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'A Place of Magic': Enchanting geographies of contemporary wassailing practices

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Abstract

Orchard wassailing practices, along with other folk traditions has been overlooked by geographers. This paper considers how such practices can engineer spaces of enchantment in otherwise 'disenchanted' spaces. Furthermore, how this form of enchantment is never fixed but relational, unstable and contingent, or 'borrowed'. Having nearly disappeared in the mid-20th century, wassailing has been 're-wakened' (Cater & Cater, 2013) for the contemporary world. A surprising feature of these contemporary wassails is that they often are performed in recently planted or restored orchards on in suburban areas with little heritage of producing fruit. Spaces usually considered absent of 'enchantment'. Drawing on interviewees with organisers of contemporary and 'reinvented' wassails in the south and south-west of England, this research investigates contemporary wassailing practices in such otherwise 'disenchanted' spaces. In doing so it draws attention to the construction of 'magical' atmospheres that combine elements of the religious-spiritual, heritage and fiction enabling a temporary suspension of disbelief. The paper develops upon previous understandings of 'enchantment' in geography and introduces the notion of 'borrowed enchantment' that draws attention to forms of enchantment which are relational, emergent, unstable and contingent to locality.

Keywords

enchantment, wassail, magic, affect, geographies of folklore, atmosphere

Introduction

It is the depth of winter and the trees are adorned with slices of toast and decorated with colourful lights. The gathered crowd, wrapped up in their warm winter clothing, are led on a merry parade around a dark orchard by The Butler and the Green Man, singing, shouting and drinking mulled cider, whilst a smoky fire crackles and flickers in the cold airy night.

Wassailing, the 'ancient' but recently reinvented folk custom, has undergone a revival since the beginning of the 21st century. Usually occurring in mid-January around the old Twelfth Night, the custom was once practiced amongst villagers in the fruit, mostly apple, growing regions of England to 'wake up' the orchard trees and to ward off malicious spirits. With this resurgence of wassails the custom has migrated from the countryside to towns and cities and occur in a variety of settings from commercial cider growers to urban settings organised by local community groups such as orchards and city farms. These urban and suburban surroundings are often characterised as modern, disenchanted and faraway from the magic and supernatural beliefs that wassailing implies.

Re-enchantment of modernity has been a recent theme in cultural geography with studies of religion and spirituality, occult, magic and ghost tours amongst other areas. Folklore and folk customs have been somewhat neglected in this analysis. However, such practices offer a geographically-moored node for localised understandings and practices of the supernatural, belief, pagan symbols and rituals and magic in contemporary European societies. In turn, the study of folklore, enchanting spaces and practices can illuminate the connections between people and place. Furthermore, the growth of wassail events in the UK has often occurred within urban spaces, reminding town and city dwellers of the earth

and seasons; supernatural thinking and make-believe appears to be thriving within spaces considered secular and modern.

This article explores the enchanting dimension of wassailing by first positioning the research in the context of the recent wassail revival and geographies of enchantment, atmosphere and affect. Employing interviews with organisers of recently-introduced wassails in the south and south-west of England as well as participant-observation at these events, this research investigates how enchantment is constructed in 'disenchanted' spaces from ideas and practices which are open to disbelief; how suburban orchards or public parks and community centres can become 'a place of magic'. The findings also address a lack of geographical research into re-emerging folkloric practices such as wassailing. I argue that such practices present an opportunity and space for the temporary and playful suspension of the secular disbelief, amongst the organisers of these events. The wassail borrows its enchantment from religious identities, spiritual connections with the environment and other people as well as stories, fictional characters and theatrical performances in the ceremony. In demonstrating the above points, I advance the wassail produces a sense of 'borrowed enchantment' that enables community relations between different people, and people and nature. The 'borrowed' quality of this enchantment draws attention to its relational, emergent, unstable and contingent characteristics.

Wassail!

To call 'waes hail', and to hear the customary reply of 'drink hail', is to toast to the good health of people, of crops and even livestock (Hole, 1976; Hutton, 1996). Arriving from an Anglo-Saxon toast, 'waes hail' has been traced back at least as far as the 14th century, as an occasion to share a convivial drink of something warming in the midst of winter, sometimes

from an intricately carved wooden wassail cup (Hutton, 1996). The practices that arise around wassailing divides into two broad activities that occur in and around the Christmas festival period: The first type, the visiting wassail, consists of a group of residents attending different houses of the village and carolling in the hope of a donation of money, drink or 'a good piece of beef' (Hole, 1976, p. 208; see also Willey, 1983). This charitable side of 'visiting wassail' and the musical exhortation found within wassail songs for food from the 'butler' or the 'master' and 'missus' of the house illustrates the relationship between the participants, as the richer landowners, and the poorer resident wassailers.

The second type of wassail, and the focus of this paper, is the wassailing of the orchards that variously enlists songs, offerings of toast, cake and cider and rituals enfolded into a ceremony performed traditionally on the Twelfth Night of Christmas. Orchard wassailing (also known as 'howling' in Sussex, England) emerges primarily in the rural apple producing regions (such as Somerset, Gloucestershire and Herefordshire amongst others) of England, dating back to at least the 17th century (Hutton, 1996). The stated objective of the ceremony is to 'wake up' the trees from their winter slumber in order to begin the agricultural year, and to use loud noises and even gunfire to scare away evil or malicious spirits that might harm the orchard, thereby causing economic hardship to the village.

