

## **Jute: Excavating Material And Symbolic Surfaces**

Bradley L. Garrett, Brian Rosa & Jonathan Prior

At a recent Vitae Innovate funded workshop, *Working Creatively With Sound and Image*, ten U.K. based artist-researchers gathered at Dundee Contemporary Arts as part of the Experimental Research Network.<sup>1</sup> During the week, participants were given a free hand to produce work that creatively engaged with the urban environment of Dundee, Scotland, employing a variety of performative, media production and documentation processes. Attendees were encouraged to break form with traditional modes of scholarly engagement and to collaborate experimentally.

The authors of this video piece, titled *Jute*, include a photographer, a videographer and a sound artist. We are all also researchers in geography. We decided, at the beginning of the workshop, to collaborate on a multimedia project to excavate the material and symbolic remains of Dundee's historic jute industry,<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to ascertain what we might be able to know about the city without *knowing* the city.

### **Landscape of Erasure**

The thriving jute industry, which at one time employed over 50,000 of the city's inhabitants, led to Dundee's 18<sup>th</sup> century designation as "Juteopolis" ("Victorian"). This industry of spinners, manufacturers and merchants, which met its demise in the 1970s after a prolonged period of decline, now survives in collective memory through solemn fragments pieced together by a flagging tourist industry.

---

**Bradley L. Garrett** is a PhD candidate in Human Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he does ethnographic work with urban explorers in the United Kingdom, a group which seeks to unveil areas of the urban environment normally hidden from view. **Brian Rosa** is a PhD student in Human Geography at The University of Manchester. He is trained as an urban planner, and also works as a photographer and art curator. **Jonathan Prior** is a PhD student in Human Geography at the University of Edinburgh, where his research interests include conservation policy, aesthetics, and the development of sonic methods and practices in geography. *Jute* was first publicly exhibited at the University College London "CitiesMethodologies" exhibition (organized by the Urban Laboratory at UCL), held at the Slade Research Centre from 4-7 May 2011. We gratefully acknowledge the Vitae Innovate award funding that made *Jute* possible, and we thank the workshop participants who gave constructive feedback during the film's creation. (Editor's note: This essay is meant to accompany a viewing of *Jute* in *Liminalities* 7.2 <http://liminalities.net/7-2/jute.mov>.)

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://experimentalnetwork.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Jute is a strong vegetable fibre which is used to make a wide variety of fabrics and textile products

A consensus emerged that the waterfront of the Firth of Tay, the epicentre of service sector-led cultural and economic regeneration, would be our point of departure – an urban waterfront dissected from the city centre by a modern motorway. Like many port towns in the United Kingdom, there was a clear essence of industrial and maritime origin, yet the material traces of the legacy were not immediately apparent, or were under quarantine.

We ventured forth in a collective multimedia and multimodal *dérive* (Pink 2008; Smith 2010) in an attempt to locate the remaining material traces that once connected the port, which supplied the historic industry with raw materials, to its industrial processing and eventual global export. The changes currently taking place within the urban landscape were building upon, recomposing, and overwriting the infrastructure of this storied maritime heritage. Among the sites we explored was the abandoned William Halley & Sons textile mill in the north east of the city which features centrally in the video. One of the last of the jute mills to close its doors in Dundee in the 1980s, the building appeared to be currently in the process of demolition and natural entropy.

Upon exploring Dundee, it became immediately apparent that water was central to both Dundee's constitution and the ongoing (re)conceptualization of the city. Juteopolis was made possible through shipbuilding, which allowed for the importation of jute from colonial India, and whaling – whale oil was used to make jute “workable” by machine.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, post-industrial strategies for tourist renewal were premised upon the re-making of Dundee as a “City of Discovery,” now the official by-line slogan for the city. This slogan was meant to mark the occasion of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Antarctic expedition ship, HMS Discovery, upon its return to Dundee in 1987. In 1993, as part of the city's waterfront redevelopment strategy, HMS Discovery was permanently moored on the Firth of Tay, adjacent to Dundee railway station, with an adjoining exhibition centre “Discovery Point” (Prentice 7). This was part of a broader shift that attempted to “turn Dundee's gaze once more to the sea” (Di Domenico and Di Domenico 338).

Our city wanderings along the water's edge revealed other contemporary manifestations of economic productivity, from the scrap metal yard on Fishdock Road to the working commercial port to the east of the city (which was inaccessible and could only be viewed from afar) to the regeneration of Victoria and Camperdown Docks as residences and leisurescapes. We also encountered the sensorial qualities of water when we explored the abandoned jute mill; the reflections, sounds and smells of standing and cascading water were as much a part of the experience as was the stone walls, broken windows, and encroaching flora.

