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Walkers with visual-impairments in the British countryside: Picturesque legacies, collective enjoyments and well-being benefits



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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on ethnographic research to explore the experiences of members of specialist blind and visually impaired walking groups who visit areas of the Peak District and Lake District, notable rural locations in Britain. For many people, a visit to these areas is associated with the apprehension of picturesque beauty through the physical faculty of sight. However, data from participant observation and interviews reveal that people also derive many other key social, well-being and health benefits by visiting and walking in these areas. This paper identifies some of these other benefits and places them within the context of recent theory that addresses therapeutic landscapes and people with visual-impairments' cultural and sensory apprehensions. The well-being experiences of visually-impaired walking participants are identified and include; exploration outside of known (usually urban) routes; reaching summits and areas that have collective symbolic value; the facilitation of social networks; and improvements in physical fitness and self-reported weight loss or maintenance. The paper combats a pervasive ocularcentrism in appraisals of British landscape and contributes to emerging debates on 'therapeutic mobilities' - a place where disability and rurality intersect.

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1. Introduction

Over two million people in the United Kingdom live with sight loss and, of this group, 360 000 are registered with their local authority as blind or partially sighted (Royal National Institute of Blind People, 2015). While some members of this group experience multiple disabilities that render rural walking exercise inappropriate (Tate et al., 2005), there is a significant and growing proportion of adults with visual-impairments who are fit, able and likely to benefit from visiting the countryside and enjoying walking exercise. This is particularly critical given that scholarship has demonstrated people with blindness or visual-impairment tend to be at greater than average risk of not being able to access adequate recreation and exercise facilities (Longmuir and Bar-or, 2000; Tre-gaskis, 2003); experience social isolation and rely disproportionately on immediate family for leisure opportunities (Carr, 2004), maybe limited to known and researched routes through urban space (Butler and Bowlby, 1997); and suffer from relatively poor physical fitness compared to their sighted counterparts (Holbrook et al., 2009).

Between 2004 and 2006 I undertook research on blind and

visually impaired people's engagement in rural space for walking by acting as a volunteer sighted guide. I conducted ethnographic research with members of specialist blind and visually-impaired walking groups who visit the Peak and Lake Districts in the British countryside. Both districts offer a wide range of walks with the former known for its steep sided limestone dales as well as high moorlands covered with gritstone and the latter its gentle lakeside strolls as well as challenging mountain expeditions.

In the national imagination the Peak and Lake Districts are often represented as areas of 'outstanding natural beauty' (Natural England, 2015).¹ These constructions arguably reinforce a pronounced ocularcentrism in the modern Western heritage of how landscapes, and particularly rural landscapes of both remote wilderness and domesticated countryside, are supposed to be conceived, encountered and managed (Macpherson, 2005), (Cosgrove, 1985, 1993, 2003). Rural landscapes are commonly positioned within intersecting 'fields of vision' (Daniels, 1993), replete with complex nationalist, political and other identity-based contestations, as well as more simply and popularly being cast as pretty scenes, nice-to-look-at vistas and enchanting diversions.

¹ The phrase 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' (AONB) is common in British rural policy, being a formal designation within a variety of policy statements and instruments.

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Whatever the exact content of such rural aesthetics, though, the countrysides in question appear as ones to be visited, enjoyed and debated by fully sighted people. A question might then be asked about the significance, of these countrysides for people with blindness or visual impairment: How are these localities apprehended by these people? Are they to be regarded as 'out of place' in rural localities, notably areas supposedly valued for their visual appeal? Finally, questions might be posed as to whether there is any point in even thinking about how and why blind and visually impaired might be there, want to be there or could be enabled better to be there?²

This paper takes up these questions as a contribution to the emerging critical appraisal of where disability and rurality intersect (Barton et al., 2015; Burns et al., 2013). Also informing the paper is Gesler's (1992) notion of 'therapeutic landscapes' which has been taken up in health geographies as a way to understand the inter-relationship between wellbeing and place. In an editorial introducing a collection of writing on the subject Williams (2007) writes that the concept 'provides a framework for analysis of natural, built, social and symbolic environments as they contribute to healing and wellbeing in places – broadly termed landscapes' (p1-2). In subsequent work geographers have argued that therapeutic landscapes may encompass everyday places in addition to well-known and singular sites and may be both important in the maintenance of health as well as in recovery and healing. Gatrell (2013) has added a further dimension to the literature on the subject of particular importance to this paper in work highlighting 'moving experiences' as a critical to therapeutic landscapes. He argues that greater attention needs to be given to 'therapeutic mobilities' such as walking which can be beneficial in terms of physical activity, sociality and context. Notably in elaborating upon the latter he asserts that we need to avoid conflating health benefits with only what we may see while walking, and instead attend to some of the non-visual ways in which bodies interact with places to foster wellbeing (Gatrell, 2013 p100).

