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Human geography and the occult: Weird walks, writing, and re-enchanting the landscape

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Abstract

This article traces geographical writings on monstrosity, magic(k) and spectrality which have developed over the last three decades. By framing these various works as 'occult geographies' and 'geographies of the occult', we show how this work is both thematically and theoretically linked and impacts current and emerging lines of thought in human geography more broadly. Surveying a body of non-specialist writings on occult landscapes, this paper contributes to human geography by showing how these practices and writings inform experiences of environment, identity, and belonging, whilst revealing political tensions for those deploying occult terminology and phenomena in their human geographical accounts.

Keywords

occult, spectrality, landscape, nation, literary

> There are places in the landscape that exude what might be called the 'everywhen'; they are haunted places. (Hopper, 2017)
>
> I must attempt to explore that sense so many before me have felt. The shadows they too have glimpsed among the fields, hills and trees of this haunted land. (Parnell, 2019: 2)
>
> Myths, legends and histories, both personal and universal, psychically connect us to the land we traverse. By walking, talking and engaging with the landscape, we add to this narrative well. (Tromans et al., 2021d: 5)

Introduction

These quotes attend to how some see landscapes as haunted by vestiges of a deep time of forgotten ancestors and the absent-presences of folk and lore, and exemplify a growing phenomenon in British landscape and place writing in approximately the last 5 to 10 years: a 'new' form of writing that engages with the darker, occluded, folkloric and mystical aspects of place. As such, these writings all share a preoccupation with the occult.[1] Comprising travelogues, guidebooks, blogs, and zines, this body of

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work is becoming increasingly voluminous, and its associated 'scene', whilst remaining diverse and intersecting with other forms of textual and practiced geographies, is becoming increasingly popular. As we shall detail in this paper, these texts draw on, whilst simultaneously demarcating and producing, a historiography of occult geographies that includes psychogeography, weird fiction, ghost stories, neopaganism, folklore and folk practices, folk horror across different media, alternative music in a variety of different forms, and (a largely British) countercultural history. Not exclusively, but mostly located in the British countryside, these new writings offer anti-pastoral and anti-idyllic ruralities yet generate visions of harmonious communities and environmental relations sourced from a forgotten past which refigure both local and national identities (Hall, 2020).

Such writing is, of course, not limited to Britain. Britain is not unique in seeing a rise in popular engagements with the occult, nor would we argue that the approaches taken by the authors of this evolving body of work are uniquely British. Rather, what we contend and what is evident from the extant body of work that we come to discuss, is that Britain has, over approximately the last 5 years, provided fertile ground for popular re-imaginings of the occult and its presence in the landscape. In fact, it becomes evident from this literature, that popular writings connecting geography and the occult are proliferating in Britain at an exceptional rate, and that the underlying reasons for this increase signal the unique spatial politics of Britain in a post-Brexit, (post-)pandemic context. In this way, we develop the argument advanced by geographers, in the last 30 years or so, that the occult is inherently political due to its capacity to simultaneously reveal, obscure and challenge certain power structures and knowledge hierarchies (Pile and Thrift 1995), by showing how, through the conceptualisation of 'occult geographies', such dynamics become spatially enacted. These enactments manifest in the embodied practices, symbolic landscapes, and affective atmospheres that emerge in and are described by contemporary popular writings on the occult and work to contest dominant epistemologies and reimagine the political possibilities of space.

The occult is notoriously difficult to define. As Truzzi (1971: 637) notes, 'There is little accord about what constitutes an occultism […] the occult is a residual category, a wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way, that do not fit the established claims of science or religion'. In this paper we define the occult as pertaining both to the 'hidden' and the 'supernatural' aspects of lived environments and human relations. The supernatural is understood here in the broadest sense of the word and is inclusive of ghosts and hauntings, ritual magic, extrasensory perception (ESP), astrology, remote viewing, cryptozoology, curses, numerology, geomancy, secret societies, and is adjacent to and sometimes including the beliefs which emerge from conspiracy theory, ufology, pseudo- and fringe science, and spirituality. The purpose of indulging in this terminological 'haziness' is not to be obscurantist nor is it wantonly vague out of convenience, but rather it is to address the occult in the least reductive manner possible so that we can show more accurately the socio-cultural and political breadth of the term and its geographical reach. The occult is always both spatial and political. It concerns, represents and exposes imbalances in knowledge—the known and the unknown (Pile 2006; Pile and Thrift 1995). The occult attends to spaces both seen and unseen, but which are not necessarily ontologically discrete. Rather, occult geographies manifest as coexistent, co-constitutive, and co-mingling spatial realms, where there is no simple delineation or demarcation of space to be made: occult geographies may exist within, under, above, adjacent or parallel to the mundane world, they enrich it, complicate and problematise our taken for granted sense of being in the world, and the lived and imagined spatial realities we construct. Patterns of geographical thought, practice, and perception emerge through engagements with the occult in ways that all too commonly go unnoticed; as Harrison et al. (2004: 19) argue 'not all patterns are visible'.

As a hybrid form of knowledge and practice, the occult does not have geographical boundaries, but it does have cultural and spatial particularities. The occult is multifaceted and multicultural: all cultures and religions possess versions of occult knowledge and tradition, by right of having 'secret' or 'hidden'

epistemic frameworks built within their dominant epistemologies. These knowledges, while known in detail to small, learned groups and individuals, have often become popularised in society more broadly through folkloric and spiritual narratives of belief and superstition that assume the presence (or absence) and co-existence of multiple supernatural worlds, deities, organisms, and processes. This process is always spatial, often contested, and rarely straightforward. Typically, multiple belief systems operate in the same territory, each with its own engagement in the occult. East and Southeast Asia offer examples of this, with various syncretic combinations of introduced religion and indigenous belief. Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity form and inform the spiritual structures and superstitions of historically colonised geographies, while the belief systems of their colonisers have been shaped by dynamic flows of occupation, migration and cultural transmission, as well as through outright appropriation. This is the same for British occultism, which has been influenced by and developed from arcane knowledges and traditions spanning ancient Egypt, Renaissance Europe, Greek, Roman, and Nordic mythology, and Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism. The way these things have come together and synthesised with indigenous folk practices and beliefs in the cultural and geographical context of Britain has formed distinct traditions and cosmologies. In this sense, the internal and external spatial complexities of knowledge and power can be seen to merge.

In this paper we chart and describe the rise of a new, popular occult literature that both reproduces and develops this relatively distinct British occultism. We aim to explore its significance for geographers, investigate why there is a proliferation and interest in these texts, and analyse some of its cultural politics. To achieve this, we first situate these texts conceptually and theoretically in human geographical work by tracing the history of this area of research. Second, we give an overview of this textual scene and explore its overlaps and links to other areas of landscape and place writing and practice. Third, in describing this scene in more detail, we argue these texts attempt to re-enchant the world through a reconnection to and an attentiveness to place, space, and nature. Fourth, we explore how a refiguring of both national and local identity is forged through these writings. Finally, in concluding the paper, we examine the cultural politics, and the tensions between the progressive and regressive – inclusionary and exclusionary – discourses and practices produced in and through these writings, and how human geographers can contribute to these debates.

Human geography and the occult

Geographers have had a sustained interest in the occult, which can be traced back at least as far as the late 1980s. This forms a thematically cohesive body of work, formed from a series of writings that engage the occluded, marginal, and affective qualities of place through the lens of supernaturalism. While the thematics of these writings are connected, the conceptualisations and methodologies present in this work vary and often work toward different ends. It becomes necessary at this point, then, to suggest a distinction between *occult geographies* – those which employ the language of the supernatural to articulate discussions of spatial absence, haunting, uncanniness and marginality, and often without a focus on occult phenomena – and *geographies of the occult*, which seek to provide geographical analysis of supernatural beliefs, events and practices. As we will show, these geographies of the occult/occult geographies frequently intersect and interpenetrate in their approaches, generating new forms of geographical knowledge and practice by taking seriously a subject that is all too often marginalised or dismissed outright in academic research. Furthermore, some geographical studies take the occult to refer to a political-spiritual-spatial amalgam (see Thurgill, 2024, 2026), demonstrating that the separation of the occult into the 'political' and the 'supernatural' is not absolute. Rather than trying to untangle these two ways of approaching the occult, we have left them interwoven in our review, opting instead to provide an overview that makes it both possible to gain a general impression of the importance of the occult (broadly conceived) for human geography over the last three decades, while also making clear the distinction in approaches

between those works which take the supernatural as their object of study and those that employ it figuratively in the exploration of socio-spatial and political processes.

Since the latter part of the last century geographers have utilised the occult to explore alternative forms of knowledge-making, politics and space, referring to esoteric practices, theories and beliefs to highlight vectors of violence (symbolic and actual), power imbalances and social injustices. Moreover, the occult, taken as a spectrum of ideas and methodologies, has enabled geographers to challenge notions of spatial stability and the dominance of historical-geographical narratives. Denis Cosgrove (1990) made an early intervention here by drawing connections between the historical development of geography and pre-modern environmental thought. Although he does not explicitly refer to the occult, Cosgrove foregrounds the 'hidden' dimensions of geography – its role in the historical spiritual, moral, and cosmographic ordering of place – as central to earlier understandings of the environment. Citing examples of esoteric thought and practice in pre-modern science (e.g., alchemy), Cosgrove argues that in the modern and postmodern context, environmental action must recover these symbolic and moral dimensions, rather than solely relying on technical or managerial approaches. Pile and Thrift (1995) take up this challenge in the final section of their *Mapping the Subject*, examining the hidden dimensions of space and the destabilising nature of the occult in Peter Ackroyd's 1993 novel *The House of Doctor Dee*. By examining the hidden and often esoteric workings of space in Ackroyd's narrative, Pile and Thrift (1995: 345) show how 'people become enmeshed into their own histories and geographies in specific ways and that these co-ordinates are also fixed through intersecting power/knowledge relationships'. In the final sentence of *Mapping the Subject*, Pile and Thrift (1995: 345, emphasis in original) conclude 'There is more to be discovered about mapping the subject and some of this may involve casting light into the great mysteries of *places* hitherto covered by clouds and darkness'. Dr Dee is taken up again by Pile and Thrift in the introduction to their 2004 edited collection with Steve Harrison (Harrison et al., 2004: 20) in which they invoke the occult (and specifically the Kabbalah) to destabilise taken-for-granted foundational understandings of Western knowledge in which logic and rationality are believed by many to have prevailed over esoteric thought and practice. Here, the authors contend that, to the contrary, Dee's meticulous, empirically grounded cosmology-driven approach allows for 'a specific way of seeing the hidden, divine connections that underlie the cosmos' – an approach which attends to the external world through the occult-as-science. This foregrounding of the synthesis of occulture and conventional science in Dee's practice is important not only because it undermines the assumed separation of logic and mysticism, but because it challenges the notion that scientific thought emerged due to its intellectual emancipation from the occult:

> it would be a mistake to assume that the patterns that contemporary scientists observe and delineate on the ground or in the heavens owe nothing to assumptions about hidden forces, nor to an interest in an all-too-human intention to influence the world. At the very time that contemporary sciences – such as geology, biology – were beginning to take shape, many thinkers were working with ways of seeing patterns in the world that owed as much to Dr Dee as to detached observation and new classificatory systems. (Harrison et al., 2004: 22)

Another, significant but less literary geographical engagement with the occult occurred at the 1989 Institute of British Geographers Annual Conference, where a session on 'Geography, Science and Magic' was held (Randall et al., 1989). One of the first published articles to emerge from this session was David Matless' (1991) 'Nature, the modern and the mystic: tales from early twentieth century geography', which focused on the geographic writings of Vaughan Cornish (1862–1948) and Sir Francis Younghusband (1863–1942). Here, Matless looks to the early history of modern academic geography to explore the often-overlooked role of mysticism and spirituality in scholarly evaluations of human-environment relations, particularly in relation to spiritually imbued conceptions of nature. Matless (1991: 283), though not

primarily focused on the occult but on the eccentricity of early (British) geographers, recognises the importance of occult-related themes in the development of geographic thought, concluding that '[t]he "mystical" and "spiritual" should not be regarded as simple categories, to be easily written up or written off' and urges for further investigatory research to be conducted in this area.

The 1994 English translation of Jacque Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (1994) had a profound effect on geographical thinking and initiated a surge of interest in the supernatural and space, leading to what Maddern and Adey (2008: 291) later termed 'spectro-geography', a geography mobilised by Derrida's spectro-politics and the 'endist' theories of the twentieth century's fin-de-siècle.[2] The impact of Derrida's spectro-politics on geographical engagements with the occult (both thematic and conceptual) has been significant, leading to a second order of occult-oriented writings by geographers seeking to explore the haunted and haunting nature of contemporary politics. Interestingly, two early ventures in this emerging spectro-geography which can be seen to contribute to work on occult geographies more broadly, came from outside of human geography. Environmental sociologist Michael Mayerfeld Bell's (1997) 'The Ghosts of Place' offered a spatial reading of haunting, looking to various socio-geographic constructions of ghostly presences which span a variety of locations including abandoned schools, nineteenth-century university buildings, castles, theme parks, and memorial sites. Mayerfeld Bell (1997: 813, emphasis in original) argues that haunting, as a '*sense of the presence of those who are not physically there*', is 'a ubiquitous aspect of the phenomenology of place' and is therefore integral to the analysis of human-place relations. In the same year, Avery Gordon (1997) examined the social and political role ghosts play in the constructing of narratives of trauma, loss, and mourning. Like Mayerfeld Bell, Gordon (1997:8) understands haunting to be an inescapable part of the human condition, a conduit through which we experience the world around us: 'Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition'. These publications proved foundational to analyses of occult geographies, leading to a flurry of publications on space and spectrality. Degen and Hetherington's (2001: 1) co-edited special issue of *Space and Culture* on 'Spatial Hauntings', a collection which sought to 'illustrate a concern with occurrences in social spaces that are not immediately "there" but are either present in their absence or absent in their presence', exemplified a growing preoccupation with the spectral, absent-present aspects of place surfacing in human geography. When viewed collectively, this thematically linked group of writings on spectrality and space further develop(ed) an occult geography which is primarily oriented towards the spatial examination of memory, social trauma, and the intractability of history, in which the occult is inherently political.

The influence and intersecting of psychogeography and walking with the occult also began to emerge at this time: Pinder (2001) blended psychogeography, spectrality, and surrealism in the outlining of artistic interventions in the hidden spaces of the city; Battista et al. (2005) described an occult-tinged walk around the graveyards, dereliction, and canal paths of London's King's Cross area; while Inglis and Holmes (2003) examined the role of ghosts in the touristic experience, and highlighted the appropriation and exploitation of historical narratives in the marketing and encountering of Scotland as a haunted landscape. From looking at these works and those discussed below, it becomes clear that matters of spectrality and occultism have been approached in two distinct ways by geographers, with scholars treating ghosts as either experiential components of a phenomenological engagement with the lived environment *or* as imagined/literary constructs whose figurative use enables an appropriate language through which to describe the role of memory, history, and trauma in human-environment relations. For the most part, the latter approach has tended to dominate in geography, where, in the absence of supernatural happenings, spectrality is used as a channel through which to explore themes of distance, disturbance, and spatial dislocation (see, e.g., McCormack, 2010;

McCorristine and Adams, 2020; Overend et al., 2020; Shippley Coddington, 2011).

A string of publications in the mid-2000s stand out as another key moment for the consolidation of spectral and occult geographies. Pile (2005) examined case studies of the ghostly, vampiric, and oneiric city to show how memory, affect, and narrative come together in the experiencing of modern urban spaces. In addition to focusing on the negative aspects of haunting – disturbance, dislocation, trauma – Pile uses the supernatural to reveal the utopic political potential of the modern city. In this way haunting is afforded the dual role of signalling spatial hope and despair and can be seen to bring together past and future geographies which are thought, experienced, and grounded in the present, and which, like the ghost, operate to undermine the perceived absolute of space's ontology. Elsewhere, Pile (2006: 315) uses the occult and magic to illustrate the complex flow of urban globalisations, challenging assumptions of how and where circuits of knowledge and power emerge and influence: 'They do not always originate in the West and they do not always flow inexorably out from the West'. Additionally, Till (2005) addressed the ever present-absence of Berlin's past; a haunted and haunting history in which the ghosts of past traumas continue to playout in the experience of the city. Continuing with the theme of urban hauntings, Edensor (2005) utilised spectrality to capture the affective nature of Manchester's abandoned industrial landscape.

A themed session on spectral geographies held the same year at the 2005 RGS-IBG annual conference (Maddern and Adey, 2005) led to the publication of a special issue of *Cultural Geographies* on 'spectro geographies'. This special issue featured a range of approaches to the spectral, including literary (Matless 2008), cultural/methodological (Holloway and Kneale, 2008), urban (Edensor, 2008), and social (Cameron, 2008; Maddern, 2008). In the same journal from the previous year, Wylie (2007: 180) turned to literary hauntings to examine the 'spectral geography' of German author W.G. Sebald, focusing on the ability of spectres to dislocate and distort perceptions of place both in intra- and extra-literary experiences of narrative writing. Furthermore, Dixon (2007) introduced the portentous figure of North America's 'Mothman' to show how occult narratives destabilise otherwise fixed conceptions of space and reality. Dixon (2007: 191) argues that, through its repeated sightings and continued presence in American folk narrative, the Mothman 'becomes the fulcrum around which the character of Truth, along with the associated constructs of reality, cause–effect, explanation, coherence, and identity are thrown into doubt'. Dixon's interest in the ways in which monstrous geographies work to affect and destabilise the production of knowledge in relation to spatial imaginings is further developed through a detailed analysis of *La bête du Gévaudan*, the name given to one or more murderous, wolf-like creatures which plagued the people of the Margeride Mountains, France, in the mid-eighteenth century (Dixon, 2012).

Beginning in the mid-2000s, Holloway (2003a, 2006, 2010, 2017) began to produce a series of articles on affect, spectrality, the monstrous, and space. These articles, built on his earlier investigations into New Age spiritual practices and embodiment in Britain's magickal Glastonbury landscape (Holloway, 2000; 2003b), provided a necessary intervention in the work of existing (and emerging) spectro/spectral geographies by demonstrating that experiences of the supernatural need to be taken seriously by geographers. This approach is reinforced through Holloway's (2006:186) analysis of nineteenth-century Spiritualism, specifically the séance, in which he focuses on the vitality and enchantment of matter and non-matter – absence and presence – in the embodying of the supernatural: 'recognizing the affect and effects of such enchanted spaces, without reducing or giving cause to these elements of experience, is both vital and vitalist'. In this sense, Holloway is rare among geographers in his use of spectrality and enchantment to examine allegedly 'real' cases of the paranormal, approaching narratives of supernatural experience as geographically informative and, moreover, essential to understanding human-environment relations. Holloway's (2010) geographical analysis of heritage tourism via the performing of a 'legend trip' focused on the way ghostly narratives are intentionally exploited by tour guides not merely to entertain but as a shorthand method to expose the

multi-coded layers of a hidden urban history. Here, ghosts not only enchant and excite their audience, but, by way of ostension, shape our very understanding of place and its connection to an always lingering and politicised past.

Following Holloway's integrated approach, Thurgill has expanded discussions of spectral geography by examining how haunting, absence, and the occult shape geographical experience across different spatial contexts. A study of the psychic archaeology of Glastonbury Abbey Thurgill (2018b) explores how landscapes become imbued with spectral affects, haunting memories and uncanny presences, positioning the past as something that actively intrudes upon and structures present-day spatial perception. Similarly, Thurgill's (2022, 2024) recent explorations of Tokyo as a supernatural metropolis show how spectral narratives, historical trauma and urban development combine to produce a multilayered occult(ed) cityscape in which hauntings are materially and socially enacted. Across these contributions, spectrality is understood as a tangible spatial force, making haunting central to understanding how place, memory and identity are constituted.

Such embodied occult geographical practices underpin a rather more material form of engagement with the supernatural, namely investigations of Earth mysteries and folk practice. Beliefs and practices that bring together geography and mysticism in a very literal way have also played a role in the geographical study of the occult. Several scholars have looked to the influence of *feng shui* and geomancy in the architecture and spatial design of South and Southeast Asian cities (Mak and Ng 2005; Pile 2005; Tam et al., 1999) and in a British context, Matless (1998) provided an extensive discussion of early twentieth-century antiquary and photographer Alfred Watkins to reveal the history of 'leylines'. For Watkins, 'leys' gave name to an observable network of ancient alignments connecting earthworks, dew ponds, churches, and prehistoric track ways across the British landscape Thurgill (2015b). These lines are believed by some to hold great archaeological and spiritual importance and are described in the landscape writing of authors like Robert MacFarlane (2012) and inform the perambulations mapped out in the folk-oriented zines discussed later in this article. When viewed critically, 'leylines infer a meaning between places' (Thurgill 2014: 196), forming what Matless terms 'a specific topographical geometry' (1998: 83). In addition, Daniels (2006: 6) noted the embodied nature of Watkins' work, stating that his leylines offer 'a sorting out of previously unrelated and unnoticed information "embedded" in the mind and on the ground'; information, Daniels notes, that has had ramifications for landscape artists, photographers, and walkers. The connections between enchantment, embodiment, and magick found in such occult practices have been taken up by geographers interested in folk tradition, spirituality, and mobility. Wigley (2019, 2021), for example, highlights the reinvention of tradition in his studies of contemporary 'waissailing' practices in southern England, whilst Thurgill (2015a) emphasises the importance of movement and materiality in the creation of sacred spaces by examining neopagan rituals.