The powerful presence of water in Dundee allowed us to superficially reflect on the layers of cultural and industrial death and renewal. The HMS Discovery, silhouetted in windowpanes, reflects the sound of a city centre populated with people disconnected from those decaying fragments and tourist tropes that surrounded them. The landscapes we encountered were largely absent of human bodies. This was not only a result of post-industrial abandonment stemming from

---

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.rrsdiscovery.com/index.php?pageID=115>

the flight of capital, but also because of urban planning strategies along the waterfront that constrain bodily circulation. Human walking is stifled in cul-de-sacs of padlocked gates and busy road systems. *Jute* thus became a process of translating a layered story of urban fragmentation into an audiovisual representation.

### **Experimentation In Field Documentation Practice**

From the initial conception of the video project, we made a conscious decision to avoid the reproduction of conventional documentary making styles – or most forms of video production, for that matter. This revolved around experimentally negotiating the relationship between the visual and sonic components of the video, preferencing process over content, as a means to pre-emptively prevent devaluing the sonic qualities of place as merely soundtracking. We spent approximately one and a half days recording across a variety of locations within Dundee, both collectively and individually, and about the same amount of time editing together. We agreed that we would use only recordings made during our time there. Additionally, we eschewed narration and any musical scoring.

While these agreed upon filming and editing choices may seem like limitations, they helped us in our attempt to produce something that we could regard as “of Dundee,” without being mired in whether or not it was “about Dundee.” We, as outsiders to the city, could only ever have a very partial and unrefined understanding of the associative meaning of the jute industry to Dundee, so we didn’t want to seek to codify place; to know a place can only start to emerge through repeat engagement (Tuan 183-4). This, in turn, meant that we could focus our energies toward the *practice* of documentation, including experimentation of new techniques and in situ skill sharing, rather than what would become the document itself.

### **The Linear Remix**

During the editing process, we resolved to edit the video with the sound recordings as our starting point. Of course, this did not preclude us from editing sound to images when a pairing seemed to present itself, but we were curious to see how such an approach could lead to new possibilities in capturing the sensual flow and rhythm of the landscape as encountered. Such an approach led us to represent our experience of Dundee in a way that was purposefully fragmented and discordant, which we felt reflected the nature of Dundee’s industrial heritage and the flows of capital production and consumption in the contemporary city. The city felt to us, in our short time there, like a city emerging from rubble. But rather than building new structures from the remains of the old, there remained a sense of anti-nostalgia that led to the selective butchering of particular moments of past.

In the end, the film also became as much about process as discovery as we found that the story we sought was buried in the urban palimpsest. It seemed that the accumulation of transformative capital had invoked a collective amnesia and burial of that legacy. Rather than sifting through archives or nostalgically

dwelling, we embarked on a subjective exploration selectively excavating material traces to find affectual affordances not mediated through bureaucratic processes.

What emerges in *Jute* is the continuing central role of the city's waterways in feeding the industrialised infrastructure. The historical urban metabolism therefore kept pace with the productive and consumptive needs of industrial production just as the living city's pulse is regulated by the influx of tourist revenue. Regardless of where memory is situated in this landscape of fragments and juxtapositions, it is clear that jute is still part of that urban fabric.

## Works Cited

- Di Domenico, Catherine, and Marialaura Di Domenico. "Heritage And Urban Renewal In Dundee: Learning From The Past When Planning For The Future Of A Post-Industrial City." *Journal of Retail and Leisure Property* 6 (2007): 327-339. Print.
- Pink, Sarah. "An Urban Tour: The Sensory Sociality Of Ethnographic Place-Making." *Ethnography* 9 (2008): 175-96. Print.
- Prentice, Richard, Sinéad Guerin, and Stuart McGugan. "Visitor Learning At A Heritage Attraction: A Case Study Of *Discovery* As A Media Product." *Tourism Management*, 19 (1998): 5-23. Print.
- Smith, Phil. "The Contemporary Dérive: A Partial Review Of Issues Concerning The Contemporary Practice Of Psychogeography." *Cultural Geographies* 17 (2010): 103-22. Print.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977. Print.
- "Victorian Dundee: Jute, Jam & Journalism." *History Trails: The Victorian Achievement*, BBC, n.d. Web. 14 February 2010. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/victorian/trails\\_victorian\\_dundee.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/victorian/trails_victorian_dundee.shtml)



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA*