Creative Correspondence in the City: Merging Traditional and Mobile Media Communication to Write a Shared Narrative Experience

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1. Introduction

> *To whomever, if the following does not pertain to you please stop reading. I am away from my offices for the rest of the future with little or no internet access.*

(Riviere 2015)

It is apt that the poet Sam Riviere should open his letter submitted to and published by *The Letters Page* with an address that hybridises both a traditional letter-writing style with the qualities of an 'out of office' email note. It is an opening that not only reflects the intriguing piece of writing that follows it, but one that simultaneously responds to the concepts that the literary journal wished to explore at its outset, best described in the editor's words as 'the democracy of correspondence as a literary practice' (McGregor 2013) and crucially, how this can be expressed in the digital age. The present study aims to further the concepts of *The Letters Page* by developing ideas that I have learnt from my experience of working on the student editorial team and placing them into 'the domain of digital storytelling', the 'ever-evolving practice' (Goggin and Hamilton 2014: 233) of mobile media technologies that can facilitate creation and exploration through hybridised spaces in urban environments. Drawing on theories from McQuire (2008), Lefebvre (1991) and de Certeau (1984) I examine projects mediated by digital platforms that physically (*re*)connect people to these spaces, with examples from both locative and non-locative mobile technologies and one community project that uses only the letter. I observe how they show that communication, politics and society play an interdependent role with one another and assess the ways in which they create connections between inhabitants and their urban environments. By studying previous projects that combine creative writing practice and storytelling with digital technology I have been able to conduct my own creative exploration named 'Creative Correspondence in the City'. The small-scale project mediated through traditional letter-writing and mobile email communication seeks to investigate how these two forms can merge and attribute to the writing of a shared narrative of communication, creating connections between the city, its inhabitants, and between paper and mobile technology.

In the first section I offer an introduction to the idea of correspondence as a literary form, looking in part at what role the letter and its digitised evolutionary counterpart the email has had to play in fictional storytelling culture. I move away from the subject of creative writing to examine the societal and political implications of email and consider more broadly the development of communication technology. In the following sub-section I explore this further by looking at the Twitter hashtag #DearCongress; the discussion demonstrates the Internet's capacity to bring people together in a shared digital space and become their own publishers, also highlighting that the public still want to engage with ritualistic practices such as lobbying through letter.

The second section necessarily considers the changing boundaries of the notion of space as a result of digital technology. I draw on McQuire's concept of 'relational space' (2008) and Lefebvre's theories of spatial practice in *The Production of Space* (1991) before looking at how smart mobile technology can be the means to spatially explore and re-engage people with their physical environment.

In the concluding sections I draw on my experience of participating in a research project that uses site-specific locative technology to explore digital music, narrative, and the centre of Nottingham. I also look at an existing non-digital lettering project with insights offered from the project's creator, before finally discussing my own project 'Creative Correspondence in the City'.

2. 'Email My Heart'

Writing on the evolution of modern correspondence and its adverse effects on the rhythm of day-to-day life Rebecca Solnit takes a moment to ruminate over the lost art of letter-writing (Solnit 2013). She notes how 'Letters morphed into emails, and for a long time emails had all the depth and complexity of letters. They were a beautiful new form that spliced together the intimacy of what you might write from the heart with the speed of telegraphs.' That Solnit writes in the past tense is telling of her disenchantment with the email as a platform for creativity, continuing she writes, 'emails deteriorated into something more like text messages … [and] Communication began to dwindle into

peremptory practical phrases and fragments, while the niceties of spelling, grammar, and punctuation were put aside, along with the more lyrical and profound possibilities.' To many, Solnit's observations may well strike a chord – though it seems the same cannot be said for Britney Spears who, in her 1999 song 'Email My Heart', expressed a trust in the email to deliver the kind of emotional content one might expect to be able to communicate through letter, albeit perhaps without the profoundness that Solnit could have hoped for.

Having spent the last academic year reading through bundles of letters for submission by *The Letters Page*, I have unsurprisingly seen a similar trend in writers reflecting on the fate of the letter in the digital age. Simon Garfield's book *To The Letter* nostalgically writes on 'what we have lost by replacing letters with email' (Garfield 2013: 19). Garfield asks, 'will we ever glow when we open an email folder?' (Ibid. 20). If one thinks only of the kind of emails that flood workplace inboxes then perhaps not, but it cannot be denied that the creative possibilities that have arisen from the email have been many.

By the start of the millennium commercial and personal use of email was wide spread. Solnit has already observed that it was a novel and exciting new form, when it hadn't yet become the necessity it is today for modern communication. Nowadays however, as Garfield notes, they are seen as a hybrid between a letter and a phone call (Ibid. 408), are firmly entrenched within society and 'follow us wherever we go, a vital supply line and a relentless chore' (Ibid. 396). Throughout history letters have often been considered as literary works in their own right, collections of published correspondence between canonical authors for example are regarded just as highly as their works of great literature. Additionally, many of these works may have even employed the epistolary format; *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley for example does this in part. Inevitably, the acceptance of correspondence as a literary form has had to change but this is not to say that emails have been disregarded. Interestingly there is one project that sought to explore the concept not so dissimilar to *The Letters Page*; between the year 2000-2001, *Openletters.net* published letters daily on the 'World Wide Web', as the website pointedly names it, a year that saw the transition of writing letters to emails. It is unsurprising that writers experimented and documented this change through narrative and form, one letter 'On a Misdirected Email' includes a thread of emails that determine the story. The misdirected email acts as a catalyst for the events which unfold: 'It was sent late on Friday night, and the subject line is blank, which is unusual. I open it. It is a message I was never meant to see' (Zalaznick 2000). Zalaznick's letter reveals a story that tells the consequences of receiving this email. It is a good example of how the traditional and electronic letter writing format can be used together for the creation of a story that couldn't be expressed, or indeed exist, without the merging of the two.