The highly localised, and often informal, nature of historical and contemporary wassails provide challenges to quantifying the number of wassails that have occurred or do occur annually. It is widely believed that wassailing, as with other national and folk religious practices (Bruce, 2013), was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries but declined significantly to almost extinction with the onset of industrialisation and rural-urban migration in England that broke up village-based rural communities (Cater & Cater, 2013). Despite the issues in

registering wassails, there is considerable witness to the resurgence, or as Cater and Cater term 're-awakening', of these events across the UK (Cater & Cater, 2013; Cooper, 2008; Kennedy, 2017; Osborne, 2010; Scott-Moncrieff, 2015). For example, Cater and Cater's internet survey finds over 170 different events reported in 2012. The re-emergence of wassailing may also be seen alongside a recent demand for 'authentic' food and crafts amongst British consumers, evidenced in farmers' markets, Christmas markets and organic food produce. It is not just the sudden growth in wassailing that is surprising, but the geographical expansion in terms of where wassails are occurring. Many contemporary wassails take place in regions with little apple producing heritage, and not just in rural environments where the custom is associated but also in urban and suburban sites with very little apple, or fruit, growing heritage at all.

Rural areas are often associated with folklore and superstition in the popular (urban) imagination. Folk-horror films such as 'The Wicker Man' play upon the stereotypes of close-knit, tightly structured communities that collectively continue with religious beliefs and interplay between Christian, folk and pagan beliefs. There is ongoing discussion as to the extent of wassailing's origins in pagan ideas – with some folklorists arguing wassail is a surviving remnant of pre-Christian tree cults (Anon., 1931; Beament, 1922). However, with its reverence to nature manifested in 'waking up', singing to and making offerings to the trees alongside the noisy scaring off of malicious spirits, wassailing reinforces partial pagan or magical identities. As will be discussed in the following section, modernity and urbanisation is viewed as a threat to religious, folk, supernatural and magical understandings of the world yet also enable certain forms of enchantment to thrive. This observation begs the question of whether the more enchanted aspects of wassailing have

followed the people and ceremonies from rural to urban settings and how may these aspects be manifest within contemporary wassailing? A question this paper sets out to answer but first 'enchantment' – and its engineering will be discussed in more detail.

Enchantment

A discussion of 'enchantment' necessitates some engagement with the disenchantment thesis, most notably advanced by Max Weber. This section will briefly introduce disenchantment and accompanying critique but will focus on the consequences of how patterns of dis/enchantment play out in the West. Modern society, according to Weber (1992), is characterised as secular and disenchanted: Whereby rationalised industry and government marginalises religion and forms of magic, folklore and superstition in favour of scientific knowledge and capitalist driven efficiencies. Weber's arguments are rooted in a secularisation theory in which the Protestant Reformation is seen as an 'elective affinity' (1992) with capitalist organisation of the economy. Through this process, scientific, technological and medical advancement provides explanation for natural world processes and solutions where previously such processes would be interpreted and understood through religious or supernatural thinking (Bennett, 2001; Weber, 1992). Such narratives of disenchantment are echoed in discussions of wassailing as folklorist Christina Hole observes:

Like many ancient rituals that have outlived the beliefs from which the originally sprang, apple-wassailing today is largely a cheerful frolic, vaguely associated with good luck; but not so long ago its old magical meaning was still remembered, and the ceremony was regularly performed to protect the trees from evil, and to make them bear a plentiful fruit crop in the coming season. (1976, p. 209)

Hole reflects a trend of secularisation theorists who see a disenchanted society today, in comparison with a 'golden age' or 'age of faith', just beyond living memory (Stark, 1999; although disputed by Bruce, 2001). Preceding Hole's statement, Beament (1922), in drawing a lineage from ancient tree cults and earth gods worship to wassailing, insists that certain elements, namely the libations of the preceding year's apple juice or cider to the tree, are an 'obvious magical survival'. As the apple produce represents the 'blood' of the orchard, offering it back to the tree is the continuation and regeneration of life from one seasonal cycle to the next.

Whilst local and central governments along with corporate organisations have prioritised rationalised procedures in management, planning, manufacturing and distribution, Weber's prediction of disenchantment has been critiqued and countered since publication. A growing body of literature has emphasised the sustained enchantment of society and spaces in the world. Pile (2006; 2005) questions the assumption that urbanisation inherently leads to disenchantment and marginalises belief and magic. Citing a variety of examples from the presence of one-armed bandit fruit machines in suburban arcades to voodoo rituals in contemporary New Orleans, Pile argues magic, supernatural and religious beliefs prevail amongst the ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse groups of people who are brought to live and work together in the city.

Pile's case studies as well as other contributions (for example Kiong & Kong, 2000; Bonnett, 2017; Burchardt & Becci, 2013; Philo, Cadman, & Lea, 2015) underline the criticism that secular technological-rationalist approaches overemphasise the homogeneity or flatness of the world (Bennett, 2001). Across the social sciences, scholars have sought not just to demonstrate the diversity of urban and rural landscapes but to deconstruct binaries that

delimit and allocate activities, lifestyles and expressions into specific divisions of space.

Within this narrative, everyday spaces have been reclaimed from secular, rational hegemonies of discourse with increasing recognition of nuanced topographies that can inspire, reaffirm and inject more-than-rational identities and relations. Bennett (2001), for instance, argues that enchantment is a state which can be cultivated by those individuals who are open to awe:

To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound. (2001, p. 5)

For Bennett, enchantment requires some form of participation in the natural world and leads to more egalitarian approach to understanding nature and divinity.

The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged – a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life (2001, p. 5).

Woodyer and Geoghegan urge this reading to inspire and inform geographical work, reaffirming enchantment as 'an open, ready-to-be surprised 'disposition' before, in, with the world' (2013, p. 196). Enchantment therefore requires an involved participation in the world, echoed in Bonnett's (2017, p. 473) reclamation of magic as an 'active process; to do magic is to enact, perform and conjure'. Elsewhere, Holloway cautions against the reduction of enchantment and enchanted spaces to 'societal processes, structures or belief' (2006, p. 186), evidencing a resistance to a flattened rationalist view of the world.