Significant contributions to work on the (im)material geographies of the occult have come from the collaborative efforts of Bartolini, MacKian, and Pile. In addition to their AHRC-funded project 'Spirited Stoke: Spiritualism in the Everyday Life of Stoke-on-Trent' (2014–2016), the collaboration produced several publications pertaining to the supernatural, with a specific focus on the ways in which Spiritualism is woven into the everyday practices and economies of working-class communities in England's West Midlands (Bartolini et al., 2013, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2016; MacKian et al., 2016, MacKian, 2019; Pile et al., 2018, 2019, Pile, 2023). Outside this productive collaboration, MacKian turned to the exploration of what she terms 'extra-geographies' in her examination of modern-day Spiritualism and psychic practices MacKian (2010, 2011, 2012), whereas Pile has focused on the spatial workings of telepathy and occult affect (Campbell and Pile, 2010; Pile, 2012). In addition, focusing on ghosts, materiality, and the body in the domestic uncanny, Lipman's (2014) study of haunted homes, usefully added to earlier work in spectral geography by drawing attention to lived and embodied experiences of the supernatural and their

'everydayness'. In attending to the apparent ordinariness of the occult and by highlighting its place alongside everyday practices of place-making and domesticity, Lipman acknowledges the same authenticity of lived-spiritual-spatial experiences which has today become commonplace in writings on indigenous knowledges, (post-)colonisation, and migration (see, e.g., Al-Qobbaj et al., 2024; Doornbos and Dragojlovic 2021; Martinez and Medina-López 2024).

The recent popularisation of the folkloric, which we attend to elsewhere in this article, is mirrored by the ongoing interest of geographers in the occult. One way in which this interest manifests is through conference sessions. In addition to those sessions discussed above, geographers have organised discussions on 'Absence, Materiality, Embodiment' (Frers et al., 2010) and 'The (U)npopular Geographies of the Occult' (Thurgill and Holloway, 2013), while more recently sessions on 'The Geographies of Folk Horror' (Holloway and Thurgill, 2019), 'Spooky Geographies' (Riding and Dahlman, 2022), and 'Methods for the Extra-Ordinary' (Barbarossa and Hamilton Helle, 2024), continue the well-established tradition of geographical work concerned with occult themes.

Within literary geography, Thurgill (2018a, 2022, 2026) has shown how the otherworldly entities of ghost stories and folk narratives work to generate spatial amalgamations of the lived and imagined, breaking down the perceived ontological divide between 'actual' and 'literary' space in the production of what Hones (2022, 2024) terms 'interspatiality'. Similarly, Kingsbury (2019) draws attention to the ongoing entanglement of the mundane with the otherworldly in his discussion of crop circles and the landscaping of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Elsewhere, Keane and Kingsbury (2021) draw attention to the role of absence, immateriality and belief in the research and conventions of Bigfoot enthusiasts. A recent contribution to the body of work on spectral geography from Al-Qobbaj et al. (2024: 145) surveys the haunted politicised landscapes of Palestine, evoking tales of jinn, spirits, and demons 'to illustrate the relationship between the invisible world of spirits and the tangible world of physical places and how they co-produce moral geographies of care and justice as well as gendered spatial practices'. For (Al-Qobbaj et al., 2024: 146), '[a]ttending to the realm of the unseen redirects our attention from detached carto-graphic depictions of territory to visceral experiences of enchanted spaces'. While Zhang and Zhong (2024) employ spectro-politics and hauntology in their examination of dark tourism in Yingxiu town in the aftermath of China's 2008 Wenchuan earthquake.

In reviewing this existing body of work, at least five distinct strands of geographical research concerning the occult geographies/geographies of the occult can be identified, namely: spectro-/spectral geography, magickal geography, Earth mysteries, folklore, and the monstrous. Additionally, the emergence of a more politically oriented and figurative exploration of the occult, one which frequently engages with the tropes of absence, affect, mourning and trauma, can be seen to run parallel to and sometimes overlap with the spatial analysis of supernatural phenomena, belief and practice discussed in the following sections. These 'occult geographies', as we term them collectively here, have broader implications for the study of geography, and their focus on alternative ways of knowing, naming and examining various modes of affect, spatial lacunae, and grief in the production and analysis of place and space has much in common with, if not feeding directly into, the more recent emergence of negative (Bissell et al., 2021; Dekeyser et al., 2022) and post-foundational geographies (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2023). By tracing human geography's prolonged engagement with the occult, it becomes possible to put into context the necessity (and urgency) of attending to the recent turn towards folklore and mysticism found in the non-specialist publications we explore below, allowing for a better understanding of how these practices and writings inform experiences of environment, identity, and belonging. We now turn to a brief overview of these writings and their links to other movements, before detailing this work in the subsequent section.

Wyrd, magickal, and folk horror landscapes

A key example of this popular occult literature is Parnell's (2019) travelogue *Ghostland*: *In Search of*

a Haunted Country. Woven around a personal attempted reconciliation of memories of his family, *Ghostland* is a counter-investigation of the weird and eerie of place wrought through the textual landscapes of different (mostly British) authors and artists, seventies BBC Television (especially *Play for Today*, 1970–84) and film. As such, *Ghostland* devotes chapters to accounts of walking landscapes associated with the fiction of M.R. James, Robert Aickman, Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, Alan Garner, Ithell Colquhoun, W.G. Sebald, E.F. Benson and *Robin Redbreast* (1970), *Penda's Fen* (1974) and *The Wicker Man* (1973). Here, there is an imaginative desire to construct a counter-heritage and reality of landscape and place – one which runs weirdly and mysteriously parallel to, whilst doubling and reinscribing, the given and taken-for-granted. For example, Parnell (2019: 315) visits Alderley Edge in Cheshire to explore the landscapes of Alan Garner (author of work such as *The Owl Service* (1967) and *Red Shift* (1973), which are often cited in this body of work) which he describes as:

> … beautiful, and nearly every bit as filled with mystery – with their enigmatic rocks, sheer cliffs, and sudden mine shafts as I would expect; in one spot I stand transfixed by the carved graffiti that peppers a reddish sandstone outcrop, trying to discern a meaning from the time warm jumble of letters.

Another example of these occult travelogues is Hopper's (2017) *The Old Weird Albion* which tells of walking the South Downs Way, again suffused with personal family memoirs.[3] Hopper (2017: 16, 17) writes, 'I read the South Downs as a "core sample" of another England. In this alternative zone that exists side by side with the modern world, the linear nature of time is not assured … where landscape intersects with memory and myth'. Sharp's (2020: 19) *English Heretic* project also illustrates this scene as 'a direct subversion of English Heritage' by placing 'Black Plaques' (instead of English Heritage's blue version) at sites of weird events and places associated with a variety of occult figures from British history. Kenning (2020: 14) describes Sharp's project as an attempt to plot 'a new, occult historical map'.

These works have distinct overlaps and echoes of other textual and artistic scenes and movements. First, there is a key crossover with the burgeoning interest in and popularity of folk horror.[4] Indeed, Parnell and Sharp weave their writings and travelogues around many of the key texts in this genre – for example, *Robin Redbreast* (1970), *Penda's Fen* (1974) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), *Witchfinder General* (1968) *The Owl Service* (1967), and *Red Shift* (1973). The phrase 'folk horror' (originally coined by the director of *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), Piers Haggard, but reintroduced in Mark Gatiss' BBC documentary series *A History of Horror* (2010)) is a nebulous one and the source of much debate (Edgar and Johnston 2023; Keetley, 2020; Keetley and Heholt, 2023; Peters, 2018; Rodgers, 2019; Scovell, 2017; Thurgill, 2020, 2023). However, broadly speaking, in folk horror 'modernity is overcome by a resurgence of the "old ways," as pagan or occult beliefs are found alive and well, surviving out of time, in rural communities'. (Luckhurst, 2022: 719). In folk horror, modernity takes the form of an outsider whose encounter with (mostly) rural communities and landscape ends in a horrific manner (*The Wicker Man* (1973) being the most famous example here). Having similarities to other anti-idyllic versions of the countryside, folk horror circulates an aesthetic through film, novels, art, and music that troubles, makes uncanny and weirds the landscapes of the British rural (Bell, 1997; Hall, 2020; Holloway, 2022; Hutchings, 2004; Young, 2021).

Second, these texts can often be related to wider forms of modern psychogeography, particularly in its more occult and often transformative, even resistant and political, endeavours. These texts echo psychogeography through, as Bonnett (2017: 472) states, 'the practice of walking …often narrated as a kind of rite or ceremony, a transforming enchantment of the ordinary world'. As such, psychogeography becomes a form of geographical occult practice, where magickal significance, synchronicities and counter-memories are unearthed through an embodied and performative engagement with the landscape: absences are made present and can summon a challenge to contemporary geographical issues and processes. Most famously here would be

Ian Sinclair's work in London's East End wherein he resists the expurgation of gentrification and capitalist development 'through acts of counter-memory, often blended with notions of occult conjuration or ritual summoning that accumulate and articulate the deep historical traces' of the landscape (Luckhurst, 2022: 724). Here, the occult space is urban, but again in Parnell (2019) we see similar magickal dérives through the countryside where the practice of walking and imaginative reclamation seeks to counter current, often dominant, ways of culturally encoding the landscape.

Indeed, Parnell's (2019) autobiographical engagement with the weird and occult landscape points to a third intersection with this body of work and other recent popular geographical writing – namely 'new' nature writing. Notable authors in this genre would include Robert Macfarlane, Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie, Helen MacDonald, and Carol Donaldson (see Luckhurst, 2022; Smith, 2018). As Hubbard and Wilkinson (2019:254) state, 'new' nature writing blends:

> … elements of autobiography, travelogue, natural history and popular science in its attempt to explore the forgotten, and often threatened, landscapes of Britain, the writing that falls under the label of 'new nature writing' can then be read as inherently political, combining arts and environmentalism, politics and aesthetics.

As we shall see, these texts and the 'new' nature writing have coincidental concerns of environmental degradation and contested national identity. However, the texts upon which this paper is based focus more often on the magickal, the paranormal and the uncanny in the landscape in comparison to this 'new' nature writing.

Furthermore, whilst it is important to acknowledge the intersection between this body of work and other writing, there are distinguishing factors that carve out a distinct space for these occult publications. First, although books are central to this area, for the rest of the paper we will mostly be focusing on the burgeoning number of zines that constitute this scene (see Duncombe, 2017). These short-form pamphlet style publications are key here, and we have selected three as emblematic: *Weird Walk* (2019–), *Hellebore* (2019–), and *Hwæt!* (2022–), with the former two also producing book versions of their publications (Perez Cuervo, 2021; Walk, 2023).[5] A second demarcating factor is that whilst 'new' nature writing and, to some degree, psychogeographical practices focus on the lone author's engagement with space and place, particularly when autobiographies and landscape walking intersect, these texts are often more collective in their weaving of new imaginary spaces and hence constitute a broader cosmopolitan and diverse sociality of and for occult landscapes – something we will substantiate as the paper proceeds. Third, many of these texts, particularly when they take the form of travel guides, seek to direct the reader to walk these landscapes themselves, and to visit certain sites to experience the supernatural or their own enchantment. Thus, whilst these writings frequently recount a solo author's walk through a (strange and folkloric) landscape, they are often explicit in their directions for the reader to do likewise. Furthermore, as we shall see, readers are often encouraged to make their visits and perambulations political and even resistant strategies, once more underlining the occult as political.

The eerie enchantment of place, landscape, and nature

A common theme emerges in these zines of how an engagement with landscape is thought to reconnect the visitor with ancient ways of life and practice. However, given this past is but a barely knowable trace in the landscape, this (re)discovery is one without surety. In other words, the deep past is a blurry spectrality that falls short of definitive meaning and one where present-absences make landscapes ghostly, uncanny, and occluded. The most often cited landscapes where this happens contain ancient (mostly Neolithic or early Bronze Age) stones – stone circles, dolmens, barrows, menhirs, cup and ring stones, and quoits – where 'time collapses in on itself, disturbing the natural order of things, and the past intrudes on the present in a way which can be disorientating, sometimes

threatening' (Soar, 2019: 15). Performed and experienced through a weird and sometimes unsettling disjuncture in time and space, these sites become pilgrimage destinations and produce a geography through which this scene coalesces. Some of the most popular and often travelled stone circles here are Avebury and Stonehenge in Wiltshire. Over time, these sites have:

> … raised many questions and given few answers. While the intentions of the people who lived, worshipped and built in this area thousands of years ago might never be known with clarity, their investment in the landscape has created a truly sacred place. If you haven't explored, you probably should. (Tromans, Hornsby, and Nicholls, 2019a: 35).

Other commonly venerated British sites are found in Cornwall and Wales. For example, the founders of *The Stone Club* (established in 2021) describe a field trip to Mulfra Quoit in West Penwith, Cornwall: 'Standing looking out across the landscape, it feels like we could have travelled thousands of years back in time. The living, breathing landscape; at once timeless and constantly in flux' (MacBeth and Shaw, 2023: 102). In addition, Marshall (2023: 45) explores the various cup and ring stones and ancient rock art of Rombald's Moor in Yorkshire, describing how she 'cannot translate the grooves carved into the rock' but feeling she is 'participating in a very personal, visceral moment of appreciation of those who came before me, as well as their landscape and creations'.

Thus, there is an experiential dislocation between the reality and presence of these stones and the absence of what they definitively signify. Indeed, it is precisely in the lacuna between the brute materiality of these landscapes and the unknowability of their origins, meanings, and purpose, that certain emotional geographies and affective registers develop – a rendering of the eerie that Fisher (2016: 62) articulates as 'the failure of presence [and] absence'. Moreover, it is in this gap where reality and unreality, the visible and the invisible, meet that a sense of enchantment grows – an emotional and affective sensing of the landscape where a pleasing disorientation is performed for the visitor that we might call an *eerie enchantment*. Not all forms of enchantment are eerie. Enchantment can captivate through awe and wonder, as is described in children's and ludic geographies (Woodyer, 2018; Woodyer et al., 2016). Eerie enchantment is specific in the way that it disorients and disturbs through a destabilising of the familiar, throwing knowledge and agency into turmoil. The eerie urges us to speculate, to fret, and to anguish over what we have encountered: within the landscape, '[t]here must also be a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience' (Fisher 2016: 62). Where enchantment reveals the vitality of objects and places, an eerie enchantment exposes the possibility that this very vitality is entangled with wider, unknown systems – animated by unseen agents, disturbing temporalities, and occult forces. Eerie enchanted landscapes, then, are those that simultaneously evoke wonder and novelty, and create a degree of discomfort, a sense of being beyond a normative consideration of the given and the mundane (Bennett, 2001; Holloway, 2010; Thurgill, 2014; Woodyer and Geoghegan, 2012).

Another defining characteristic of these texts is the emphasis placed on the reader to visit these landscapes and experience their own eerie enchantment: above Tromans, Hornsby, and Nicholls (2019: 35) state that 'If you haven't explored, you probably should' when discussing Avebury. These directives are fully realised in *HELLEBORE*'s guidebook *The Hellebore Guide to Occult Britain* (Pérez Cuervo, 2021: 11):

> What we've attempted to create here is a travel guide for folk horror and occult fans, to help them plan their next trip according to their personal interests. It is designed to be read in the comfort of your living room, but also to be carried in your bag on a day out as you experience the spirits of place and conjure the scenes that captivated you from the screen or from the pages of a book.

Whilst including many standing stones and circles, this guidebook also documents a variety of other strange and occult sites. The book is organised by region, with each section illustrated by a map and

a key for locating sites of 'Witches and cunning folk', 'The Old Gods', 'Magic, rituals and the occult', 'Ancient megaliths', 'Portals to the underworld', 'Demons and devils', 'Curses and portents', 'Film and TV locations', and 'Literary locations'. The occult landscapes documented here are multiple and varied, yet ancient paths and tracks strongly feature. For example, The Icknield Way, which is said to go 'all the way round the world, or even into the next: a man in the 1890s walked the way until he came to "fiery mountains" with choking smoke and sulphurous fumes. He turned back' (Pérez Cuervo, 2021: 69).[6] The book also records faeries, alchemists, monsters, giants, ghosts, barguests, druids, and cunning folk, as well as authors such as Bram Stoker, JRR Tolkien, Alan Moore, and Peter Ackroyd.

This resurgent interest and popularity of such occult landscapes echoes previous periods of fascination with folklore and mythic landscapes. One could, for example, trace similarities to eighteenth-century antiquarianism (e.g., William Stukeley), or the first and second British folk music revivals of the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, or modern geo-mysticism and interest in Earth Mysteries (Brocken, 2023; Matless, 1991; Sweet, 2004). Yet, it is the 1970s that holds particular importance in the texts we discuss here – as we have seen, folk horror films, novels, and television from this period are continually honoured. As Darby and Finnernan (2022: 313) have shown in their study of 1970s popular occult UK publishing:

> The British cultural experience in the 1970s was a haunted one. By this we mean that a resurgence of interest in the paranormal throughout society … was more widely reflected in the willingness of writers to engage with liminal experiences, the occult, and uncanny folkloric themes as part of both broadcast and printed popular entertainment media.

In particular, the similarities between *The Hellebore Guide to Occult Britain* and the (popular now and then) Reader's Digest (1973) *Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain* are both (reflexively) thematic and stylistic. Yet it is not just the influence of the 1970s on contemporary occult and folkloric fascination that is significant. Central to Darby and Finnernan's (2022: 326) argument regarding texts such as the Reader's Digest (1973) book and other supernatural travel gazetteers, was their reaction, and arguably their solution, to contemporary anxieties regarding social, cultural, and economic change: 'in the 1970s, a period of industrial decline, social and economic unrest, and a sense of flux and change, the essential elemental qualities of the British landscape, and their genius loci, could still be experienced through the guidebooks'. Indeed, Luckhurst (2022) has made a similar argument concerning societal instability as a driver for the contemporary interest in folk horror, 'new' nature writing, psychogeography, work on 'edgelands' and rewilding. Arguing these texts amount to a 're-weirding' of the landscape, Luckhurst (2022: 713) contends that this 'literature sits in the cross-hairs of both disembedding (global scale) and re-embedding (the restatement of local specificity)'. As such, the (re)discovery of the strange landscapes and ghostly places acts as counterweight, a (re)territorialising reassurance through space and (deep) time, to political instabilities and global economic insecurities conjured by, for example, the 2016 Brexit vote and 2008 financial crash. Thus, these texts act as 'a resistance to the heroic failure that pushes nostalgic visions of Brexitland's sunny meadows' (Luckhurst 2022: 727).

Arguably, this work provides a means for (re)connection, through an attentiveness to the particularities of landscape, in times of rapid socio-cultural, political, and economic change: as Parr and Marshall (2023: 6) state 'in an era in which these ties feel severed, it is about reconnection'. This (re)connection has been consolidated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the social restrictions of different lockdowns during which the British countryside enhanced its status as a desirable space of escape, well-being, community, and residence, reinforcing already widespread discourses and practices of rurality as 'idyllic' (Boyce Kay, 2020; Halfacree and Rivera, 2011). The 'idyllic' often emerges here through a reestablished bond to a 'lost' nature through walking and exploring: the artist Ben Edge argues the increasing interest in folklore and folkloric rituals 'remind ourselves that we are part of

nature, not separate from it and, most importantly, not above it' (Tromans et al., 2020a: 8). Thus, anthropogenic ills can be cured by recognising 'lost' traditions and understanding our sequestration from nature: Steve Von Till from the band Neurosis states 'our connection with nature should be inherent and yet has still been lost' (Parr, 2023: 16). Here, a melancholy for seemingly more 'primal' states of being in the world underpins a relationship to nature that borders on the bucolic or pastoral. Furthermore, this loss is often accompanied by a feeling of horror and dread at nature's destruction. Thus, reconnecting with nature also generates senses of anxiety and alarm as environmental issues, wrought through climate change and habitat destruction, are brought into sharp relief. As Andrew Michael Hurley, author of many key folk horror novels such as *Starve Acre* (Hurley, 2019) explains, 'the spiralling complexity of life for us in the twenty-first century and the real and imminent threat of ecological destruction perhaps makes the need to connect with nature … all the more crucial in order to relearn who we are' (Tromans et al., 2020b: 26).[7] For Parr (2022a: 60) the act of walking and understanding folkloric traditions become 'a simple remedy for the soul sickness many of us feel in a post-industrial, ultra commercialised society where news of environmental collapse has become so commonplace that it's routinely shrugged aside'.

The occult nation and the strange local

So far, we have explored how these works encourage an eerily (re)enchanted (re)connection with strange and partially unknowable landscapes of deep time, and how they represent a reaction to contemporary socio-cultural and environmental change and issues. In this section we wish to argue that this eerie (re-)enchantment also produces a *political* refiguring of national identity which charts and inspires an engagement with a distinctly *weird* Britishness. This, then, is a construction of a counter-historical geography of and for the nation which venerates the forgotten and occluded in British history, geography, art, and media: a historical geography of the ghost and the magician, the witch and the demonic, the warlock and the alchemist, the spectral dog, and the megalith. As David Southwell (2019: 62) describes 'beyond the chocolate-box bucolic, village ponds are haunted by the ghosts of witches that refused to sink'.[8] National belonging is shaped here through a historiography of Britishness as seemingly 'unique' in its supernatural and weird topography, similar to that which Darby and Finneran (2022: 326) identify in the 1970s' interest in a 'strange' nationality: 'The message is that Britain is unusual in having a particularly supernatural heritage and a built heritage which is a particular abode of the supernatural'.

However, in these contemporary texts this 'unique' British history and geography is often made explicitly political through visions that rail against dominant, elite, and class-based, narratives of national landscapes and time. For example, the broadcaster Zakia Sewell (2021: 7), who describes herself as growing up 'between two different cultures; two different colours' in Hounslow, West London, charts how her experience of a childhood spent at her grandparents' house in Laugharne, West Wales opened-up a different occult sense of Britishness, one 'rich with lore … a different kind of Britain – magical, mythical, and full of wonder'. Visiting and experiencing occult Wales, as well as listening to the psyche-folk music of Pentangle, generated a dissident vision of Britain or 'Albion' as 'a refuge from the conflicts and complications of the here and now … an idea that promises the possibility of belonging' (Sewell, 2021:11). Here, eerie enchantment engenders a political challenge to hegemonic modes of national identity. For Hurley, the weirdness of place explored in folk horror 'demythologises the idea of Britain's "gloriousness" being somehow expressed in its aesthetic natural beauty' wherein landscapes are coloured by 'an attitude of xenophobia, belligerence and hubris haunted by the ghost of a deeply unpleasant imperialism' (Tromans et al., 2020b: 26). Therefore, whether it is the mystical unknowability of the deep time of these landscapes, or the horrific histories that are often occluded in dominant representations of space and time, or the desire to connect or reinvent with the folkloric rituals of communities in the past, these occult landscapes carve out a different and

resistant understanding and practice of Britishness: singer Tom Templar from the band Green Lung describes how post-Brexit 'people were looking for a sense of British nationhood that wasn't the patriarchal, Christian, capitalist hegemony of the last however many hundreds of years', a British identity different to one 'basically wrapped up in all of this Tory do-what-you're-told aristocracy' (Parr, 2022b: 12).

This resistant discourse of national identity, built upon a radical, mystical, and folkloric past, is composed through a patchwork of local landscapes, myths, legends, and tales. Of particular significance here seems to be those areas of the nation at the edges or beyond the non-metropolitan core: as we have seen, Sewell (2021) discusses the influence of West Wales in her narration of a refigured Albion. With its plethora of stone circles and folklore, Cornwall is deemed a seemingly liminal space where an alternative national belonging can flourish with Heholt (2020: 74–75, original emphasis) arguing that the county 'seems to threaten to float away from the mainland. It is a place represented as ungovernable and transgressive, full of fissures in space-time, and reality … Cornwall [is] *too far away* from mainland England, and yet at the same time *too near*'. Similarly, in the rural counties of the East of England, several zine publications have emerged in recent years which emphasise the importance of local knowledge and identity, doing so by presenting and preserving narratives that are tied to the region's history, geography, and specific cultures. The illustrated collections of essays, folktales, and original 'wyrd' narratives found in the likes of *Black Shuck* (2020–), *Black Dog* (2020–), *Occultaria Albion* (2020–), and the more recent *Marshlore* (2023–) each tend to the specificity of folklore and place within a broader, shared occult geography, and provide further examples of the wider British folkloric 'return' that we have outlined in this paper. Briggs and Connor's long-running serial column and podcast 'Weird Norfolk' for the Eastern Daily Press (2016–2022) galvanises local identity through the circulation of regional folk narratives. Presenting historical as well as contemporary accounts of supernatural encounters in the pastoral Norfolk landscape, Briggs and Connor not only preserve the county's local folklore but frequently critique the problematic politics and mistreatment of oppressed groups and individuals that are found in its tales. The titular 'Weird' found in the column's heading plays on (mis)representations of Norfolk as an anti-modern and uneducated rural enclave often present in the wider British geographic imagination – a mirroring of the widespread topophobia towards rural landscapes that is found in folk horror writing and film (Thurgill, 2020). Yet, Briggs and Connor's articles on Norfolk's ghostly and demonic events, and their newly-formed Norfolk Folklore Society, testify to a much darker and experiential 'weirdness' that afflicts the county – one which is rooted in the stories told and understood by the people who live there.

Conclusion: 'Re-enchantment as resistance'?

> 'Folklore is the common wealth, but that link to place means it too has become battleground. Those who love it find it increasingly weaponised to push spurious agendas of cultural or ethnic superiority; see it stitched uncomfortably into banners of hatred and radical authoritarian nationalism' (Southwell, 2019: 62).

With its imaginative reclamation of local and national identities these texts could be said to perform a cultural politics of authenticity whereby certain readings of the landscape are privileged as more 'legitimate' and 'truer' to some 'unique' mythic primal nationhood: when asked about a current folklore revival, the artist Jeremy Deller, stated it is 'about authenticity' (The Face, 2023).[9] Yet, often, these texts explicitly seek to avoid an essentialism of identity and place through a declared diversity of voices that overtly celebrates a multicultural Britain and emphasises the re-enchantment of the landscape being subject to constant flux and change. Across this movement, events such as Brexit and the rise of 'populism' in British political life produce a desire to avoid exclusion and the marginalisation of difference. As Hopper puts it, these landscapes:

> …shift to take in the stories that befits the moment. The landscape, again, is of embrace … the English landscape is heterogeneous; is comprised of ideas and stories, flora and fauna, from millennia of intersections and immigrations. (Tromans et al., 2019b: 18)

For many writers it is precisely the mystery and indecipherability of these occult landscapes that welcomes diversity. Hence, it is this lacuna in the definitive knowledge of these places that opens a space for a progressive cultural politics wherein, as Templar succinctly puts it, 'no one really knows what the fuck was going on, and I think people feel freed by that. I think that's what people are tapping into'. (Parr, 2022b: 12). Hence, reflexive ignorance engenders eerie enchantment, leading to a cultural politics wherein 'even the creepiest of old legends can blossom into something from which marginalised communities derive power and meaning' (Parr and Marshall, 2022: 9). Furthermore, folklore, as the stories and practices through which communities coalesce and come to know themselves, has also become a space for an avowedly non-essentialist politics. For example, the Boss Morris, a female collective of Morris dancers, seek to challenge the masculinist associations of this tradition by reclaiming 'a sense of identity that isn't exclusive and nationalistic, but intrinsic and ripe for the picking' (Tromans, Hornsby and Nicholls, 2019c: 37).

This explicitly anti-nationalistic and cosmopolitan cultural politics is also a response to the recent resurgence of the Far-Right's attempt to co-opt folklore and occult landscapes into their ethnonationalist and White supremacist agendas. An example that received considerable coverage in the (neo)pagan and folkloric movement, occurred when a group called the 'Asatru Folk Assembly' (AFA) proposed a 'Winters Night' event at Stonehenge on 28th October 2023. The AFA, as The Pagan Federation describe, 'are an American white supremacist hate group who claim to practice the religion of Asatru, however, the AFA openly and proudly promote a racist, homophobic, misogynistic, and antisemitic interpretation of contemporary Germanic Paganism' (The Pagan Federation, 2023a). A call to action was signed by 28 groups representing the UK Pagan and Heathen religious community, arguing that the AFA share 'nothing with the inclusive contemporary iteration of British Paganism' and 'we cannot allow the AFA to desecrate a symbol of our cultural heritage and a site of spiritual significance to Pagans across the UK' (The Pagan Federation, 2023b; 2018). A petition signed by over six thousand people and a subsequent coalition of pagan groups, English Heritage, and the local Wiltshire police forced the AFA to cancel the event. Here again, we see how this scene becomes explicitly political and cosmopolitan in its valuing, interpretation, and practice of such landscapes. This 'battleground' as Southwell above puts it, also extends to folk horror appreciation. Ingham, author of *We Don't Go Back*: *A Watcher's Guide to Folk Horror* (2018), explains that during his time as a moderator of a Facebook folk horror group, 'it was like whack-a-mole. I think I personally either banned or denied entry to at least one hardline racist every couple of days' (Ingham, 2019).