I begin the paper by drawing on literature which has established the dominance of associating visiting the British landscape with an embodied faculty of sight and introduce Cachia's (2013) critique of ocularcentrism as manifest in museums. Following this I turn to my ethnographic data which demonstrates that while the popularity of places such as the Peak and Lake Districts in England is often explained through the symbolic construction of their scenic and picturesque beauty, there are many other embodied and social factors that have to be taken into account when considering the enjoyment of a walk in such countrysides for sighted or less-sighted participants. These include health, physical and social benefits. At the same time walking groups face considerable challenges including managing rough rural terrain and negotiating walker-guide relations. After detailing these challenges I conclude the paper returning to Cachia (2013) and enumerating strategies for 'combatting ocularcentrism' in our constructions of the British countryside.

2. Situating the study

This research contributes to the growing academic and policy literature on social, ethnic and embodied diversity in the British countryside (eg. Askins, 2006; Agyeman and Spooner, 1997; Burns et al., 2009; Countryside Agency, 2005a, 2005b; Macpherson,

2009a; Slee et al., 2001; Tolia-Kelly, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). The presence of people with blindness or visual-impairment in areas of landscape traditionally valued for their scenic beauty disrupts the traditional association of landscape with an individual's visual apprehension, potentially drawing attention to other, non-visual, embodied, collective, tactile and sonic aspects of visitors' experiences in these locations (Macpherson, 2009a, 2009b). Previous research on understandings of the British countryside and stated rationales for visiting these areas often focus on the visual sense (Andrews, 1989; Darby, 2000; Urry, 1990). Indeed, in popular imaginaries and in academic literature sight is often understood as central to experience the landscape. Such a way of conceptualising the landscape has a long history dating back to between 1600 and 1850. In this period picturesque modes of enjoying the landscape came to the fore as improvements in transport and developments in perspectival representation, architecture and theatre fostered European travels and saw the emergence of the 'grand tourist' (Agnew, 1998; Andrews, 1989; Cole, 2015; Cosgrove, 1985, 1993, 2003; Wallace, 1993).

The belief that a 'fit and able body' (Lorimer and Lund, 2003) is a prerequisite to appreciating the landscape finds echoes in dominant constructions of museums and art. This is a subject taken up by Amanda Cachia.³ (2013) in a paper in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, in which she ponders an experience retold by about viewing a painting in a Matisse exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art. As someone with macular degeneration, Kleege had to stand very close to the picture to gain any sense of its scale, texture and colour, but a male visitor lectured her that she was *too* close and that the only proper way to appreciate the picture was to step back, to gain some distance and perspective on the artwork. In so doing, this visitor displayed an unthinking ocularcentrism, convinced by the supremacy of sight in the epistemological, aesthetic and interpretational tasks of viewing a painting; and not just any form of sight, but a particular mode of viewing dependent on a distanced, even panoramic gaze, arguably of a piece with what is usually conceived as the correct form of landscape viewing. Akin to common reactions to people with visual-impairments visiting rural landscapes, whether wildernesses or pastoral regions, which turn on surprise at both their presence and their apparent interest in encountering these landscapes, it can be anticipated that other gallery visitors would be similarly puzzled by what someone with poor or no sight might be doing in their spaces: what, in short, is the point if you cannot properly see the artworks?

Prompted by her experience here, Cachia was led to critical reflections on how an art gallery might be reconstituted to serve not just the sighted but also those with poor or no sight. Moreover, she widened the span of her reflections to include art and other museums, other interior spaces where, it might normally be intuited, visitors would be expected to be able to see the artefacts – indeed, to *want* to see the artefacts – and where too the lay-out and organisation of the spaces would grow from this primal ocularcentric logic. Cachia then reports on experiments with other ways of creating a museum, specifically a 'blind museum', which seek to depart from other logics, ones suggesting the primacy of other senses for encountering and learning about the museum's

² Note that there is a quite other suite of considerations attaching to people with visual-impairments who already *live* in rural areas – ie. are not visiting such localities for recreation and leisure – although of course some disabled rural-dwellers may also wish to walk in the countryside or, indeed, in AONBs.

³ This 'blind field shuttle' was part of a composite exhibition *What Can a Body Do?*, held at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, US, October–December 2012, curated by Cachia as an explicit follow-on from *Blind at the Museum* and actually narrowing the question to 'what can a disabled body do?' It should be noted that the 'shuttle' involved visual deprivation for sighted participants, forcing them to encounter the local environment through other, non-visual sensory mechanisms.

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