Connecting enchantment and the affective qualities of religious-spiritual spaces, Holloway argues that

The cultural politics of belief and religiosity, as well as the sensations that affirm and reiterate them, are for millions of people life-giving, life-fulfilling and life-affirming – something we must respect and seek to understand (2006, p. 186).

Elsewhere geographers have questioned the assumed requirement for belief when engaging with institutions, events, processes or practices of religion, spirituality, magic or the occult. The proliferation of ‘new age’, alternative spirituality and holistic products, ideas and activities, not just in ‘official spaces’ of the dedicated centres and practitioners’ classes but in the secular settings of supermarkets, mainstream newspapers and digital platforms, suggests a loosening of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane or the magical and the rational (Bartolini, Chris, MacKian, & Pile, 2013; Harvey & Vincent, 2012; Hjarvard, 2008). Indeed, as demonstrated in Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) Kendal Project, it is likely that more people practice yoga or other holistic activities than believe in its efficacy as a result of a transcendental cause.

Drawing on his research in ghost tourism, Holloway (2010, p. 629) turns attention away from the binary of belief and disbelief to a performance of ‘not disbelieving’ involved in the infrastructures of enchantment. In this reading, enchantment is a relationship between the enchanter and enchanted which, in line with Bennett, relies upon some aspect of playfulness and willingness to be enchanted.

This readiness (no matter how subconscious) to be enchanted may reflect a disillusionment with exploitative capitalist, corporate, consumerist, governmental and scientific agendas which have betrayed public trust in recent years, and a desire for something deeper and more meaningful (King, 2008; Woodhead, 2012). The continuation of belief in religion, magic and the occult along with the appearance of these themes in films, TV programmes, books and magazines indicates their ordinariness (Bartolini et al., 2013; Bartolini, Chris, MacKian, & Pile, 2017; MacKian, 2012). Whilst Mackian (2012) argues that the consumerisation of spiritual or holistic ideas, objects and practices does not necessarily imply a dilution of original meaning, the translation of a formerly esoteric entity into a monetised transaction must reflect a process of partial disenchantment. Therefore, Weber's notion of disenchantment should not be completely dismissed. Indeed, everyday life and experiences, once considered to be outside the agency of humans, are subjected to 'rationalised' and commercialised method or framing. For example, a recent UK advertising campaign for an online dating website used the phrase 'Step aside, fate. It's time science had a go at love', signalling a mediating 'scientific' intervention in even the most human of relationships. There are then differing processes of enchantment and disenchantment occurring within the landscape.

This section has considered the prevalence of enchantment and some of the channels in which enchantment continues to be sought and experienced in contemporary western society. That a practice such as wassailing continues to exist in the contemporary world, indicates an ongoing enchantment, as will be evidenced in the main empirical sections of this article. Yet such spaces of enchantment do not exist without the elements that construct them, including the creation of atmosphere through shared experience. The

following section therefore addresses the engineering of the affective qualities of enchantment and engagement with the world beyond the rational experience alone.

Spaces of atmosphere, affect and enchantment

Alongside enchantment, cultural geographers have paid attention to atmosphere in recent years. However, definitions of atmosphere have proved slippery. Anderson (2009, 2014) locates atmosphere as traversing the subject-object divide between different people as well as between people and objects or environment. As part of this discussion, affect is a quality of social relations understood on a bodily and collective scale:

On this account atmospheres are spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with. (Anderson, 2009, p. 80)

Atmosphere and enchantment as a form of affect felt on the bodily and / or collective scale can also be engineered or constructed to allow this process to take place. A process discernible in recent theorisations of sacred spaces (Kong, 2001, 2010). 'Sacred spaces' are constructed through shared histories and meanings, labour and regulations of sensory stimuli. Centres of pilgrimage, for instance, are places in which events or movements have occurred, whether this be the establishment of Islam in Mecca and Medina or the miracles of healing in Lourdes. Such spaces can lend themselves to tourism and spectacle as they undergo processes of management and regulation of journey and ritual (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). Even spaces of nature can be structured through the use of paths, benches and photo spots to enable the consumption and regulation of the affective qualities of the landscape (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; della Dora, 2011). Transcendental qualities of

spaces framed through religious and spiritual narratives can therefore be rationalised, managed and distributed indicating a level of disenchantment, yet can still possess the affective capacity to emotionally move and alter the moods of the individual.

Sensory stimulation can be a key factor in dispossessing or ‘activating’ (Edensor, 2012) the individual to enchantment. The role of the senses in structuring the experience of place has been explored by Tuan (1974, 1982), as has symbolism of colours across cultures (Turner, 1967; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002) producing different meanings of place. In contemporary work, Edensor has explored the affective qualities of the annual Blackpool Illuminations in northern England, identifying a profound theatricalising of space that enables ‘particular atmospheres [to] emerge as part of a distributed relationality’ (2012, p. 1107). Geographers of religion have also explored the regulation of light and dark, the use of incense or aromas to evoke olfactory senses, of sound and bodily postures that can elicit spiritual responsiveness (Holloway, 2003; Maddrell & della Dora, 2013). Elsewhere Holloway (2006) has explored the embodied relations produced that by the performance of 19th century séances. Surrounding environment is another important factor, Mackian (2012) makes the point that performing yoga at a spiritual retreat has a greater spiritual affectivity than in a school hall on a Saturday morning. Similarly, (and more humorously), Bonnett cites a psycho-geographical account, ‘attempting to access the woodland spirits and reawaken my pagan instincts when I found myself back on the A206 Woolwich to Erith Road’ (Rogers cited in Bonnett, 2017, p. 479) concluding that ‘[t]his is not the place to perform the Rite of the Three Rays.’

