scientific knowledge, then this questions further the type of knowledge generated by our research project. Of course, in the early twenty first century, it is possible to draw a distinction between the empirical/verifiable knowledge created by the hard sciences and the knowledge paradigm in which we located our practice-led PhD. Much of our research concerned itself with what could be described as experiential knowledge, knowledge that develops as a result of observations made in the field. Unlike Popper's knowledge based on falsifiability, these observations cannot be proved or disproved, merely reflected upon. It is for this reason that we did not seek to overwrite Augé's concept of the non-place, but instead augment it with a reminder of place, in an attempt to keep both concepts in the continual play of both-and. Evidently our practice-led research was exploring 'soft' knowledges, rather than the 'hard' knowledge propounded by Popper. This consideration of 'softness', which should not be confused with a lack of rigour, reinforces further the need for us to have undertaken our PhD utilising Practice as Research as a methodology, allowing as it does, the use of practical explorations of theoretical models. Thus, 'soft' knowledges, which valorise the experiential, supported our strategies of dissemination, which sought to generate knowledge in the location in which it was developed. Partly Cloudy, Chance of Rain functioned in such a way, allowing the service station to be both a site of contestation and of generation.

As a result of that first bottle of piss, and all that followed it, we have spent most of the past 12 years looking out of various windows, at varying landscapes as they blur by. We are much travelled, and we suspect that the much-travelled couple probably does not engage in the voyage of discovery. Their travels are unlikely to be the kinds that lead to some sort of edification. They are much more likely to engage in the kind of journey that ends on a stranger's doorstep with a Kirby[™] vacuum cleaner or something in tow, and a hopeful smile on their face.

The much travelled probably clocks up the miles out of necessity. Maybe they have a partner who lands a job in a far off place, a partner who ups sticks and moves to the land of milk and honey, leaving their other half behind, and so they are forced to travel 500 miles a week just to try and keep the old familiar routine in place, even if it does creak, groan and threaten to buckle under the weight of expectation. But that is another part of our shared history, part of the research and life partnership that is so messily entangled, and we are in danger of moving away from the PhD, and down the subsequent roads we have taken.

But these are roads that we must resist, as that is not where we want to take you this time.

The blurring of landscapes, the buckling of expectation and the strained smile of the much travelled. Where the miles speak of promises, not discovery. The space between *A* and *B*, occupied out of necessity; so we find ourselves sitting here, stationary but thinking about movement. Thinking again about how the research began, and where it could take us, has taken us. Away from where we were, from the fixed point of one there, imagining the shift to another. Except of course that over simplifies. We are never moving away from one fixed point, and we are

always moving towards a multiple. The 'there' we have left has always been plastic, a shifting point we imagine to be fixed, even as it is in flux. And so we are brought to the beginning that we imagine we start with and from, even though we know it oscillates; the beginning that is **home**.

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