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Audio and ludic engagements with spiritual heritage at an Irish holy well

This article reflects on audio methods and field recordings as means of examining how a cultural-spiritual space can be experienced by young people through an arts heritage project undertaken with primary school children in rural Ireland. Contributing to the growing role of sound and audio in geographical research, we consider how a series of participatory workshops at a holy well fostered curiosity and ludic engagements with the place enhancing the understanding of this location in a process that merged creative practice, spiritual heritage, and wonder.

Audio methods, field recording, holy well, young people, creative practice

Introduction

Holy wells are found across Ireland as enchanting spaces where elements of the Pagan, Christian, and natural blend together. Many of these sacred springs are active sites of religious and spiritual devotion, as well as being local heritage locations. *(Re)Sounding Holy Wells* was a collaborative audio project based in rural south Ireland that explored wells with groups of young people, aged 10-12 years old.[1] It presented an alternative means for the participants to experience local cultural-spiritual spaces while also becoming attuned to soundscapes and field recording. Podcasts were made after the workshops as a means to convey the young participants' creative engagements, and communicate their insights.[2] These activities built on our previous collaborative research between Richard, as a cultural geographer who has researched holy wells and has an interest in audio, and Vicky, an artist

whose practice operates across performance, sound, and film.[3] As well as drawing on our expertise in, and passion for, audio, the project unfolded through shared appreciations of the ludic character of working with young people in co-generating new understandings; while, also being aware of the considerations and complexities involved in research with under-eighteens.[4]

<Insert Figure 1>

Holy wells are a distinct aspect of the Irish cultural landscape.[5] They are natural springs which have religious-spiritual functions, with some locations originating in ancient Pagan worship and others being associated with local patron Christian saints. In addition to the well, the sites have ritualised surroundings with features such as sacred trees or medieval remains that are incorporated into practices performed on saints' feast days or high-points of the Celtic calendar for those seeking supernatural interventions and healing. These are liminal spaces experienced through the embodied and affective engagements of personal and communal devotions.[6] Holy springs occupy a post-secular position as active areas of pilgrimage and worship within Roman Catholicism and growing neo-Pagan communities, while also serving as heritage locations on local cultural and tourism trails.[7]

Conceptually and practically, the project used sound to help the participants understand the space in a fresh way. Vicky's craft interrogates and disrupts socio-political contexts through the visceral use of auditory methods, centring appreciations for the role of sound in shaping encounters with and interpretation of the world. This prioritising of the auditory aligns with developments in cultural geography that have turned to sound, in particular, as a rich milieu for unsettling a historically optic tradition in the discipline.[8] Sound is increasingly valued as

rich terrain for geographers' examinations of place and human (and non-human) experiences of spaces, as well as the medium's capacity to convey meaning, atmospheres, and essences.[9] In addition, audio methods are suited to creative and playful engagements that resonated with youth participants. This dimension links to research that works with young people in appreciating how they experience and create their own worlds, and how we give voice to these perspectives.[10] Our reflections on this practice, unites these strands through an interactive process focused on spiritual heritage.

Audio workshops: playing with the numinous

<Insert Figure 2>

Five workshops were run with final-year students from two primary schools in Mitchelstown, north County Cork, exploring St Fanahan's well in the lead up to the saint's feast day, 25th November, when attention was focused on the spring and devotees visit completing sets of prayers (Figure 2). As both schools were under Roman Catholic patronage (a common feature of the Irish educational system), the young people would have annually visited the well on class trips, and some with their families also. Our external facilitation and use of sound was welcomed by the students and teaching staff as a new means to engage with the space.

In preparation for the workshops, students carried out research on the well by asking family members/neighbours about it, to help attune them to the site's heritage.[11] Before walking to the site, we had an interactive session introducing ourselves and the methods, and asking them to share the accounts they gathered. Tales of St Fanahan's patronage and the miracles

linked to the site established it as a numinous place of local lore at the intersection of spiritual heritage and the physical landscape. Also, their telling the stories enabled an initial ownership in the process by establishing the young people as agents with local understanding who presented it to us, as outsiders.

<Insert Figure 3>

Three audio tools were deployed at the sites, with the students, in groups, rotating between each one. An audio recorder and hydrophone were used at the spring presenting a unique perspective from within the well, and the opportunity to play with watery sounds (Figure 3); two audio recorders enabled them to attend to the soundscape; and, a walkman was used to record and playback sounds, in a more mechanical and, especially for these participants, antiquated process. We also asked some of them to tell their stories of St Fanahan to help link the local folklore and the site. The children brought considerable enthusiasm and emotion to their use of, and responses to, each of these tools.

The enhanced listen experience offered by the devices were met with wonder by the students as they encountered and examined the space in new ways. The gentle plop of the hydrophone going into the well is an innately pleasant sound, while the babbling of an adjacent stream is enlivened when listening through a microphone, and location is disrupted with distant noises becoming close. One child explained that: ‘We’re having fun and checking out the sounds which are around us and in water…We heard multiple sounds that we probably won’t hear again.’ As well as describing aural enjoyment, they highlight audio’s distinct role in experiencing the landscape and the importance of these devices to access

this dimension. The rich sensory connections were relished, but also remained a temporary orientation created in the workshop.

The students quickly turned to more ludic pursuits as the devices allowed them to freshly encounter the area and each other through the medium. While being conscious of the well's sacred character, we had prompted them to make their own sounds, especially by interacting with the site. On the tape, they can be heard whispering and shouting in the microphones, and making a range of amusing and loud noises, as well as trying to hear birds and wildlife, and play with leaves and dirt. At the well, the drop of the hydrophone was popular, as was classmates animating the water while one of the students listened. These transgressive elements permitted the children to engage with the space through a form of playful exploration that presented new experiences of the space.

Listening

We worked with the hours of tape recorded across the five workshops to produce a podcast from the student's field recordings. As Mills has suggested, this involved a process of active listening to the young people's voices to understand the spaces they create.[12] Our editing the tape foregrounded how students interacted through the medium and created original accounts of St Fanahan's well. The financial limitations of the grant, resulted in the young people not being able to participate in this phase of the project, which was disappointing as their energy and creativity would have added considerably. Nonetheless, our focus was on rendering podcasts which reflected their work and located encounters.

Our listening reinforced experiences of the workshops as the student's raw fervour and spirit was palpable, especially given sound's evocative and affecting qualities. The tape was a cacophony of natural soundscape, watery noises, tales of the saint, hushed conversations, shouts and playful exploration. It was the auditory manifestation of their surveys, a layered insight into young people's experience of this space with the understandings they generated along the way. Through the microphones, they intervened in the substances of the site while also reaching out to the immaterialities, accessing elusive layers and elements.

Assembling a podcast to respectfully represent the range of recordings was a challenge. It was intended to present a distinct perspective on the well that would appeal to the local community and those with a commitment to heritage, and serve as a novel listening tool for the young people. We were conscious of making editorial choices on behalf of the young people; however, their authenticity and curiosity had a strong affect which suggested its own priorities and insights. Careful active listening opened us up further to their worlds, enabling the creation of a blended product that was both chaotic and purposeful. As well as voicing their experience, it demonstrated how audio presented a distinct insight into this spiritual heritage space.

Conclusion: audio and ludic

Our reflections in this paper highlights the potential of working with children using audio methods as an alternative means to engage with cultural and spiritual heritage. The workshops illustrated how field recording animated the imaginative and ludic capacities of young people in exploring St Fanahan's well. In addition, the project underlined sound's role

as a research and creative tool to explore and understand the world in disciplinary and public contexts. Their recordings connected with dimensions of the space only accessible through this medium in a lively and practical process. The activities indicate the capacities of sound as a medium that can both enliven considerations of heritage spaces and include children as co-producers of knowledge.

Both the students and the schools gave very positive feedback of the experience and the audio artefacts created. It was appreciated as an innovative approach to a familiar space that allowed them to engage with its spiritual heritage and encounter it through sound. Reflecting on our practice, the genuine wonder and joviality of the young people's use of the audio tools prompted fresh appreciations for the capacities of sound as a research and artistic medium. Although we were vested in the deployment of sound in our respective professions, we could not but be affected by the abundance and authenticity of the recordings the students created. In listening to their soundtracks, we were opened to new worlds and their potentials; we hope it does the same for others.

Notes

[1] The project was funded by the Creative Ireland County Cork Grant Scheme under the Creative Ireland Programme 2017-2022. The grant covered equipment and expenses, but our participation was non-remunerated. We would like to acknowledge everyone who participated in and facilitated this project, including students and staff of Bunscoil na Toirbhirte, Mitchelstown and C.B.S Primary Mitchelstown. All

images were taken by the authors. For more information see: http://liminalentwinings.com/creative-ireland-project/

[2] The project podcasts are available here: http://tinyurl.com/soundholywell. At time of submitting the article, they have been listened to 46 times in total.

[3] Richard Scriven's research website: http://liminalentwinings.com/; Vicky Langan's professional website: http://www.vickylangan.com/

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[11] This imitated a programme in 1930s Ireland when the recently formed Folklore Commission had children from primary schools gather information about the heritage of their areas. The collection is available online through the National Folklore Collection University College Dublin Digitization Project at https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes

[12] Mills, 'Voice: sonic geographies of childhood', pp.666.