These accounts illustrate that enchantment can occur in a variety of settings – often be prefigured by a degree of engineering or management of space to produce certain affective

qualities. Shared histories and meanings of the site may also play a part in the enchantment process, resonating with notions around atmosphere as traversing the subject-object divide (Anderson, 2009). Similarly, the participant in such spaces has to engage with such practices and allow themselves to be enchanted for a loosely defined period of time. Yet many of these accounts of enchantment – and its engineering – privilege examples from mainstream religion or alternative spiritualities. This paper explores how narratives of enchantment are to be found in contemporary wassailing – often contexts in which the main purpose and practice has been re-introduced rather than being an established tradition. Beforehand, the next section will briefly discuss the methods employed in this research.

Methods

The findings presented here were part of a small research project, responding to the lack of academic literature regarding wassailing customs and their possibilities as geographies of enchantment. There was also an interest in finding out more about wassails that had little or no lineage to pre-existing wassail events. Five wassail events were identified in urban, built-up areas in the south of England. All wassails had been introduced by the organisers within the previous two decades, with no lineage to a historical wassail. Interviews were held with the organisers of these events, enquiring how the wassails were run, the motivations for putting them on and how the different organisations found out about wassailing customs.

The timing of the research in June and July 2017 did not allow for participant-observation at the events (although the author has participated in some of the events prior to and after the interviews), however photographic and written material was accessed via event websites, social media pages and material provided during the interviews. The visual and online

material was used to familiarise the author with the wassails and additionally lent insight into the different wassails – especially when on-site visits were not possible. Interviews with the organisers allowed for the recollection of the wassails and the organisational factors, and the timing of the interviews normally meant that participants had processed this information but this was still fresh in their memories. Interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to nearly 80 minutes, the shortest of which was due to the participant being a peripheral member of the organising committee for his group's event.

Wassails in cities and towns are often organised by non-commercial or local volunteer groups, which in this research included two community orchard groups, one city farm, one community arts centre and a branch of the Transition Town Network (TTN) listed in Table 1. Bath CO, City Farm and Community Art Centre held their wassails on their own property whilst TTN held their wassail in a public park near their orchard nursery. Buckinghamshire CO rotated the site of their wassail each year around their different orchards in the region and drew upon local histories to contextualise their wassail. The sample combined a diversity in aims and objectives with a depth in terms of the motivation: to connect local urbanised communities with environmental and local food production concerns with heritage-based cultural events.

Locations were selected from areas of Bristol and Bath in south-west England and Milton Keynes in the south midlands. Bristol and Bath can claim some heritage of wassailing practices and cider production whilst Milton Keynes' identity is predominantly as a 'new town', largely developed since 1967 incorporating rationalist planning (Edwards, 2001) and more recently, a 'smart city' image. Whilst the research did not focus specifically on ethnicity or class, from attending the sites, wassails and meeting the organisers, it was

apparent these wassails were attended mostly by white, middle class urban communities.

The lack of visible diversity in the identity wassails may be a possible avenue for future research in this area.

Whilst the participants agreed to their names being used, interviewees will be referred to by first initials and the organisations by pseudonyms, also listed in Table 1.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Contemporary wassailing and enchantment

Four themes emerged in the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts that highlight the highly localised as well as reinforce the geographical and cultural characteristics of the place: heritage, religion, fiction and magic. Together these themes demonstrate how wassailing constructs a 'borrowed' enchantment: a drawing together of elements that 'enchant' a space for a temporary and often defined period of time. Borrowed enchantment enlivens the relationships between different people and between people and space through a non-rational reading of space which may or may not combine with elements of consumerism. The term 'borrowed' draws attention to the temporary and non-possessive character of this form of enchantment, as it borrows elements from heritage, locality, religion and spirituality, storytelling, make-believe (or suspended dis-belief (Holloway, 2003) and magic; a disposition, if only fleetingly, to believe and play within a constructed environment that momentarily re-configures social relations of the wassail space

Heritage and locality

Apple or orchard wassailing has a long and significant history within England with reports dating back to the 17th century with other forms of the custom preceding even those accounts (Hutton, 1996; Kennedy, 2017). From the interviews, several organisers commented on recent local histories of the custom – often within the previous 100 years or so – rather than more historical examples. Buckinghamshire CO, in particular, used the wassail event to research and promote local histories and heritage of their orchards, with different orchards in their region hosting the custom each year. One year, Buckingham CO had worked to imaginatively reconstruct and connect an orchard which had been lost during the 20th century as the land on which it once stood had been divided into new plots with houses built on them.

[...] we contacted the owners who thought, “Oh, we’ve got an old apple tree in our garden.” They didn’t realise that their neighbours had an old apple tree, and their neighbours had an old apple tree and actually they’re actually all part of one, sort of, big orchard. [...] so we wassailed at that venue and then we took the whole, sort of, procession around the village and went and visited everybody’s remnant orchard in their back garden...

(C, Buckinghamshire CO)

Buckinghamshire CO’s wassail reconnected an historic and lost landscape, making the absent present – a ghostly remnant of the past, reconfigured for the present (Edensor, 2008). C was enthusiastic about the continued existence of historic landscapes and after the interview took me to a field near to her house that had barely changed in the preceding

200 years. When talking about the lost orchard, *C* demonstrated the potential of reconnecting a lost orchard to inspire adults and children alike:

Imagine these as standard trees in a great big orchard, not just a garden, but actually as an orchard. Because it's quite something, especially if you're a small person, you know, a child and think the size of a child and the size of a tree and imagining, you know, great big trees in structured rows, [...] I mean, it's pretty awe-inspiring if you're an adult... (*C*, Buckinghamshire CO)

