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‘Real change comes from below!’: walking and singing about places that matter; the formation of Commoners Choir

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This article details the first event *Commoners Choir* performed: a singing and walking project, *Magna Carta*, about the rights of lay people to access land for leisure and recreation. Using original songs, the project conceives both singing and walking as political acts of protest and commemoration. Situated within new walking studies, it argues that the choir's walking is embodied and politically 'artful and wilful' (Lorimer, 2011). Drawing on radical walking collectives and practitioners from British psychogeography such as the *Loiterers Resistance Movement*, *Wrights & Sites* and Phil Smith (2009; 2015), it explores how *Magna Carta* affected the choir as they connected, through song with the rural spaces where the choir performed. Using a small-scale sample of interviews with choir members, the piece explores the experience of the *Magna Carta* project. To capture the subjective and reflexive nature of both the action of the protest and the psychogeographical response to space as an output, the article is written using a deliberately creative melange of lyrics, histories, happenings, symbols and images to offer a 'thickness' (Highmore, 2005) of description of *Magna Carta* as a walking event.

protest choirs, radical walking, land access, embodied attachments to place, psychogeographical writing

## **Introduction**

### Get Off Your Arse

Get of your arse

And do something good for the world

Get off your knees

And stand up. Let's take back the world

*Commoners Choir* (no 'the', no apostrophe) is an active, contemporary political choir (see Figure 1). It is a group of singing practitioners who perform original songs about a whole manner of social issues from food poverty to the closure of public libraries. The aim of *Commoners Choir* is to sing about questions of social justice and to perform in

locations which get them noticed. Hence the clarion call to ‘Get Off Your Arse’; it is our signature song, the first song sung at rehearsals to motivate our purpose.

*Commoners Choir* was formed in April 2015 out of a collaboration with former band member X and the ‘Media and Place’ research cluster at X University with a view to making a creative project about attachments to place. Author X designed the first project the choir undertook entitled *Magna Carta*: he wrote the music and lyrics, put a call out on Facebook.com for the first rehearsal (no audition required) and envisaged the terrain to be walked where the songs would be performed.

In *Magna Carta* singing and walking were conceived as political acts. To this day walkers face restricted land access and are excluded from rural space. As Ravenscroft and Gilchrist argue (2010) ‘Right to Roam’ legislation prohibits recreational and leisure access to large parts of rural Britain. Designed to commemorate activists who have protested for the rights of common walkers to have free access to land, *Magna Carta* was a performative event of two halves. The first took place at Edale at the foot of the Kinder Scout summit to remember activists who defied landlords at the 1932 mass trespass. The second centred around Yorkshire’s largest tract of common land at Ilkley Moor the day before the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the *Magna Carta* – a document travestied by the elite, the establishment and corporate wealth – on the day the Queen would unveil a portrait of herself at Runnymede to give the royal seal of approval to a charter originally drafted to challenge royal power over commoners’ access to common land.<sup>i</sup>

In this article we produce a critically informed descriptive account of how our walking practice explored the many meanings of the rural spaces where we performed *Magna Carta*. Opening with a contextual foray in to what Lorimer (2011) terms ‘new walking studies’ to situate our approach to walking as embodied practice, the paper

argues that our work joins the tradition of British psychogeography, notably the work of practitioners such as *Wrights & Sites* and *The Loiterers Resistance Movement*. While psychogeography is associated with formulating response to and critique of urban terrain (Richardson, 2015) we argue that elements of their praxis, for example ‘mytho-geography’ (Smith, 2009b; 2015) and the democratised version of the Situationist ‘derive’ developed by Morag Rose (2015) can be applied to the rural settings of our performances, to critique the dominant legislative order which prohibits access to the countryside (Richardson, 2015, p. 7).

As performers the choir was conscious of the rich historical traditions of political singing (Russell, 1997; Waters, 1990; Miyake, 2014) and determined walking (Walton, 2012; Taylor, 1995; Navickas, 2009; Salveson, 2012). We recognise that the practices which form our identity as a choir, such as singing in ‘shock’ locations have historical antecedents. We pay critical attention to the mythical, layered and necessarily partial ‘story’ of the Kinder Scout Trespass in recognition that knowledge of it gave wilfulness to *Magna Carta* as a walking event. Legat (2008) argues that for indigenous peoples, the significance of ‘becoming knowledgeable and using stories to think with’ while walking, keeps the chain of teaching and learning of place-knowledge alive (2008, p. 35). For her, both the environment and the place to be walked in are continually regenerated through narratives of place: ‘helping them to walk the stories and follow the footprints of their predecessors while becoming knowledgeable and leaving their own footprints for others to follow’ (Legat, 2008, p. 43). In *Magna Carta* we wanted to walk knowledgeably in homage to those who determinedly made claims to access cherished landscape; each lyrical note and footfall underpinned by an expression of opposition using knowledge of our trespassing forbears. The paper then turns to our methodology. We locate our positionality within the research as ‘insiders’.

We reflect on our methods as *performers* for whom singing and walking are embodied acts and as *writers* using a creative bricolage of words and media to enable the event of the walks to become an output (Richardson, 2015). Drawing on *Commoners'* oral testimony we discuss the empirical methods we used to research the experience of five choir members. The article offers a 'thickness' (Highmore, 2005) of description of the *Magna Carta* events using a deliberately experimental form of words, photographs, lyrics, symbols and oral testimony in a sequence which resists a linear story structure.

### **Contemporary Political Walking**

In his chapter 'Walking' Lorimer (2011) argues for the emergence of new 'walking studies' which breaks away from un-reflexive, A to B accounts of walking as a mundane way to transport people to their destinations. Rather, a 'cultural, interpretive frame' is used to produce a critical perspective on walking as a practice (2011, p. 19). The approach conceives of walking in these ways: 'the *walk* as an event; the *walker*, as a human subject; and, *walking* as an embodied act' (ibid.) Writers within this tradition call for an appreciation of various types of walking which emanate from differing cultural and social perspectives, insisting that any analysis of walking recognise the sensuous effects it has on the body. Edensor (2005, 2008) argues that the affordances of ruins with their 'charged sensuality' awakens the walking body to enervate the senses. Grouping different cultures of walking in to a typology Lorimer marks out four categories; the walking in this article falls under his heading 'walkers who are wilful and artful' (2011, p. 24).

According to Richardson, British psychogeography is primarily an urban, improvisatory type of walking, informed by the will to critique the geographical consequences of capitalism. An embodied practice, it is sensitive and responsive to the

environment traversed and seeks a method, by which the output of the practical walk is documented (Richardson, 2015). The movement's roots began with the avant-garde Situationist International, a group of Paris revolutionary artists and writers (1957-1972) who used the walking strategy they termed the 'derive' to walk through cities such as Amsterdam in a ludic, yet highly conscious manner, with a view to identifying and problematising what writers within the movement termed, 'the capitalist domestication of space ...the choice of one particular materialization, to the exclusion of other possible ones' (Kotanyi and Vaneigem quoted in Richardson, 1996, p. 116). The affective corporeal encounter with space is central: subjective and psychological responses to the aesthetics of environment in the form of moods and emotions are, 'the 'bread and butter' of psychogeography, the matter that enables its output' (Richardson, 2015, p. 5). It is through the active, overtly political and sensorial approach to terrain that space is transformed: 'the psychogeographer recognises that they are part of this process, and it is their presence that enables this recognition to occur' (2015, p. 18).

Drawing on some of the political tenets of psychogeography, mythogeography was developed by the *Wrights & Sites* (1997-) collective. Described as, 'our resistance to the monocular identity manufactured by Tourist Boards and Local councils' (2009b, p. 84), mythogeography takes objection to the ways in which urban planning and managed tourist sites distil the meaning of places fecund with meanings into, 'restricted meaning'. Indeed, the work of *Wrights & Sites* is to allow the specificity of site to 'fracture, erode and distress' singular meaning. Strategies of disruption can occur by engaging with mythical and anomalous stories about a site or by celebrating all the other things a site may have been, 'jam factories, battlegrounds, lovers' lanes, farms...'. In this way, the lens of mythogeography places, 'the fictional, factual, mistaken and personal on equal terms with the factual municipal history ...allowing authors and

walkers to become equal partners in ascribing significance to place' (Hodge et. al., 2004, quoted in Smith, 2015, p. 167). The *Mythogeography* website advertises *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* (2012) by Crabman (aka Phil Smith) which encourages the reader to behave outside the regulated norms of bodily deportment expected at heritage sites (an image on the page shows a visitor lying inside a tombstone for example). The aim is to celebrate the multiplicities of meaning in every heritage site and to dislodge, 'the industry's attempt at meaning control and homogenisation ... Behind the locked gates marked PRIVATE there is a multitude of inconvenient stories'.

These ideas find similar expression in the site-specific solo work of performer and founder of the walking collective *Wrights & Sites* Phil Smith. Using, 'self-consciously aesthetic walking' (Smith, 2009b, p. 88) his autobiographical text, 'Crab Walks' (2003-6) is a written performance based on holidays to South Devon where he was taken as a child (Smith, 2009a). These 'exploratory walks' were performed across a 4 week period, at several unconventional sites in Dawlish which acted as, 'custodian and agent of memory' (Mock, 2009, p. 21). One of Smith's authorial voices proclaims the desire to 'find' his memories of place, but the text shows that places refuse to be straight-jacketed into static meanings, rather, they change through the accretion of multiple site-specific meanings. Smith notes in his contextual essay to 'Crab Walks' that at *Wrights & Sites* his conception of 'site' shifted from, 'landscape backdrop. Unexpected events and appearances barely acknowledged'; to the notion, 'that a site might – and might be encouraged to – perform' (Smith, 2009b, p. 81). This idea is central to 'mythogeography', for in 'Crab Walks' the singular, assured autobiographical voice of the self is disrupted when 'space, place, environment, route and way are not passive surfaces .... On which the walker writes', rather they are 'psychical and physical ... 'characters' that the 'drifter' seeks to provoke into performances of themselves' (2009b,



p.98). What Smith finds is the mythologizing of memory; in this way, the performance demonstrates a ‘failed archaeology’, instead he finds metaphors that disrupt any sense of a fixed memory, encouraging him to re-engage, to make meanings afresh about the place where he experienced childhood holidays,

I didn’t find my memories ... I had found something bigger ... I’d found all these layers – the gulls, the giant’s eyes, the shifting sands of the ghost houses ... Nan and Pop weren’t missing. I felt the presence of their love. The adventure, the safety, the warmth inside the cold on a misty, shaky sea. But I couldn’t find it HERE anymore (2009b, p. 76)

Morag Rose is founder member of The *Loiterers Resistance Movement* (LRM) a Manchester collective who use walking as a ‘kinaesthetic tool’ (2015, p. 149) to critique the hegemonic planning and growth of the neo-liberal city. Chosen as an irreverent, playful form of protest which enables the lay public to engage with radical theory in an active way against spatial inequality, Rose takes a stance as a disabled, working-class woman against the entitled affordances of Benjamin’s position as flaneur. Rallying against the neo-colonial, elitist and misogynistic tendencies of the derive she argues that it can be democratised to become collective and non-hierarchical. The work of the LRM is to look beyond stores such as Harvey Nichols and the ‘shiny postbomb nirvana of Manchester City Centre’, past the monopolisation of place marketing to explore spaces of decay, liminality and to conjure the haunted qualities of the streets:

Although the street layout may have changed somewhat, their metaphorical ghosts and those of a million unnamed workers, continue to haunt Manchester and the injustices they documented still prevail (2015, p. 149).

The work of the collective is to use the derive to uncover hidden histories of characters from the past who have contributed to the ‘rich tapestry’ of those who have moved through the city. At the heart of the work of LRM is the drive to make power structures transparent, to bring forth invisible layers of the city to ask how things can be made better by loitering.

## **Method**

Autoethnography is ... a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of the self and others in social context (Spry, 2001, p. 710).

We co-wrote this article drawing on an interpretive, performative auto-ethnographic approach (Denzin, 2014). We are both the authors and the subjects of the story, we experienced the events and we tell of them, we are both viewers and the viewed.

Located at the intersection of the cultural and the personal we perceive and observe as ethnographers and recount as interpretive storytellers. The text produced here is discursively constructed. We recount here, ‘storied performances of life experience’ which are ‘open-ended, inconclusive, and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations’ (Denzin, 2014, p.4-5). We recognise that emotions form the subject matter of auto-ethnographic accounts; here our own investment in the value of the choir and its attendant emotions – anger about landowners’ strategies for keeping out commoners for example, is embedded in our account. We take Denzin’s poststructural perspective in which performances are not truthful evidence of experience but rather, ‘are constitutive of experience ...practices that allow for the construction of situated identities in specific sites’ (Ibid, p. 41). Embodied, sensory acts with ‘material and affective effects’, performances strive to ‘do something in the world’(ibid.) as they reach out and connect with the hopes, anxieties and longings of their participants and audiences. A performative approach to everyday life understands experience as imitation or construction. If however, that performative construction takes a resistant stance, blending it with aspiration for social justice then a powerful form of resistance has the potential to take shape.

We used artful and methods drawn from psychogeography to ‘produce’ the events. Author X used the language of the management, ownership and rights to land in the song lyrics: objects and figures and heroic historical and mythical figures from vernacular folklore were featured. In these ways, we were using mythogeography as a method as we conjured fragments of stories and diverse figures who have passed through rural space to engage different meanings of the landscape on the move. Similarly, while these walks were neither urban nor impromptu, they share the features of the democratised derive envisaged by Rose; we use the derive collectively as a method for connecting with and exploring the rural environment to open an experiential dialogue with space, not as Rose argues as a ‘solution’, but as a means of imagining different possibilities.

Interested in how the events were experienced by *Commoners*, we conducted five 30 minute static qualitative semi-structured interviews in informal settings (choir members’ homes, a local café, in the University buildings before rehearsal) in the summer of 2015.<sup>ii</sup> At this stage in the choir’s early life it was comprised of around 30 members, a largely white constituency with an even gender balance. The age of choir members ranged from 9 to 69, however, at least 75% of the choir were aged 40+. We found through conducting a survey of professional occupation, home ownership, educational qualifications and self-classification of social class that 50% of the choir would be identified as lower-middle class, 35% more firmly middle-class with the remaining 15% identifying with a working-class identity. Anecdotally, our sense is that there were a number of members, who like ourselves, were born into working class households but have moved through education into middle-class professions. To give an illustration of the types of work members were employed in we found: a camping cookery writer, two

university lecturers, a GP, an accountant, three social workers, a theatre workshop organiser, a theatre director, three people working in the FE sector and two nurses.

We draw on psychogeography in terms of the method we use for writing up the experience of the *Magna Carta* project. Richardson argues that as practice it can feel random and unsystematic; its attraction to the messy consequences of disruption and the ephemeral nature of the ‘derive’ or ‘drift’ make recording the sensual aspects of the walk difficult. Its ‘bricolage nature’ (2015, p. 3), means that it lies outside academic conventions. We argue for a self-reflexive melange of ways of capturing the embodied nature of how we used walking to make rural place meanings.

### **Where it all started: the *Commoners Choir* manifesto**

Using his experience of being a practicing song-writer for three decades, drawing on his recent work with volunteer ‘scratch choirs’ and his membership of the singing and walking group ‘The Reluctant Ramblers’, author X realised that the choir needed a manifesto. Author X wrote an outward facing manifesto as a means of welcoming interested new comers on the *Commoners Choir* website (to be found at [www.commonerschoir.com](http://www.commonerschoir.com)). Essentially the manifesto was designed along these parameters such that the choir would:

- be rigorously investigative and ideas-led, in a way which makes a connection between work by historians, cultural theorists and journalists about walking and singing as forms of political activism;
- be specifically about the politics of class and culture relating to land ownership and access;
- be a musical group characterised by walking to or between sites where the songs would be performed and sung in places to shock;

- be fun! The website call out said: ‘rehearsals and concerts will be a mixed-up uneven balance of hard work and laughter ...we’ll be peculiar, memorable, feisty, witty, angry and inclusive.’

### **The Ethos of the Magna Carta Project**

Having established a manifesto the choir needed an identity. *Commoners Choir* alludes to the idea of ‘commons’ – ‘that there are natural resources accessible to all members of society, including natural materials such as air, water and habitable earth,’ which are ‘held in common, not privately owned’ (Wikipedia, accessed 26 January, 2016). Already experienced at performing English rebel songs from the Peasant’s revolt of 1381 to the Miner’s Strike of 1984 during his time as a band member of X, the title also came from the authors mutual interest in drawing up alternative histories as opposed to legitimated ones ‘from below’ through song as voiced by ‘ordinary’ people, by ‘commoners’. For the purposes of this its first project, the title also alluded to the idea of common land held in common by commoners. It was a title which lent itself readily to the choir’s symbol which could be dispersed across a spectrum of sites: banners, the website, the pin-badge as well as a cloth badge to be appended to choir members at performances (See Figure 2). Cloth, as Connerton (2011, p. 15) argues, has a broad historical connection, across a range of cultures, to legends, commemoration, mourning and loss. Deliberately irreverent with its upturned crown it carries a clear anti-establishment message.<sup>iii</sup> Importantly the choir’s output and organization was shared amongst its members from project planning to printing patches to filming and editing videos. Crucially though, the formation of the choir also needed a story, a precursor to the choir’s ethos, so that potential members could identify a space for their own held beliefs to build a community of interest with other group members. Loosely narrated and layered with fragments of history, legend and contemporary popular

commentary the author decided to use the aims of the *Magna Carta* as an appealing historical concept to lend the group purpose. The choir began its rehearsals in April 2015 with two planned walking and singing commemorations in its diary. The first gathered at Edale, to remember the hundreds of activists who defied landlords and laws to physically reclaim the land which was once held in common at the 1932 Mass Trespass; and to commemorate the five who were jailed and who, some would argue, sped up the process of forcing parliament to take back the land for the workers in northern industrial towns which had been parcelled off for rich landowners during the Enclosures Acts of the nineteenth century.

### **Rich Histories of Protest: Walking**

Recreational rural walking originated in the early nineteenth century in the first industrial districts of northern England (Salveson, 2012; Walton, 2012). ‘Developing in popularity and assertiveness’ (Walton, 2012, p. 267) ‘stravaging’,<sup>iv</sup> emerged out of early industrial urbanization alongside other popular pursuits: the seaside holiday and popular cinema. Un-commercial and un-regulated, it offered sensuous embodied pleasures of fresh air and exercise, while affording, ‘an accessible antidote to the smoke, grime, pollution, and domestic over-crowding’ (Walton, 2012, p. 267) of industrial everyday life. Rural walking represented a ‘popular cultural adaptation and innovation in working-class life’ and was a pursuit that was largely unnoticed until others tried to block or prevent it.

The Lancashire and the Yorkshire Pennines offer a rich context through which to explore the political aspect of upland walking, especially in relation to the contestation of total ownership of land by aristocratic landowners and the nouveau riche. Peoples’ political walking practices based on attachments to the land and the countryside have a history. The northern footpath preservation societies, which aimed to

keep ancient access to pathways open began in the 1820s (Taylor, 1995). Navickas (2009) charts early nineteenth century cultures of political radicalism in relation to fields, tracks, moors and pathways in West Yorkshire and the Pennines, as religious and political protesters convened to strategize and disseminate their protest while using their knowledges of tracks to remain below the radar of urban officials. Hartshead Moor was the site of meetings by the Luddites and celebrations of the French Revolution for example and such spaces were fiercely protected from threats of closure. An affinity between the radical campaigners and the footpath societies developed alongside an association of open landscape with free-thinking and political campaigning.

In the twentieth century the 1930s were significant: 'hiking' or 'rambling' became especially fashionable, the *Youth Hostels Association* and the *Ramblers' Association* were formed and this was also the decade of the Kinder trespass. Often socialist and at times radical, the politics of rambling as an accessible, democratic pursuit relied on common entitlements to access and rights of way. Celebrated by *Commoners Choir* in the *Magna Carter* project, The Kinder mass trespass of April 1932 remains controversial, partly because it exposes differences of opinion about which methods and tactics are appropriate to protest over the 'right to roam'. The young and eager male protesters, affiliated as they were to the *Young Communists* and *The Labour League of Youth*, were informal weekend walkers who had clashed with aggressive aristocratic gamekeepers in the Peak District. They were adept at organizing political demonstrations and because of their politics they were not sanctioned by the official ramblers' associations; Walton for example shows that the Peak District Footpaths Preservation Society's Annual Report for 1932 makes no mention of the mass trespass (2012, p. 264). Indeed, in David Hey's contentious article he extends this argument by down-playing the event as a, 'single afternoon stunt' enacted by members of the

Communist party, who were entirely unaware of the history of the political gains of the official outdoor movement (2011, p. 199). Labelling it the ‘legend of the mass trespass’ which did more harm than good, Hey argues that it was the slow persistence of rambling clubs which proved the turning point in the ‘right to roam’ campaign. Hey is opposed the ‘direct action’ of Benny Rothman and his associates, his position is invested in the legitimate legislative processes of the judicial system. While numbers of the trespass vary, between 400-800 people followed Rothman and walked from Hayfield with the intention of reaching Kinder Scout, singing as they walked (2011, p. 210)! The trespass itself was relatively peaceful, though five were arrested. The harsh sentences, the prejudicial identification of the ‘perpetrators’, ‘half of whom were Jewish (as the judge pointed out)’ (2011, p. 212) and the class-privileged and elite nature of the jury, generated a good deal of sympathy, such that the annual meetings of the Manchester and Sheffield rambling associations in 1932 were said to have attracted 10,000 people in the wake of the trespass (ibid.) For our purposes here, the historical ‘truth’ of the trespass is perhaps beside the point, for as Walton asserts: ‘the mass trespass was to accumulate great symbolic importance, as a reservoir of anger and injustice, which could be tapped for future campaigns’ (Walton, p. 264). It is the symbolic significance of what Hey calls the ‘legend’ of the mass trespass that *Commoners Choir* used to construct the political flavour of its *raison d’être*. It also holds the historical, mythical and imaginative metaphors we wanted to unfold as we walked.