Throughout the two issues that I have worked on at *The Letters Page* there has been only one submission recognising the email as a narrative form. In his cover letter the author E.C. Gardiner writes that he hopes his email-based epistolary story 'may entertain and open up a prospect of letters so far not engaged by *The Letters Page'* (Gardiner n.p.). Unfortunately 'Correspondences' was never published, but it was Gardiner's letter that provided me with a starting point to consider how I could reflect on my experience of working with the journal and to develop its ideas.

My initial intentions were focused on seeing how email might attribute to the ways in which it could allow us to write creatively. I hadn't considered the societal implications of the introduction of email communication, or more broadly, of media communication. Morrisett's views on 'the great story of communications technology' (1996) are positive, he writes that 'E-mail allows individuals to be their own publishers and reach as many people as their creations merit'. Crucially, he notes that 'Just as the printing press, then radio, and finally television were technologies of freedom in their times, computer communications and E-mail can be a technology of freedom now' (Morrisett 1996). 'Freedom' here can be read as synonymous to 'democracy', he says that these communications 'will counterbalance our traditional one-way media and help release us from their benevolent tyranny.' The paradoxical expression is exaggerative but De Cindio and Peraboni (2011: 93) observe how during this time the Internet represented a significant effort to involve citizens in public affairs. The following sub-section necessarily considers how communication technologies, politics and society play an interdependent role with one another.

2.1 #DearCongress

The Internet, as Jim McGuigan notes, 'has a number of apparently distinctive properties of its own that are not just reducible to speeding up the post through e-mail' (McGuigan 1996: 182). But these 'properties' have proliferated since McGuigan's book *Culture and the Public Sphere*. Like Morrisett, McGuigan is interested in 'the virtual communities in cyberspace' (Rheingold 1994; in McGuigan 1996: 182) and notes that 'powers of citizenship are rediscovered and enhanced' because of them.

However, de Cindio and Peraboni (2011: 93) recognise that after the emergence of Web 2.0 there has been a further rediscovery of the social dimension of the Net; there are new virtual, or 'online' communities such as blogs and social networking sites and a new form of democracy has been born from it, which Joichi Ito names 'Emergent Democracy' (Ito 2005; in de Cindio and Peraboni 2011: 94). Moreover, McGuigan's cyberspace communities differ to modern online communities, Martijn de Waal notes that media 'no longer adhere[s] to the anything-anytime-anywhere new media paradigm of the 1990s. Rather they are centred on location-sensing capacities and aim to intervene or add to a specific here-and-now' (de Waal 2011: 5).

The scope of social media networking is so vast that for the most part I have chosen to omit the subject from this dissertation. However, the example here gives an indication of how modern media coupled with the notion of a traditional mode of communication connects people to one event in a time and place. Dourish and Satchell (2011) argue that social networking sites act as points of connection, they are 'not islands; they are enmeshed in a larger world of people and events' (Dourish and Satchell 2011: 31). They therefore provide the perfect platform for the organisation of political discussion or protest which can result in an 'emergent democracy'. Particular to this is the micro-blogging site Twitter that allows users to publish their own 140 character limited 'tweets', these can be directed toward other users and can be further distributed by other users by the function of 'retweeting', and vice versa. Users can connect further through the use of a 'hashtag' or '#', which directs them to a thread or public forum on the topic of the hashtag. In their micro-analysis of the hashtag #DearCongress Elisabeth Montemurro and David Kamerer note that the hashtag places an individual within a group or an 'ad hoc public' (Montemurro and Kamerer 2016). This hashtag emerged in 2013 during the U.S government shutdown where for 16 days the government were unlikely to have replied to a letter, e-mail, or phone call. The public used Twitter as a platform to express their views and share stories and the result of this was the creation of an 'ad hoc public' or a temporary community with shared interests (Bruns and Burgess 2011; in Montemurro and Kamerer 2016). What is notable about this particular hashtag is its connotation, Montemurro and Kamerer provide a suitable description for this: 'At first glance, the hashtag #DearCongress brings to mind a letter — a public, open letter to Congress from those they govern.' It is as Carey describes, the public creating culture through ritualistic practices (2009; in Montemurro and Kamerer 2016). The hashtag demonstrates that the letter is still recognised as an important and persuasive means of communication. Its adaptation to fit a new form of social networking communication allows for wider participation from all over the country or even farther afield, but it is also situated in one particular time and place. The notion of storytelling is important here as people share their experiences and become their own publishers; this aspect will become more relevant as this project progresses as we see how media platforms can be used to make connections between people and places in creative and artistic ways. The hashtag #DearCongress demonstrates, as Sengers (2011: 3) observes, how the domains of communication technology, people's reactions to technologies in their everyday lives, and of society and politics are not only co-constructed but are intertwined with one another. However, one question that this study raises is what are the boundaries of an *ad hoc public* such as this? Dourish and Satchell argue that we have to reconsider 'what might be public, what might be private, what might occupy some transitional space, and how that transitional space is to be defined and determined' (Dourish and Satchell 2011: 27).

3. The Production of *Relational* Space

It became apparent in my research leading up to the planning of a project mediating both the traditional letter and communication technology that by actually employing the digital medium rather than just imitating its stylistic qualities (writing in the epistolary format for example) would offer a new perspective that could develop the ideas of *The Letters Page*. As I have shown in the example of #DearCongress, the two combined create inextricable links between people's relationship with the two forms of media and social experience. Following on from Dourish and Satchell on determining and defining transitional space (2011), the same questions arise for McQuire (2008): 'The development of new generations of mobile media which are carried in the course of everyday life has further intensified the challenge to establish boundaries of public and private space' (2008: 6). This section necessarily looks at the changes in the spatiality of urban environments, looking first at McQuire's notion of 'relational space', and Drakopoulou's (2013) modifications of Henri Lefebvre's framework conceived in *The Production of Space.* This provides the groundwork for understanding how the smartphone can be used not only to *communicate*, but also to *create*, facilitating new ways to (*re*)connect inhabitants of cities to their urban environments, which is central to my project 'Creative Correspondence in the City'.

The examples of creative forms of correspondence provided in the first section of this dissertation were either from a time when use of the email was still new or, as is the case in 'Correspondences', does not explicitly mention that the emails were sent from anything other than a computer desktop. However, it is no longer necessary to be tethered to our desks to read or answer an email, in the same way we do not need to be bound to a landline to communicate by telephone. On this McQuire notes how '…the caller asked whether or not a certain person was 'there'. In contrast, [now] the customary greeting on a mobile phone is 'where are you?'' (McQuire 2008: 6-7). According to McQuire, the distinctions between these questions are representative of how a process of co-constitution between architectural structures, urban territories, social practices and media feedback have changed the spatial experience of modern social life (McQuire 2008: vii). Adriana de Souza e Silva and Jordan Frith (2014: 37) note that identities of places are not just constructed by their geographical elements, but crucially by people who attribute meaning to them. They argue that the interaction of further physical, social and cultural elements is what gives spaces identity. However, it is communication with people living in *other* places that influences these elements; thus without advancements in communication such as the letter and the telegraph, there would have been little development of relational identities, 'a way of seeing one place in contrast to other different (and similar) places' (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2014: 37). However, now that media and the use of communication technology is inherently online and mobile it means that the 'relational identities' of places are changing, as McQuire (2008) comments: 'a broad array of new media technologies and platforms are not only redefining architecture and urbanism, but the social life sustained within their domain. The image of the city, and the ways of imagining existence within its bounds, are in flux' (McQuire 2008: 7). This is not the first time that the relational identity of space has undergone a change. Radio and television's ability to show people new places brought about what Joshua Meyrowitz termed as the 'generalized elsewhere' (Meyrowitz 2005: 23; in de Souza e Silva and Frith 2014: 38). Which, it is argued, make us 'aware of our local spaces because they acquire relationality' (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2014: 38).

The word 'relational' used by de Souza e Silva and Frith (2013) is also employed in McQuire's coining of the term 'relational space' (McQuire 2008: 21), referring to 'the contemporary condition in which the horizon of social relationships has become radically open' (McQuire 2008: 21). McQuire recognises that mass media communication has created a 'fluctuating' and 'discontinuous' generalized elsewhere (2008: 25), contributing to a relational space that is 'suffused with 'uncanny' experiences of doubling and displacement, as the pulsions of events in other spaces interrupt and recontextualize immediate experience' (McQuire 2008: 25). McQuire asserts the societal implications of this by drawing on Lash who argues that contemporary communicational bonds 'are brief, intense, discontinuous and no longer governed by narrative continuity' (Lash 2002a: 206; in McQuire 2008: 23).

Whilst these accepted notions are important in understanding the change of social experiences and space, the loss of narrative continuity that Lash refers to is something that can be contested. It is true that narrative continuity in communication has changed, but it has not disappeared altogether. On the contrary, new media can create narrative; Brett Oppegaard and Dene Grigar (2014: 22) use the term 'intermedial communication' to describe the way in which the convergence of media and location allows mobile devices to '…provide the full spectrum between physical and virtual environments'. It is this, they argue, that can 'flip the passive nature of experiencing most media around into an active proposition' by absorbing 'its surroundings and making connections' (Oppegaard and Grigar 2014: 27). For Drakopoulou locational technology doesn't just highlight the spectrum *between* physical and virtual environments, she argues that the urban environment is now composed of an intertwinement of information, data and media, 'Urban space, in other words the lived experience of the city, is now produced in *conjunction* with the space of information that is used in everyday life' (Drakopoulou 2013; italics my own). According to Drakopoulou, the merging of the digital with the physical and the way it is overlaid onto the physical space of the city is redefining the spatial experience of the urban environment. Drakopoulou takes Lefebvre's theory in *The Production of Space* to investigate this relationship but necessarily modifies his framework to include representations of space augmented by smartphone screens. Spatial practice for Lefebvre is definable by linking spaces together and the production of these spaces can be separated into three: representation of space, representational spaces and mental or abstract spaces which remain in opposition but are interdependent with one another. Representational space, or mental and physical spaces, combines bodily senses and lived experience but is mediated through the representation of space that can be thought of as expressions of social practices carrying in them relative relations between knowledge, understanding and ideology (Lefebvre 1991; in Drakopoulou 2013). 'The lived representational space, therefore, is an all-consuming process of feeling, seeing and

apprehending reality, and hence social space', the relationship between the three spaces creates a tendency to narrate the abstract space (Drakopoulou 2013). Lefebvre writes: 'We are confronted not by one social space but by many … Considered in isolation, such spaces are mere abstractions. As concrete abstractions, however, they attain 'real' existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of bunches or clusters of relationships. Instances of this are the worldwide networks of communication, exchange and information' (Lefebvre 1991: 86).

Drakopoulou (2013) says that 'the use of smart devices in the city produces new spaces and transforms existing spaces into a mix of physical and mental spaces within the space of information' and this produces new ways of experiencing the urban environment. Oppegaard and Grigar say that exploring spatially placed media through mobile technology can bring people physically back together in the same space (Oppegaard and Grigar 2014: 25), one way in which it allows us to do this is through site-specific and location-aware mobile technology. This is the main topic of the book *The Mobile Story* which features essays exploring the affordance of mobile media in 'Narrative Practices with Locative Technologies' (Farman 2014: 13). In the following sections I refer to my experience of participating in one such narrative experiment using locative technology but also examine projects using non-locative technology, as is the case in my project. It becomes apparent that regardless of whether these projects use location-based media or not, movement around the city remains a crucial aspect of both; psycho-geography and the act of walking, as de Souza e Silva and Frith observe, allows each person to create 'their own threads and maps through their mobility through urban space, and each set of combined locations constitutes a different narrative' (de Souza e Silva and Frith 2014: 46), this as I will show, becomes the means in which people can explore and re-discover their city.

4. 'The Rough Mile'

The title refers to the research project 'Immersive Gifting Study' that is researching new ways of sharing digital music initiated by Dr Jocelyn Spence, Visiting Researcher at the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at The University of Nottingham. The first part of the study involved a friend and I performing an 'audio walk' along 'The Rough Mile', a one-mile route in the centre of Nottingham, starting and ending at Rough Trade. We were supplied with a smartphone and a set of bone conductive headphones that allowed us to hear the sounds of the city as well as the audio. We started our walks with a ten minute difference so at no point did we walk together. The smart phone used locative technology to follow my performance and trigger site-specific information when I reached certain areas of the city. Throughout the walk an audio file was played, in this a narrator prompted me where to walk and where to stop, interwove a story about her friend and her wish to create a music gift for him, told me history about the parts of the city I was walking through, and asked questions about what music I would like to share with my friend. For example, I was told to wait at the tram stop, look up at the destination board and imagine getting on the next tram and was asked questions such as: *where would the tram go?*, *where would you and your friend like to travel to?*, *what song would be playing on the way to this dream destination?* Half way through the walk as I emerged onto Market Square the audio narration asked *what would a private detective or a person following you even look like?* when a woman approached me with a microphone promising me that she wasn't a private detective. She recorded my answers to the various questions that had been asked so far about which songs I would pick for my friend in certain situations. The same happened once more at the end of the walk when another actor concluded the story about the friend in the narrative and recorded my last answers. We were invited to return for the second part of the study and were given our digital gifts, a personalised audio file produced by the MRL using the music that we chose during the first performance. We walked 'The Rough Mile' once more, but this time while listening to the music that we had selected for one another.

Psycho-geography in urban space as Drakopoulou points out is an important attribute to locative media, and the combination of the two can offer a re-contextualisation of familiar surroundings and create alternative spaces inside the urban environment (Drakopoulou 2013). De Certeau's advocacy of spatial wonder is appropriate here as 'Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice' (de Certeau 1984a: 115), he describes how the walkers of a city, *Wandersmänner*, follow the thick and thins of an urban 'text', creating networks and intertwining paths (de Certeau 1984a: 93). Both my friend and I agreed that taking part in the research study was very insightful in this respect, the act of walking through the city and having to engage with my surroundings evoked connections between places that I had never previously made. John F. Barber in his examination of a project called 'Walking-Talking' describes the *flâneur* as 'both witness and wanderer – one who, through participant observation, simultaneously detached but aesthetically perceptive, experiences and appreciates the idiosyncratic modernity of an urban environment by strolling through, carefully

observing, and interacting with components of that environment' (Barber 2014: 103). In many respects 'Walking-Talking' is similar to Spence's project as it utilises mobile locative technology to produce a sound narrative focused on a particular urban location (Barber 2014: 97). However, as de Souza and Frith point out, 'The ability to read physical spaces by connecting information as one moves through space existed before the development of location-aware technologies' (2014: 43); they offer the example of artist Janet Cardiff who has been developing audio walks since the early 1990s without them. However the 'Immersive Gifting Study' couldn't have worked without locative-technology and the experience was the better for it; it offered me a new way to spatially explore, appreciate and learn about my city, the act of walking opened up perspectives on my contribution to its landscape as I followed trajectories both old and new. However, it is also important to observe how similar effects can be achieved *without* locative-technology as this remains relevant for my own project which is mediated through the physical and the digital, but not the locative.

4.1 Communi-city

Indeed there are projects that seek to connect people with their city without any technology medium at all. Lindsay Zier-Vogel's community art based project 'The Love Lettering Project' in Toronto asks people to write anonymous love letters addressed to their city and to hide them for strangers to find. I got in contact with Lindsay by email to ask her some questions about the project to see how well the letter as a form works to facilitate community, creative exploration and connection with the city; the questions and answers have been added to the appendix in full with permission. One of the most notable points that Lindsay makes is that writers have commented how writing the letters and hiding them transforms their relationship to their communities, she says 'Hearing and sharing what people from different neighbourhoods/age groups/backgrounds love about the city we all share is a really powerful connecting force' (Zier-Vogel 2016). Lindsay believes strongly about the project having a tangible and physical element to it, and although she takes photos of the letters for a digital archive she doesn't feel that it is necessary for the project itself to utilise any digital element. I was interested to see that in 2013 on a 5-city UK tour Lindsay visited Nottingham with 'The Love Lettering Project' and met with Jon McGregor, editor of *The Letters Page*; she set up the project in Lee Rosy's Café and has noted that the response was 'overwhelmingly positive' with people writing love letters to the city. One example reads: 'Dear Nottingham, I fell in love with you 4 years ago! You're full of creative lovely people and the lace market is so beautiful' (Loveletteringproject.com 2013). It serves to show that community and physical environment remain as important elements for the inhabitants of a city, as Lindsay notes 'It's so easy to see what doesn't work in a city … But for me, seeing what does work in a city is a powerful shift, a changing of the lens through which we see our communities' (Zier-Vogel 2016).

Lindsay's project is still ongoing and has clearly been successful in fulfilling her ambitions of forging connections between the city and its communities. However, as I have shown digital technology is fast becoming an invaluable tool for communication and creation in urban environments, and has proved that it can further facilitate connections between cities and their inhabitants. I wanted to achieve similar effects to both Lindsay's and Jocelyn Spence's project and so my own has been created so that it is physically and digitally mediated with non-locative technology. The balance between the two I hope shows that a combination of the physical act of writing and hiding a letter, writing, sending and checking an email and walking around the city to discover and read the letter can complement each other to achieve the effect that this dissertation has explored, a negotiation of space through the urban city creating connections by creative communication.

5. 'Creative Correspondence in the City'

The purpose of the project 'Creative Correspondence in the City' was to see how the merging of letter-writing and digital technology could attribute the writing of a shared narrative experience between the participants and the city. I conducted the small-scale project on two occasions, the first being a pilot study to see if it worked logistically, to receive feedback on what the experience was like for the participants and to assess if any necessary amendments were needed for the main study. The pilot required three participants all with access to their email through a smartphone, either through Wi-Fi or 3G services, to meet in the centre of Nottingham. Before the project, I set up an email thread between the participants, attached an information sheet explaining the details of the project and told them the structure of who they were paired to write letters for. After an initial meeting on the day for questions the participants walked to different parts of the city, predominately within the Hockley and Lace Market area to find a space in which they could write a short letter. The letter did not have to be

addressed to anyone in particular and there was no set theme, but on completion it had to be left or hidden in the place it was written for their allocated partner to come and find it. For example, in the pilot study participant A wrote for B, C wrote for A, and B wrote for C. The participants used the email thread to communicate with one another with details of where they had left the letter. Participants then left their writing spot and walked through the city to find their letter. The process was repeated after swapping around the allocations so by the end of the project each participant had written and received two letters to and from different people.

5.1. The Email Thread

I chose email as the digital platform because of its relationship to the letter as explored in the first section of this dissertation. Madrigal (2014) contends that the email is becoming what it was originally thought of, as an electronic letter-writing platform; he comments how email renders well on mobile: 'While the mobile web is a rusting scrapheap of unreadable text, broken advertisements, and janky layouts, normal emails look great on phones! They are super lightweight, so they download quickly over any kind of connection, and the tools to forward or otherwise deal with them are built expertly and natively into our mobile devices' (Madrigal 2014). On a more aesthetic note Garfield observes how their 'screen iconography is all postal – tiny symbolic envelopes and in-trays – with paper-clips to denote attachments and paper planes to denote sent mail [and] The trash icon is still a wastepaper basket' (Garfield 2013: 396). The email thread worked well in the project, participants had no trouble finding Wi-Fi or using their 3G service. One participant said how handy it was that everywhere has 'The Cloud' now, a public access Wi-Fi network, and this observation becomes a recurring thematic feature in his letters, for example: *Then, outside, a man too busy checking his apple smart watch walked past Phil who sells the big issue. Phil was a regular at the Major Oak before he hit hard times'*, and in another of his letters, *I hadn't memorised that, you know me. But I checked online.* Media and technology in general function as a motif in the letters: *Writing this letter feels awkward – not that much because of the content than not being used to hand writing anymore.*

As well as a method of communication, the email also hinted as its own form of creative writing: *I've left a letter for Alice with the menus on table 34 at the Major Oak. (At the back of the pub – I can see Delilah.) P.s. I'm staying until half time. (7 mins).* Mostly however the emails in the trial, though still vital for communication between participants, weren't as creatively compelling as the letters. Although one participant chose to attach photos to her email the majority of the emails were seen as a method of convenience rather than creative features in themselves. Despite this, for the second project I decided against changing the digital platform because I was interested to see if the same effect would occur with a different group of participants. Notably in this project the participants were much more inventive with where they hid the letters. In the pilot, letters were hidden in menu holders, between sugar pots, and on tables whereas in the second study a letter was hidden behind a specific book in the four-floored Waterstones, one was written and hidden on the top level of the Lace Market car park, another tucked behind the frame of a print illustration of a dinosaur. As a result it made the emails more inventive too, *Rinzing. Ugly bread bakery. Seating area. The dinosaur likes to surf. The letter might fall.* In this respect the participants said the experience felt like a game. Interestingly, the sender of the above email said that *it felt like a movement, a sort of protest, leaving letters around the city in places, kind of perpetrating an act in secret but whilst everyone was around.*

5.2. Exploring, Hacking and Haunting Space

In his examination of the research project 'Waterways and Walkways', a digitally mediated creative exploration of the city of Cardiff, Spencer Jordan (2016) explores how the act of walking and tracing the route of the disused Glamorganshire Canal was an act of transgression, a hack of the Welsh capital. He contends that the walk was 'a deliberate 'tactical' and 'creative' re-conceptualisation of the city's topography – tactical in the sense that it was openly transgressive; creative in that it self-consciously harnessed the power of technology', the technology of choice being Twitter (Jordan 2016). The participant's comment on 'Creative Correspondence' at the end of the previous sub-section echoes elements of Jordan's observations. Indeed, another participant joked that she felt as if she had 'hacked the system' when she accessed the Wi-Fi to write and read the emails. Jordan's reference to Wark's *A hacker manifesto* (2004) is relevant here, Wark declares that 'whatever code we hack … we are abstracters of new worlds' (Wark 2004: [002]; in Jordan 2016), and Jordan notes that the stories we make in our journeys through cityspace become the abstraction of new spaces and meanings; de Certeau too understood that his 'itineraries' were transgressive forays across the oppressive and hegemonic 'urbanistic system' (de Certeau 1984: 100; in Jordan 2016).

For Forlano (2013), joining a Wi-Fi network is one way in which inhabitants of a city can co-produce place, she says that whilst wireless networks allow people to connect to the Internet and communicate across time and space they are also located in bounded physical and digital spaces where people often gather; thus cafés that have Wi-Fi become regular haunts. In this sense the participants who accessed a Wi-Fi network were contributing to and creating stories in the same space that others not involved in the project were. Sample's (2014) discussion of the game 'Haunts', involving the creative 'misuse' of existing locative social networks for narrative purposes, draws on Michel Foucault's theory of 'heterotopias': a single real place in which incompatible counter-sites are layered upon or juxtaposed against one another (Foucault 1986: 24; in Sample 2014: 74). Sample says that as well as the narrative emerging for the teams involved it also affected random strangers using the same apps 'who have no idea that they've stumbled upon a fictional world augmenting the real one – a fictional world haunting the real one' (Sample 2014: 75). Although there was no overarching fictional narrative in 'Creative Correspondence', accessing public Wi-Fi can be seen to constitute as this shared overlapping space and there were also cases where the participants were interrupted or had to interrupt random strangers. For example, one participant whilst writing her letter was approached by someone who was interested to see what she was doing, the interruption not only become a creative feature in her letter but after an exchange of emails, two weeks later he was participating in the next project. On a different occasion a participant had left her letter on a table by the sugar pots and when their allocated partner arrived to read it she needed to politely interrupt a new set of customers who were at the table.

The idea of haunting is of importance to de Certeau, the stories that make up the 'spirit of places' (de Certeau 1984b: 135) through superstitions and local legends are 'composed of the world's debris' (de Certeau 1984a: 107) and 'organise around them the city saga' (de Certeau 1984b: 2: 135). The act of walking to find a space to write, to send emails and to find hidden letters clearly had an effect on the participants as images of these 'verbal relics' (de Certeau 1984a: 107) surfaced in their writing. One letter written on a napkin which is scanned and attached to the appendix, is from the perspective of 'The Right Lion' of the two stone lions situated at either end of the Council House; the participant felt that the right lion does not receive as much attention as 'The Left Lion' and so wanted to give it a voice. According to Nottingham's official tourism website the Left Lion, affectionately known as 'Leo', is beloved by locals as a famous meeting place but both have 'become etched in the psyche of local people who will probably have clambered over them as children and used them as a meeting point with friends and 'dates' in adulthood' (Experiencenottinghamshire.com, n.d.), it is as de Certeau says, 'these personas lead their own lives' (de Certeau 1984b: 135).

6. Connections and Conclusions

One of the most successful aspects of the project was the creation of connections between places in the city but also between the participants and their wider community. This shines through in many of the letters and I was fortunate to receive generous feedback from the participants, two of these are attached in the appendix. One letter addressed to her allocated participant offers stories about her memories in the place that she wrote the letter: *I'm going to tell you some stories about things that have happened in the establishment I'm currently sitting in … First off, I'm sitting in Junk Yard (the place where you picked up the letter.)* Each letter that was written, hidden, found and read created connections through the city by sharing their stories about these places. In his feedback one participant said how he visited parts of the city that he wouldn't normally visit, he felt as if he was exploring new places although he'd been living there for four years.

A strong sense of wider community was also established in many of the letters, one reads: *Pockets of space, I'm in a pocket, Nottingham is the coat – does it keep the people warm?* One aspect that I hadn't anticipated was the connections made between the participants themselves, one piece of feedback writes 'I loved reading Rinzing's letter. It carried a lot of personality before even getting to the content. Going to a place that was personal to a stranger and reading their thoughts at a particular moment was just a really pleasant experience.' In response to the aforementioned letter the participant in his writes: *Your letter felt like a really lovely introduction to yourself & your interests. I wanted to echo that myself with my location.* Though he eventually succeeded in doing so, the same participant reported that he would have liked to have ventured further out of the Hockley and Lace Market area, suggestive of the potential for the project to grow.

Though small, the project succeeded in offering a re-contextualisation of the city. The merging of letter-writing and mobile email technology allowed participants to navigate hybridised digital and physical spaces; the writing and hiding of letters meant that participants had to walk through the city thus facilitating the creation of new trajectories and narratives. By sharing their experiences and

stories the participants were able to explore their surroundings in a new light; this small-scale example highlights the potential for such creative projects to help people (*re*)connect with their urban environment.

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Appendix

1. Questions and answers with Lindsay Zier-Vogel, founder of The Love Lettering Project:

Do the letters ever reach their way back to you – or are they lost once someone picks them up in the city? Do you find that many people who may have never heard of the project before but find a letter contact the project after they have found it, hoping to get involved?

I very rarely hear back from people who have found a letter. The letters are anonymous and don't carry any contact info (no website/hashtag, etc). I have heard back from a select few who have googled the project and/or heard about the project through the press. It's always been pretty thrilling and wonderful, though to me, the project does not require re-engagement with me. I love that the recipients don't have to "do" anything. They just get to receive a letter, that's it and that's all. It's not a marketing tool and my hope is that people who receive letters get to experience the very moment they're inside of. One recipient got a letter (and is now one of my closest friends!) She didn't know who had tied a letter to her bike for years, until she heard about the project on the CBC.

"Five years ago, I moved to Toronto from Vancouver, and a few months in experienced a hugely difficult shift in my personal life. Being new to the city at the time, and working intensely on building my community, every day was a new venture into exploring the city and meeting new people. One morning, I woke up to a little air-mail envelope tied to my bike that said "love" on it. That little envelope became my little beacon of light that made Toronto feel like home; I knew that if there was someone out there in Toronto tying love notes to people's bikes, this was my kind of city. I've kept the little envelope on my bookshelf, and in the years that have passed, now happily and fully have embraced Toronto as home."

Do you feel like letters as a form is the only possible way to achieve what you have set out to do? Have you ever thought about including any digital mediums? Or is part of the charm of it that it has no digital aspect at all?

I take photos of the letters to have a digital archive of all the photos written through the project, but I definitely feel strongly about the project requiring a tangible/physical element. There is something so powerful and magical about opening up an envelope, pulling out a letter, unfolding it. And don't even get me started on the importance and power of handwriting! It's so much more personal and intimate than Helvetica and says so much about the writer of the letter.

Can you give me a little information about the community aspect of your project, have you seen any definitive changes or results in the community because of this project. Does it bring people together, have any strangers become friends from it?

I have made a dear friend because of the project. And I've heard from others how both writing the letters and hiding the letters transforms their relationship to their communities. Hearing and sharing what people from different neighbourhoods/age groups/backgrounds love about the city we all share is a really powerful connecting force.

How important do you think it is for people to connect with the city?

I think it is a really important, vital thing for people to connect to their communities. It's so easy to see what doesn't work in a city (and that's totally valid! There's such value in pointing out what doesn't work). But for me, seeing what does work in a city is a powerful shift, a changing of the lens through which we see our communities. And once you start seeing what does work in a city, it's contagious - you start seeing a lot of things that work, that you love, small, little things that can really change your daily outlook.

When you came to Nottingham three years ago, did anyone who took part express any interest in having something similar permanently in Nottingham?

The response was overwhelmingly positive, though I didn't get any feedback about anyone wanting something permanent. (Sorry about the sideways photos, but there are photos here: http://loveletteringproject.com/love-lettering-in-nottingham/)