In Somerset, wassailing had been present in the locality although the TTN wassail organisers had only fragmented memories and knowledge of the local customs. These histories were treated by the group with some nostalgia, recollecting cider producers in the area and personal stories related to cider-making in the home or living near the working orchards. Local histories enlivened the contemporary wassail in place, but also diffused some tensions around the pagan elements of wassailing that are discussed in more detail in the next section. Organisers could use the historical dimension of wassailing to explain the pagan aspects of the contemporary practice such as offering libations to the trees or scaring away malevolent spirits. At the TTN, when asked about the pagan elements of wassail (discussed in the next section), *R* responded:

The nearest we've got to that, I suppose, is years ago, part of a person's wages was cider, so that's the nearest we've got to it. We've never gone to say this was a pagan thing, or... We're not going up that road. It's an old tradition, we're bringing it back; cider is the important thing, and that's as far as we want to go. (*R*, TTN)

The response here is slightly tangential at first, as *R* immediately talks about the salaries of farm workers being partially made up in units of cider. However, it would appear *R* was referring the historical importance of cider production in the local and personal economies of the region; justifying the restoration of wassailing at TTN in terms of this historical significance and as ‘tradition’, tying the custom into the collective local imagination. As with the Buckinghamshire CO’s lost orchard, heritage establishes a connection between the contemporary wassailers and the local heritage enlivens the orchard spaces with stories contributing to the construction of atmosphere; the contemporary practices wassailers overlap spatially and imaginatively with the communities of the past, transcending subject-object divisions (Anderson, 2009, 2014). Tensions provoked by pagan elements along with the more spiritual and community-centric side of wassailing are now discussed in the following section.

Enchanting the orchard-space

Alongside the historical and material heritage outlined above, wassailing also has some associations with both pagan and Christian traditions. Wassailing or carolling residents involves a group of villagers attending the doors of their middle class landlords, ‘[h]oping Master and Missus will let us all walk and in, and for to fill our wassail bowl and sail away again’ (Willey, 1983, p. 64). This version draws on notion of Christian charity in the relationship between the rich and poor in rural village life. Apple wassailing differs greatly from the other version, not least in the pagan-centric ideas of spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, that are to be communicated and negotiated with during the ceremony; the ‘waking up’ of the orchard, the offerings of libations of cider and the scaring of ‘evil spirits’ all draw on a rich pagan folklore. For these reasons, Kennedy (2017) asserts that the pagan

aspects of wassail disrupts the otherwise Christian identity of the festive period. This section explores a spiritual side of wassailing that draws on both the Christian and pagan legacies to draw on a new sense of enchantment.

Given some of the recognisable pagan references, the wassail organisers were asked in the interviews if this had ever caused any tension amongst group members or those attending the events. Organisers downplayed the non-Christian or religious aspects and for the most part eschewed any symbolism or overt references, instead seeing wassail as a harmless celebration of nature and seasonality. The organiser at Buckinghamshire CO did though acknowledge the possible images that such an event might provoke:

You know, we don't have people firing shotguns or chasing the virgins round the village because it was all part of a, sort of, a fertility festival aspect of it as well. We don't do that. And putting the small child up in the tree was all about fertility ritual, but you know, that's not the kind of, the theme, that we're going after. (C, Buckinghamshire CO)

Alongside the above quote, other organisers also implied some association between paganism and eccentricity as, like C above, they sought to distinguish the contemporary wassail from pagan identities. For example, elsewhere (Wigley, 2019 - online first) another organiser tells the story of attendee who, without the organiser's prior knowledge, fires a rifle during the ceremony, linking the gun-owner's unconventional behaviour to their druid identity. Whilst the predominantly white audience of wassails indicates a lack of ethnic diversity, the dilution of the pagan aspects in favour of community and family-centred activities suggests some form of an ecumenical and spiritually-inclusive custom emerging:

It doesn't matter whether you're, Jewish, Christian, Sikh, Pagan, Star Wars-inian, whatever, you know. It's about people just coming together, and I think, in that sense, the spiritual thing that we try to evoke is that sense of community. (*Te*, Community Arts Centre)

Elsewhere *C* echoes this inclusivity:

[...] we try to be inclusive and neutral and draw in the parallels with all sorts of traditions so that we're not saying, "It is this." "It is a pagan ritual," or, "It is a Christian ritual," or, "It is none of those things because actually, it's a little bit of everything." (*C*, Buckinghamshire CO)

Religious identity of the event was therefore taken lightly by the organisers as the common goal for these groups was to bring the community together through the re-deployment of symbols, food and drink consumption and low-skilled ritual. There had been no incidents of tension over the pagan influences reported, however, organisers generally acknowledged the possibility of controversy and suggested that the (partial) pagan aspects on the custom may be off-putting for some people; with two interviewees actually aware of friends who had stayed away because the ceremony compromised their Christian identity. There was also some bemusement when organisers recounted other wassails which had either been organised by vicars or held inside consecrated grounds. Historically there are recorded accounts of clergy organising wassails for their orchards as well as some tolerance and appropriation of the church of folklore traditions (Hutton, 1991, 1996). Such amusement of the interviewees pointed at the perceived incongruity between the wassail custom and possible conflicts between Christian beliefs and practice, reinforcing some of the pagan or non-Christian religious undertones of the ceremony.

Only one group suggested that the custom linked to a part of their own spiritual or religious identity. Like the other groups in this research, there was no promotion of religion involved in their event other than the key elements of the folklore already discussed, however the two organisers at Community Arts Centre stated that their spirituality provided some partial motivation for putting on the wassail. With their event originally conceived as part of wider 'Turning of the Wheel' programme, the wassail was to be held in conjunction with other events that would mark and celebrate the seasonal cycle. In this sense, an emphasis was shifted away from the more esoteric and folkloric aspects of the wassail towards a universalised connection with the changing of the seasons and awesome power of nature.

Spiritual for me would be about nature and all of that anyway, because I'm, sort of, Pagan in my philosophies. So, I'm very much about, sort of, just revering nature, looking after it, because, you know, basically we live on this planet that, you know, if we don't look after it, then it's not really going to look after us for much longer. So, it is... You know, and there's that sort of element of spiritual connections, a connection with an otherness of some sort, and it doesn't have to have a name. (*Th*, Community Arts Centre)

Similarly, although not as overtly articulated, members of the TTN group also expressed a feeling of connection with the Earth being iterated in the wassail custom:

Ca: And you're awakening the tree. Spring's here, you know. It might be at the darkest, snowiest time, but come on, Spring's just beyond there – and it really is connected to pagan times, isn't it?

D: Yes, yes.

A: And I think that's quite an attraction for me, as well, that linking back to the Earth and things.

Ca: Well it's a generational thing...

The environmental and the spiritual become entangled in the above quotations and on more than one occasion *R* from the same group noted that a personal motivation for the wassail was to use apples from a small orchard in the grounds of a nearby children's hospice. The apple trees, having been planted in memory of the children by their parents, were somewhat neglected and so the wassail as well as Apple Day later in the year was a way to ensure the fruits were not wasted and the memory of the children carried forward. There is then the emergence of an enchanted space whereby the religious-spiritual beliefs as well as the processes of wassail are neither accepted as intrinsically divine nor reduced to a set of societal processes or structures (Holloway, 2006). Instead wassailing here enables a deeper but institutional spiritual relationship between people, the Earth and its histories – both recent and long ago. Whilst both groups presented the wassail as non-religious or spiritual, their experience of the ceremony deepened this spiritual connection between individuals, as the Community Arts Centre organisers comment:

Te: ...there's this slight, little bit of electricity, or something in the air, and everyone can feel it. Is that to do with the people? Or is that to do with something else? So, you know, you can make up your own decisions, but I definitely feel, kind of, more connected to things after something like that.

Th: There's a lot of energy in it, anyway.

Te: Yeah, for me, it's the energy.

Shared embodied experience of participating in the songs, the stories, the physical walking and consumption of a prescribed beverage of warmed apple juice or cider, illuminated by the flickering of fire or the twinkling of fairy lights combine to heighten the atmosphere. The individual is primed through the regulation of sensory experience (Maddrell & della Dora, 2013) as well as dynamic interplay of light and darkness (Edensor, 2012) and shared physical movements and gestures. The result for the organisers here resonates with notions of enchantment as a life-affirming participatory moment of enchantment and renewal (Bennett, 2001; Holloway, 2006); the ceremony symbolising the renewal of commitment between farmers, workers and nature (Kennedy, 2017) takes on an added layer of spiritual depth. Yet this is a moment of spirituality which does not necessarily fully subscribe nor abandon pagan undertones but borrows from religio-spiritual and folk heritage its sense of connection with nature as an enchantment. As well as the religious or spiritual aspects, enchantment can be constructed through an embedding of characters and stories in the local, which is discussed next.

Storytelling in the orchard

Folklore and folk customs are dominated by characters and stories – often recurring in different variations across different regions and countries – that are localised through nearby landmarks or features. Throughout the wassails examined in this research, stories and characters were interwoven into the fabric of the event. Often invented to certain extent but also drawing on common features from historical wassails. Mummers' plays, a variety of English folk play commonly performed by amateur actors or audience members, are associated with wassail events including some of those in this research. Indeed, during

one wassail, the author was recruited for playing the part of Saint George in a particularly award-winning performance!

Professional storytelling, usually for young audiences were also included as part of the custom in several wassails in this research. Stories, folk and fairy tales are considered important to local, regional and national identities and traditions, as recognised recently by the Folklore Society along with Center Parcs compiling a folklore map (Center Parcs, 2017). This concern was shared by several organisers with one commenting:

[...] quite a lot of parents don't tell their children fairy tales, they don't carry on local traditions. (A, TTN)

A's commentary here links a loss of enchantment with the locality. Storytelling lent itself naturally to the wassailing custom, particularly in animating nature and the local landscape, creating magic within the landscape. All wassails researched here incorporated characters and elements of dressing up in seasonal or otherwise eccentric clothing. Table 2 lists some of the different characters used by the different wassails.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Community Arts Centre and TTN both drew on the character of 'The Butler' in their wassails. Figure 1 shows The Butler, alongside the Green Man at the TTN wassail.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

The Butler is observed in several traditional wassail songs, representing the threshold between the wassailers and the Master and Mistress of the house they wassailed as this Somerset carol illustrates:

Call up the butler of this house, Put on his golden ring; Let him bring us a
glass of beer, And better we shall sing. (Hole, 1976, p. 208)

This song is rooted in the village wassailing tradition and as at other wassails in Gloucester and Wales (Kennedy, 2017), The Butler in the TTN wassail has migrated to the orchards instead of guarding the entrance to the house (Cater & Cater, 2013). Whilst the Community Arts Centre and City Farm did not identify a central character playing the role of the MC in their wassail, there was clearly an effort to dress the MC in 'steam punk' clothing that seemed appropriate to the role, a top hat with feathers and long coat. The imagery of this dress is also similar to that of 'The Butler', suggesting a similar carnivalesque quality to the clothing selection. The 'carnavalesque' is most popularly theorised by Bakhtin (1984) where by the medieval carnival builds a world in opposition to the everyday reality of the 'folk', where social roles are reversed and established values challenged (Santino, 2011). Similarly 'steampunk' fashion emerges in resistance to a homogenising processes of consumptive modernity (Onion, 2008), something recognised by the Community Arts Centre when asked about their adoption of steampunk dress style:

[...] it's all that thing about being the opposite to, you know, mixing things
up, goes back to Saturnalia, doesn't it, where the poor people pretend to
be the rich people, and so on; so by donning a top hat, you take on a
status, I suppose, that's different. (*Th*, Community Arts Centre)

Bath CO employed actors to conduct the role of the MC. The previous year's event had seen an actor create the character of 'January', personifying the wintery aspects of the month. Attired in warm woolly clothing and tailcoat, he would lead the participants around the trees, explaining the work and achievements of the community orchard over the

previous 12 months. 'January' was part of a universe that had been created by the actor who would refer to the other characters of 'February', 'March' and so on who were to come and take turns caring for the orchard. During the summer months, the characters who cared for the orchard were referred to as 'the girls', April, May, June and Julie. A final eccentricity of the character was the unexplained (perhaps unexplainable) deployment of an industrial Birmingham or 'brummie' accent, despite the Somerset location and custom.

At Buckinghamshire CO, the practice of dressing up the MC had faded in recent years, however the interviewee as MC had previously dressed up as a tree, complete with branches, leaves and a stuffed robin perched on her shoulder. The figure of the Green Man had also been employed at previous iterations but more recently the group simply wore coloured clothes of green, red and brown that reflected the rural-seasonal environment.

Several of the wassails crowned a 'King' and 'Queen' from the children present (as well as a King Tree in the orchard to be the main focus of the ceremony). The crowning of a 'King Bean' and 'Queen Pea' suggest a subversion of social statuses and roles in otherwise highly structured societies, reinforcing notions of the wassail, along with other folk festivals, as a social safety valve (Cater & Cater, 2013; Whistler, 1947; also Bakhtin, 1984) and a reunion of master and worker (Kennedy, 2017) through versions of the ceremony. These stories and theatrics illustrate the ways in which wassailing re-distribute affective roles in the ceremony and create a sense of enchantment through establishing a playful atmosphere that as Anderson (2009, 2014) argues, enables social relations and potentialities.

'A place of magic'

So far, this article has developed an account of wassailing based on the tangible aspects of wassailing that allow the organisers and attendees to enter into a space set apart from the

everyday world that blends elements of Christian and non-Christian religion, fiction and local histories into a theatrical performance. The remainder of the article explores how this combination, along with the affective engineering of place, constructs a space of enchantment.

A member of the TTN wassail observed earlier that fairy stories have fallen out of favour with parents. An observation reflected by the Community Arts Centre wassail:

Well, in our daily lives, you have so many parameters about, kind of, you know, you can do this or you can't do that... It goes back to, sort of, the health and safety, and in a sense, this whole event is about giving people permission to play, and it doesn't matter how old you are, you know, and permission to listen to stories; they don't just have to be for children. Permission to believe in fairies or goblins or, you know, whatever else. Or they're just thinking goblins! (*Te*, Community Arts Centre)

Whilst wassails don't usually feature fairies and goblins, *Te's* reference to these mythical creatures implies the oppositional nature of the world that wassail temporarily creates through enchantment and enrichment of space. A world oppositional to a reality where everyday life is governed by rationalistic rules and regulations, resonating again with Bakhtin's (1984) notion of the carnivalesque.

The wassails in this research all catered for children in some way. Sometimes this may be in the form of storytelling or workshops; the TTN wassail made a big effort to include children, encouraging them to shout out every time they saw the Green Man sneak a sip of cider from the wassail cup. This notion of 'play' maintained an element of unpredictability to

proceedings. The adults dressing up as well as the rituals of offering tributes to the orchard trees invites the attendees into a safe time-space of make-believe.

We're, kind of, giving ourselves permission to believe and make wishes
and to be childlike and to think that anything's possible... (*Te*, Community
Arts Centre)

As well as the theatrical elements, the orchard also performs a role; often decorated with toast hanging from the branches of the trees or lit up with fairy lights, lanterns and bonfires. The striking contrast of the dark winter's night and the illumination of certain elements of the orchard create a picturesque scene that invites the wassailer. The orchard, trees and the wassailers are enveloped by the darkness as the fairy lights and lanterns act to summon the focus of vision and demark the shared space of the ceremony (Baker, 2015; Edensor, 2012). Additionally, the songs, the stories and communal activities of walking, of consuming food, warmed cider and apple juice produce particular effects amongst those attending.

C: [...] with the drum, and the children with the lights, and it's magical,
isn't it? It really is.

A: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, and there's something about handing out – I
generally am on the cider [distributing duties] [...] and there's something
about handing out a gift to other people, and music, you know, Barley Rye
[choir] are singing, and the Green Man, and the Butler being there...

A here finds it difficult to articulate the feelings created during the wassail but there are social-communal qualities of giving wassailers mulled cider that bring strangers together and enable the connection between these people. Additionally, the presence of the Green

Man and Butler characters as well as the musical accompaniment of the choir enables her to agree with *C*'s comment that the ceremony is 'magical'. *Te* from the Community Arts Centre echoes this observation at their wassail:

[...] that becomes a place of magic. It becomes magical when the lights go down and you've got the bonfire up there, you've got the... everything lit with little lanterns and tea lights, you've got all of these people gathered together and you're explaining the old tradition that we're chasing out the evil spirits, and you're telling them a story essentially. You're telling them a story of heritage, that this is what was believed. And although, you know, today we're all far too intelligent to believe that, for that one moment, you see old and young alike completely suspend disbelief, and they will all holler in unison. It is that moment in *Peter Pan* where, "I do believe in fairies. I do, I do, I do. I do believe in fairies!" (laughter). (*Te*, Community Arts Centre)

Te draws together a range of different sources of affect from sensory stimulation, shared collective experience, make-believe and stories and heritage that work to create an atmosphere of suspended disbelief and playfulness. These accounts resonate with Bennett's (2001) assertion that enchantment leads to 'a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life'; wassails provide licence for adults to bypass the belief/non-belief dualism and instead engage in make-believe. Crucially, whilst the spaces are constructed to a degree with the deployment of illuminated decorations and the regulations of how and when to enter the orchards, the wassails here all occur within built-up areas with no history or lineage of wassailing to draw upon.

As with Bennett's ecological implications of enchantment, there is a politico-economic dimension too, as most organisers commented on the timing of the wassail that usually falls in mid-January to early February. Schmitt (1997; also Santino, 2011) observes a general feeling that the sincerity and 'effervescent gaiety' of festivals have been displaced by the cynical rationalistic machinations and manipulations of business. The saturated commercialism of the Christmas season was cited by several interviewees as reasons for the resurgence of wassailing events as a reaction to the appropriation of the festival period by commercials and retailers.

D: In January, when it's all kind of post-Christmas – and Christmas has lots of different senses about it: rampant consumerism, you know; sometimes you've had a good time, sometimes it's been very pressured; whereas this feels, it's sort of that post-Christmas...

C: It's a little bit of silliness –

D: Yes, a bit of silliness and coming together.

Wassails combine elements of Christmas from decorating trees, carol singing and prescribed food and drink with a promise of an unadulterated (by commercial interests), if fleeting, sense of community. The agreement of *D* and *C* of the 'silliness' of wassailing, a sentiment echoed by other participants, illustrates some escapism from the pressures of consumerism.

Wassails around the UK are sometimes used as promotional vehicles for commercial cider producers as well as consumptive experiences. However, many such as those in this research are organised to bring communities together, if briefly, and demonstrate this with the free (or voluntary donation) entry and food and drink. As *A* mentioned previously, there

is a sense of connection and community symbolised in the sharing of food and drink as *Th*, from above, echoes:

Th: The whole wassail thing was all about the wassail bowl being passed around and sharing, wasn't it?

The non-commercial nature of these wassails represents a relief from, and opposition to, the consumption-saturated period of Christmas; the aspects of sharing food, drink, company and experience takes on a new significance. After this paper had been drafted, I attended a meeting with the TTN as they organised the wassail. The group were concerned that a new landlord at their wassail pub would not support their event unless a clear profit-driven rationale could be made. Part of this concern was expressed as regret that their community event would be somewhat commercialised, and thereby diluted, by the new arrangement that would structure relations between wassailers. Wassail, in the mind of these groups, represent something beyond a rationalised interaction based on consumer-paradigms but an interruption within the consumerism of Christmas and participatory moment of affect between people (Bennett, 2001; Anderson, 2009, 2014); an enchanted space of relationships within community and nature.

Conclusion

From local custom performed chiefly by men in villages in the west of England to a popular festive party celebrated across the UK, wassailing has evolved from an esoteric tradition into one that is practiced as part of wider agendas of community engagement and marketing campaigns for towns, restaurants and bars (Scott-Moncrieff, 2015). Although this resonates with Hole's observation that the custom has lost its magical or supernatural dimension, it is

also useful to consider how the 'magic' in the 21st century may have evolved to fit contemporary societal needs as these concluding thoughts will now outline.

Wassailing has re-emerged in a context in which consumerist and rationalist discourses are prevalent in society, yet do not fully satisfy the individual's need for depth. Additionally, traditional networks of proximity-based communities such as churches, trade unions or political party membership are declining yet the interest-based communities that replace them are not sufficiently anchored in locality. Wassailing offers a depth that is missing in contemporary consumer culture: the historical and often heritage-based narrative and the sense of connecting the community with the seasonal cycle of the planet. Whilst contemporary wassails are often 're-invented' customs, in that the groups who organise them have created entirely new events with no connection to pre-existing events and even in areas where wassailing has never before taken place, the events link to an imagined regional or national past. That wassailing events did once occur and may once have been part of a pagan calendar that was specific to each locality and region is more important than the recent histories of the individual wassails. Wassailing events also provide bridges for communities with their histories, even if these don't directly involve a wassail custom. Most of those interviewed in this research took the opportunity of talking about wassailing, to also talk about their local community and its history whether that be ancient and lost orchards, cider-making and apple growing or even, on one occasion, ship-building in the landlocked county of Buckinghamshire!

Wassails connect the organisers and attendees with each other and nature and reminds wassailers of humanity's reciprocal relationship with the earth and this is where the 'magic' is: in constructing atmospheres of enchantment that inspire non-commercial and non-

rational ideas whilst bringing different people together through the ceremony, and its materialities of affect. At the heart of the wassail and this 'enchantment', as engineered in the playfulness and magic of the event, is the community.

Wassails were interpreted by several of the interviewees as being an engagement with nature coded as broad universalist sense of 'connection' with the environment and other people. Organisers in the events presented here recognised some spiritual value in the wassails whether that be through the offering of cider or apple juice, or the 'blood' back to the trees in thanks for successful harvest. There is an emphasis of local, folk and heritage (if somewhat invented) customs performed through a framework of playfulness and affectivity that construct and transform the orchard into a 'place of magic'. Hence there is a sense of 'borrowed enchantment' here in that the enchantment is a temporary assemblage of heritage, folk practices, pagan and magical beliefs and fiction borrowed from different local, regional and national traditions and suspend the binaries of belief and non-belief for a defined period of time. The 'borrowing' of this enchantment means that the elements are not drawn from a single origin or authoritative source, indeed the enchantment has no fixed status but is relational and contingent upon the local and the community from which it emerges. Although often perceived as integrated with 'tradition' (Wigley, 2019 - online first), this form of enchantment is always temporary and changing. Whilst enchantment transcends the sum of its constituent parts, being 'borrowed' emphasises its construction and emergent, not absolute character, hence the accommodation of difference demonstrated in much of the empirical material presented in this paper and elsewhere (Wigley, 2019 - online first). The emergence of a borrowed enchantment, produced by the

wassailing performance demonstrates the value and potential contributions that the study of folklore could make to cultural geographies more widely.

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