### **Now Back to the choir ...**

On the morning of the first gathering at Edale, the author gave out pin-badges of the *Commoners* symbol for choir members to wear and two postcards: one of thlarge group of walkers on their way to Kinder Scout in 1932, the ‘peak district ramblers in



trouble!’ and another of Tom Stephenson, the political activist and journalist of the socialist newspaper *The Daily Herald* (See Figure 3). The commentary on the back told the story of Tom who had been a, ‘a nine-bob-a-week apprentice textile printer in Whalley’ when he first climbed the Pendle Hill in wooden clogs to survey the Pennine peaks, ‘then inaccessible, private shooting grounds, fenced and guarded by gamekeepers working for wealthy landowners’. The postcard celebrates thirty years of campaigning for the ‘long green trail’ of the Pennine Way, ‘which stands as a glorious testament to our unsung power to change things; as a physical trail to mark the reclamation of our open land for common, not private use’. The card shows Tom grinning next to a notice threatening prosecution for trespassing. These badges, postcards, stories and symbols are important; they set the project in to a historical tradition of protest and defiance and they give members a visual code of shared aesthetics and belonging. For choir member Will the design choice of Commoners typeface on the badge was appealing. ‘I also like the graphics,’ he told me, ‘I like the upside down crown in the William Morris font.’<sup>v</sup>

On the day of the second walk across Ilkley Moor, the author distributed a leaflet which drawing on Peter Lindbaugh, argued that the aims of the *Magna Carta* had been a ‘blueprint for change, for equality and for the commonality of the law and the land’ which had since been travestied by the political elite, the establishment and corporate wealth as a ‘document that boasts democracy whilst acting as a smokescreen for diminished rights and rule’. And after reminding the choir of the irony that the Queen would unveil a portrait of herself at Runnymede to give the royal seal of approval to a document originally drafted to challenge royal power over commoners and common land, the pamphlet then turns to the choir member:

So what can we do? We can, for starters, begin to understand our historic right to have common ownership of the land. We can re-imagine our roles as part of a

community that looks after itself, ... The Commons, these patches of shared land, from village greens to moorland expanses, are resources for us to build on. So by walking, and by singing, we're rooting ourselves to the earth and to the past, celebrating the simple physical pleasure of community and self-organisation.

### **Rich Histories of Protest: Singing**

The notion that music is a form especially capable of influencing peoples' ideas is not new; it was a prevalent belief in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Indeed the first political song, the 'Cutty Wren' goes back to the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. 'Broadsides' and folk songs containing lyrics which rallied against bad employers, working conditions and political rulers dates back to the seventeenth century (Russell, 1997). Music's potential as a 'political weapon' for the people was even more prevalent in the nineteenth century, for example the dialect song which mimicked the persuasive 'Peter Fearless' who tries to convince 'Dick Freeman' of the importance of union membership, identifying in the process the self-interest and exploitative traits in employers at the Durham pit strike of 1831: 'Wey, Peter, aw begin to see things right plain/For wor maisters they care for nowt else by gain'. Commoners lyrics, as detailed below, continue this tradition of addressing its audience with its views about social class and access. There is also a history of the performance of music in locations which are designed to make a challenge or underline its radical use, for example the series of concerts deliberately held on Sundays in 1856 by the secularist movement which held that religion was a mere matter of speculation, to attack the devotional, non-commercialism of 'Victorian Sunday'.

In the late Victorian period, there was a revival in socialist radicalism through bodies such as the Clarion movement and the Independent Labour Party. Mostly found in northern communities, these groups seized on the emotive powers of music to morally and politically elevate rational recreation (Waters, 1990). While music

had always enjoyed a central position in utopian socialist thought, they believed, ‘that human passions could be harnessed to the cause of radical reform and that music could encourage intense feelings of shared identity’ (1990, p. 100). Robert Blatchford, a socialist who founded the *Clarion* newspaper in 1891, felt that socialism had become ‘far too earnest’ (Russell, 1997, p. 60). Adept at promotion, he used the paper to showcase socialism as an attractively different lifestyle, drawing on the camera, cycling and rambling clubs to popularize its fellowship. Blatchford himself was aware that music had the potential to offer a supporting and brightening element to more pedestrian forms of political labour: ‘we want some broad, humanising interest to brighten the dingy round of our struggling party, some more genial and cheering amusement than political speeches and contested elections’ (Russell, 1997, p. 61). There are parallels here with what Commoners Will and Ned told me about finding a new form of social activism through singing: it was seen by Ned as an alternative to the more outworn political strategy of ‘placard politics’.

More recently, forms of collective singing have become increasingly popular, demonstrating the rise of strategies which make space for social bonding, shared political purpose and for what they express about attachments to place. Miyake’s (2014) ethnographic work about the Manchester Lesbian and Gay Chorus choir argues that the existence of the Gay Village as, ‘a geographical and social space to accommodate their activities’, its development as an openly gay culture since the 1990s and its links with LGBT were essential to its formation, practices and outward public success. The choir felt safe within the Village, but the choir also became a space defined outside the commercial, touristic values of the Village: it was non-commercial (not part of the club economy), ‘non-scene’ (non-eroticized) and it became an alternative space - an asylum - where its members were able to build a strong sense of community. Interviews with her

respondents show that the most ‘meaningful’ events were locally performed and to do with civil and political issues – HIV and civil partnership for example - which affected queer lives.

### **Once More from the Choir ...**

Carrying our *Commoners Choir* flag, we walked several miles uphill to the plateau where the original trespassers had celebrated (see Figure 4). There, perched 2,000 feet above sea level, we sang a song about trespass in four part harmony and rooted our choir to those converging compass points of music, community, history and politics.

#### From Below

Step by step...  
With a compass and a cap  
For a sing-song and a scrap  
Are we bound by the lines upon the map?  
Hell no!  
‘Cos real change comes from below

#### *Chorus*

From below, from below  
Real change comes from below

It’s a place we call our own  
From stone to boundary stone  
Will they take away the right to roam?  
Hell no!  
‘Cos real change comes from below

#### *Chorus*

For every footprint on the land  
For all the banners and the banned  
Should we keep to the landlord's plans?  
Hell no!  
'Cos real change comes from below

*Chorus*

From below, from below  
Real change comes from below  
Down in the soil where the ideas grow  
Real change comes from below

Rehearsals continued with a view to the second part of the *Magna Carta* project, this time over Yorkshire's largest tract of common land, Ilkley Moor. We sang at Darwin's memorial at the foot of the Moor then climbed towards the summit before singing in the Cow and Calf quarry. As a choir we understood the historical and social resonance of Ilkley Moor: it stands as a reminder of a time when the common land was held in common, farmed since the Bronze Age and used for animal grazing by the Romans, Danes and Normans to the present day. Quarries were dug to provide stones to build local houses and the streams were harnessed to power the corn mills on nearby Mill Ghyll. It remains today a huge area of land with continuing open access. That day we sang the Magna Carta song in the quarry to a small audience.

For the Common Good (Magna Carta song)

Tax by tax, stone by stone  
From arable farm to a retail zone  
National Lottery, payday loan  
All you are is what you own

On the banks of the river in an open field  
Where Crown and Cameron shake on the deal  
See the dead-eyed descendents of old King John  
They're selling their lies in the Mail and Sun

*Chorus*

So call Boudica! Rally Ned Ludd!  
Send a taxi for Robin Hood!  
We're taking back the past  
For the Common good

They drew up the charter, signed and sealed  
Then stuck it in a drawer with the unpaid bills  
Three cheers for change – hello, Hooray!  
(What a nice day)  
Fold it up neatly then throw it away

*Chorus*

In the name of the market it's all been planned  
They're selling the forests, fracking the land  
Kettle the marchers, fill up the cells  
With the good-for-nothings and the ne'er-do-wells

**The experience of performing *Magna Carta* ...**

While our interviews with choir members covered several topics, here we focus on *Magna Carta*. Ned felt proud of the idea of the project: 'We were not just singing cover songs,' Ned asserted, 'we were singing about our rights to walk and enjoy our country's open countryside.' For Gemma the walk at Edale posed quite a physical challenge, but here she alludes to having a mental consciousness about the purpose of the walk, which was to have those figures from history in mind:

Well I enjoyed it - a stunningly beautiful day. But walking up hill negotiating those rough stones was genuinely tough. I was glad of those pathways, fancy if we didn't have them? I kept thinking 'step-by-step', it gave me a rhythm for heaving my weighty body up that hill [laughs]. And it was sweet of X to make the postcards. I kept them in my top pocket. Good reminder of why we were pulling on our calf muscles to commemorate trespass. No better way than to put one foot in front of the other.

Gemma's response is clear that walking is the practice of the protest and that the toughness was justified by the act of commemoration. Katy recalled what it was like to sing at Edale as a small group in a vast open landscape (see Figure 5).

I'll never forget singing 'From Below' on the Edale walk. The wind was blowing about us, the sky was so big and we were engulfed in vast space of the landscape, the hills. There was no audience, it was just us in that place, which gave it a particular meaning somehow. We didn't sound that great really because our voices were so tiny in the vastness but when I got to the words on the second verse I was that moved I couldn't sing. I think it was looking at X while he was conducting, he looked vulnerable somehow in the way that you sometimes are when something really matters ... to be standing there and singing about ordinary folk and their rights to being in common land.

In this exchange, Katy reflects on the emotions of being bodily engulfed in a huge open rural space. Caught at the intersection of singing with other warm bodies, in the presence of words about the longing to have access to that space was over-whelming. Having no audience meant that the performance turned inward to reflection about the purpose of the event where the physical and psychic sense of presence combines in a unique moment. Others allowed the site to perform in ways that captured the imagination, using the stories which framed the event:

There was an eeriness for me when we got to the top of the summit. In my mind the trespassers were like ghosts – imagine them in their 1930s clothes! I stood and contemplated the ground at the summit and thought about what it must've been like to have that many people flood a landscape with their angry presence and the noise of shouting and charged atmosphere. Violence basically. Ghostly because the place was virtually without anybody the day we took the choir (Will).

Will actually transposed his imaginary sense of trespassers coming alive on the walk, ushering in the layers of meaning prompted by the event. For others a residual frustration about the efficacy of singing protest songs to effect real constitutional change for ordinary walkers stubbornly persisted after the event. As Katy said:

It was great at Ilkley, a good day out, we had a good laugh. I loved singing at the quarry with the dog howling as well. But it still annoys me that the problem is still there. Can real change come from below? Is the Queen listening to the Magna Carta song, I don't think so. What will happen? Very little actually, we're doing it to make ourselves feel better really.

These oral testimonies give an insight into the way in which choir members made meaning about place. Some were bodily uplifted, some made mental connections with how history shapes place, some felt jaded that beyond protest further action seems not to prevail. Castells'(1998) excitement about the potential for mass political organisation via the internet has never been realised in neo-liberal Britain where the public realm has been systematically eroded, despite grass-roots campaigning and protest. But we must, somehow, keep going.

#### **And the choir goes on ....**

*Magna Carta* was just the start of *Commoners Choir*. Many more protest songs came afterwards, performed in settings designed to shock. When it was announced in January 2016 that the Royal Photography Society's world renowned collection which had been housed at Bradford's National Media Museum since 2003 was to be moved to the V & A in London, author X wrote 'Robin Hood in Reverse' to protest another triumph of metropolitanism. In a bid to challenge the idea that Northern communities are less deserving of culture than those in London, the choir flash-mobbed the museum's foyer to the breathless consternation of security guards who demanded an end to the song. In



Spring 2017 we toured public libraries around the North of England to protest their closure and sang ‘Mechanical Moveable Type’ which celebrates the invention of the printing press, a historical shift which placed the power of literacy in the hands of commoners rather than an educated elite. Our songs can be accessed from the choir’s debut album *Commoners Choir* (No Masters Co-operative Ltd, 2017). These events and performances are examples of a continued catalogue of the life of the choir.

DeNora argues that, ‘musical activity can be understood as an active ingredient of community formation’ (2015, p. 88). We would argue that the choir is an on-going community. There is within *Commoners Choir* a feeling of inclusivity, of genuinely shared ownership. The choir operates as a collective: choir members are given space to comment on everything from what we wear when performing to the arrangements of the harmonies. And crucially, *Commoners Choir* has been in some cases transformative in terms of promoting a sense of connection with others and for promoting well-being (Clifford, 2017).

*Commoners Choir* has been successful in its attempt to act as a ‘fulcrum’ that links an assortment of social and political ideas, connecting us physically through our voices, our ideas and our feet to a history of dissent and change. We rejected the notion of history as being a litany of monarchs and wars, and instead presented a history as voiced by the ordinary people, the ‘commoners’. *Commoners Choir* is an attempt to become part of that history, an acknowledgement that the song form is a vital part of our culture that can offer something very different from a written history. If we can continue to explore these links and the interrelationships between them, whilst retaining a sense of friendship, community, purpose and enjoyment, then *Commoners Choir* will be doing what it set out to do. In this sense the choir may well meet the objective Hesmondhalgh lays out in his claim that music’s most significant contribution, ‘to

collective human life might be to advance political struggles for a better distribution of flourishing' which in turn continues the 'sustenance of a public sociability, which keeps alive feelings of solidarity and community' (2015, p. 10).

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<sup>i</sup> For an animated experience of the *Magna Carta* project our short film made by Chian Gatwood at University X can be accessed on YouTube.

<sup>ii</sup> This study was given ethical clearance by University X. The people of the study gave us signed consent to use their responses in published materials. We use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the people of the study.

<sup>iii</sup> The upside down crown was used specifically as a reaction to Magna Carta – the original Charter was written to diminish the power of the King, whose power was out of control. As well as protecting the forests and commons the Charter limited the sovereign’s power in the courts and in law, so the upside-down-crown was logical.

<sup>iv</sup> Walton uses the term ‘stravaging’ to mean ‘walking unconstrained by legally established rights of way’ (2012, p. 247).

<sup>v</sup> The font used in all Commoners print is by Golden Type by William Morris. A pioneering socialist designer and poet, his Arts and crafts Movement was based on the idea of art and references design being part of ordinary peoples’ lives rather than as an elite fancy for the wealthy.

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## List of Figures

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Figure 1: Commoners Choir, Summer 2015

Figure 2: Commoners badge

Figure 3: Postcards for the walk at Edale

Figure 4: Carrying our flag at Edale

Figure 5: Singing at the summit at Edale