2. Scan of a participant's letter written from the perspective of the 'Right Lion':
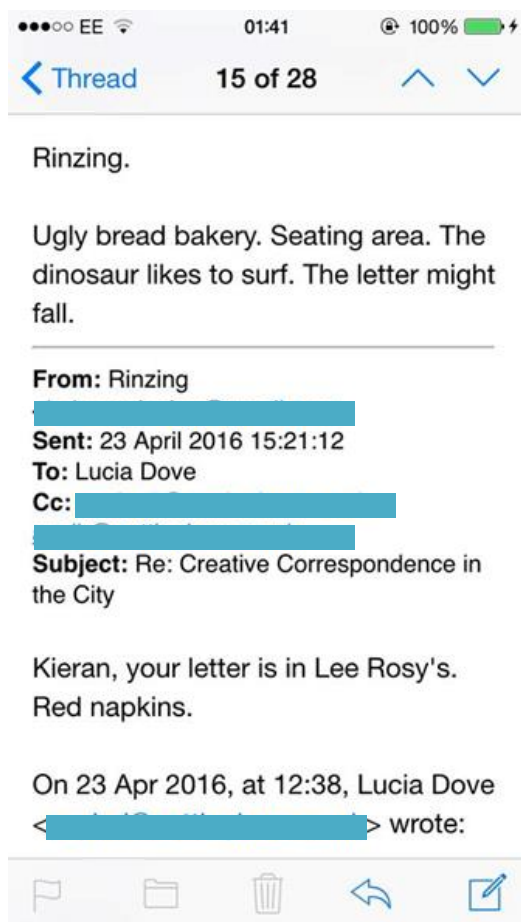
PEOPLE always talk about my brother, LEFT.
He's super POPULAR. Surrounded by crowds, posers
and TOURISTS. Say CHEESE but not FROMAGE.
My name is COOLER. The vowels SOUND
the same. I RHYME. But nobody flocks around
ME. I am the forgotten TWIN. I was born FIRST,
too. FAME does NOT find me despite my BLOOD or the
THINGS I HAVE DONE. I spent a
_____ VANILLA and Taught TRIGONOMETRY
to children. I fished for secrets and HERRINGS
and bears. BUT secrets don't bite like they USED to.
I met the PRINCE of Spain and insulted his TWEED
jacket and language. I became a BULL and moved
to BIRMINGHAM, but I missed it HERE. I missed
his SHADOW and the way CHILDREN would feed me
VANILLA ice cream. My LACTOSE grew intolerant.
I ate CASHEWS. I caught Medusa's FLU. The
headache COMBUSTS and in the ASH, we all play.

Yours,

Right?

3. Photographs of 'Creative Correspondence in the City' (photographs my own):

4. Feedback from participant (1):

"Personally I was introduced to the project by my housemate Liam. I had little idea of what it would entail until shortly before I set off. I found the first letter very difficult. It seemed as though the content was completely open ended and that mixed with wanting it to be in some way entertaining meant that I had no idea where to start. Since I was writing to my housemate I didn't feel like there was any point in making it particularly personal since he already knows me. I spent a good few minutes trying to settle on a place that I hoped would help me think and settled for the view atop the car park. Writing it felt sort of rambling and I ended up kind of disliking it. The only thing I really had to go off was trying to think why someone would be atop a car park writing a letter.

I loved reading Rinzing's letter. It carried a lot of personality before even getting to the content. Going to a place that was personal to a stranger and reading their thoughts at a particular moment was just a really pleasant experience. In response I really wanted to write in a place personal to me but found those were a bit too far out of Hockley. Instead I just settled for somewhere quiet and close and really had the urge to start a correspondence. I hoped my letter was at least a bit revealing as to who I am. With a structure already in place from Rinzing's letter and content there for me to react to the second letter came completely naturally and easily, no stopping and starting like the first. In particular it was a really nice chance to meet someone new in a personable yet non-awkward manner. Something I think a lot of people wish was more easily done.

I hugely enjoyed the whole thing. I think that it's a really interesting looking at how we interact with each other and our environment through writing and how the format that that writing takes place in itself affects the writing. Beyond that I really just hope this is something I see happening more regularly. It's a fun way to meet new people and find new places in your local area and I don't think I've come across anything that so successfully manages that."

4.1. Feedback from participant (2):

"Thanks again for inviting me to participate in your project. I take pleasure in meeting new people and finding out something personal about them and there is something very personal about reading a handwritten letter addressed to you. To me it is a very similar experience to doing portrait photography - the unposed kind, when facilitating the subject to be themselves or to reveal something about their personality.

I liked the idea of having choice with the location for writing the letters. I've ended up choosing two locations that are some of my most visited and personal places: Lee Rosy's Cafe and Waterstones, photography section. I also enjoyed the game of sending and receiving hints about where the letters were hidden.

I felt that your project enabled me (possibly us) connect on a personal level, which rarely happens to me so quickly when 'just' meeting people for the first time. And perhaps this is more to do with addressing the letter to each other rather than the content of the letters. However I think it is natural to feel more intrigued by and connected with the person who wrote to you when reading something personal about them.

I think it's a great idea to repeat the project perhaps with more participants and perhaps even make this a regular event. To me the game was fun, meaningful and would be happy to do it again sometime."

***The Letters Page*: Special Issue, Summer 2016**

After submission I was invited by Jon McGregor to act as the special issue editor for a small *The Letters Page* publication, published as a PDF that I shared with friends, family, colleagues, and was distributed internally within the School of English in July 2016. The one-off issue features the letters written by the participants who took part in the first 'Creative Correspondence in the City' project, and Elin Keyser's 'Mapping Correspondence', an architectual-style watercolour illustration mapping the locations and trajectories of the participants and their letters. The issue can be viewed here.

The Letters Page: a literary journal in letters
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