In the face of populism, the normalisation of far-right politics, and post-Brexit politics, this occult geographical scene seeks to tread a progressive path despite, or more precisely because, of its claims to vestiges of the 'authentic' in the landscape – the shadowy presence of a mythic past is open to multiple interpretations, most of which are seemingly welcomed.[10] Therefore, the eerie (re)enchantment of the British landscape has become a rallying call for this scene and one it increasingly coalesces around. Indeed, the phrase 're-enchantment as resistance', coined by Southwell, often appears in these debates as a summation of the scene's politics:

> How do we fight this? How do we fight monsters? As in the best stories, with magic. Re-enchantment is resistance. In our carving of light on film, in our markings of ink, we need to become the cunning folk. Recognise the enfolding enchantment, share its sublime songs … For a battle of narratives, in contest for imagined England – or any other unreal state – wonder will always win. (Southwell, 2019: 63)

The policing of the borders of this occult landscape scene and the hope that (re-)enchantment will override the exclusionary politics of far-right groups,

is a commendable endeavour. However, we would like to finish this paper by critically qualifying the oft stated embracing of diversity here by exploring moments of exclusion in its practices and discourses.

First, although publications such as *Weird Walk*, *Hellebore* and *Hwæt*! showcase a range of voices from Britain's diverse communities, an underlying obsession with the 'uniqueness' of Britain risks homogenising a heterogenous, storied landscape, fixing it to a specific understanding of 'Britishness' that both negates the local identities to which such narratives and landscapes belong, and ignores the reality that *all* cultures and peoples possess a similar sense of a national 'uniqueness' in their folk narratives and practices. Whilst many of the publications discussed in this article enact what their creators and readers perceive as a reclaiming of a 'unique' magic(k)al landscape of Britain as 'Albion', the locally oriented writings discussed above can be argued to counter this by revealing the production of folk identities at a micro – rather than macro-level. Rather than Britain being a homogenised landscape of folkloric uniquity, a multitude of distinct local geographic identities can be seen to emerge from the regionally specific narratives and traditions discussed by the likes of Briggs and Connor on Norfolk. Thus, the ideas of national or cultural folkloric singularity displayed in some of these 'weird writings', both misunderstands and misrepresents the complexity and relationality through which geographic identities come to be made.

Second, as we have seen, the scene has crafted its own lineage and historiography of key texts. Top of the list is the consistently lauded Reader's Digest (1973) *Folklore*, *Myths and Legends of Britain*, a totemic text in this scene, with demand for the book inflating second hand prices and fans often celebrating on social media finding a cheap copy in a charity shop.[11] Furthermore, participants often post pictures of their 'to read' pile or bookshelves weighed down by the same canon of authors and texts – James, Blackwood, Machen, Garner, Colquhoun, as well as more contemporary authors such as Parnell, Hopper and the various zines discussed here. Social media posts reproduce an oeuvre of seemingly 'sacred' texts, revealing a performance of cultural or subcultural capital where collections and their display equal status and performs a hierarchy in the scene. Arguably, the esoteric nature of these books can potentially exclude those without the learned and sometimes economic capital to hunt down and comprehend their often-cryptic discourse.

Third, the status gained in this scene through displaying the 'required reading' is repeated as participants gain prestige and greater subcultural status through their discovery and access to ever more geographically remote sites of ancient stones and places of occult happenings. This suggests an unacknowledged exclusion of those who have neither the resources nor ability to experience this 'eerie enchantment'. Visiting many of these celebrated sites is not always an easy task. So, whilst the scene may honour ancient occult landscapes of 'embrace' many sites would be inaccessible to disabled people and many require a degree of physical ability and fitness to visit.[12] This exclusion is further underlined by some of the narratives used by those who chart and map these sites – often these read as heroic quests, where the narrator has undergone physical strain and stresses, and battled against nature, to reach the promised land of a stone circle or megalith.

Fourth and finally, the privileging of the cultic obscurity of texts and landscapes has resulted in some negative reactions from those who hold these books and places as spiritually sacred. This manifests itself in neopagan and witchcraft commentators decrying the resurgence of interest in occult landscapes as merely a fashionable hobby. For example, one commentator described *Weird Walk* and *The Stone Club* as 'dismal, opportunistic tote bag vendors with only superficial interest in the ancient sites they like to be photographed with' (Pers. Comm., November 2023). Whilst there is further cultural capital and claims to authenticity being mobilised here, the fault lines between these 'new' visitors and those who use such landscapes for worship and ritual is evident.

This occult geographical scene is aware of the need to embrace diversity of voices in its discourses and practices. Yet, there are several tensions that stand in the way of this cosmopolitan vision that could be productively explored by human geographers interested in the occult. Notably, the

celebration of a qualified 'uniqueness' to this weird/wyrd occult Britain leaves a space for the far-right to exploit through claiming national distinctiveness. In turn, such discourses can easily override the multiplicity of local and regional occult spaces, erecting a monolithic occult 'Albion' that silences complexity. It remains to be seen if this resurgence of interest in occult landscapes is merely a fashionable endeavour. However, the divisions between those for whom generating 'content' through taking a 'selfie' at a megalith, and those for whom the mystery of these sites underscores a spiritual path and deep-seated faith, is something that needs to be acknowledged and analysed. For these reasons, plus the social-cultural exclusions performed by the scene's esoteric history, reading, and remote geographies, it is important to think through calls to 'resist through re-enchantment'.

We began this paper by exploring how human geographers have engaged with occultism, noting the most popular mode being one of 'occult geographies' where supernaturalism, especially the ghost, is used figuratively to explore the political, social and cultural traumas and injustices of the past that haunt the landscape. As such, if human geographers are to continue to engage with the occult by utilising its language to investigate issues of spatial absence, haunting, uncanniness and marginality, they need to be at least aware of (and preferably critique) the ways in which this occult terminology and phenomena can be used for regressive means. As such, the occult when examined as a subject of research (geographies of the occult) reveals tendencies that those who employ occult framings in their geographical analyses (occult geographies) need to reflexively account for. Put simply, deploying occult phenomena to analyse *something else*, could easily miss the shadowy political concerns that some occult spatialities promote. Hence, if weird walking and eerie enchantment has the potential to embrace *and* exclude, we need to account for this when drawing on the supernatural, the strange and the otherworldly as we seek to understand this-worldly political concerns central to human geography. As we stated above, the occult is always spatial and political. Previous studies have employed the occult to recognise the politics of space. When analysing the politics of space through occult discourse human geographers need to examine how the spectral and other occult processes are never politically neutral and can be used to reproduce precisely the sorts of injustices and traumas that they have been deployed to counteract and challenge. We hope that in highlighting the political tensions central to the intersection of the occult and human geography, that the value of either researching the occult per se or utilising the occult in our theoretical endeavours can be further debated, examined and explored.

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Notes

1. One phrase that characterises this literature is 'landscape punk' which author Gary Budden (2017) describes as: '…politicised, it embraces the weird, the horrific and the non-realist to try and get to some deeper truths about the insane world we've found ourselves'.
2. In the latter part of the twentieth century, several influential theorists working in philosophy, politics, and critical theory began to write pessimistically on the waning of originality in Western culture and politics, leading to what Francis Fukuyama coined as 'the death of history' (Fukuyama 1989). See, for example, Jameson (1992), Kojève (1980), and Lyotard (1979).
3. Hopper's output also includes music, for example, providing spoken words performances for the artist Belbury Poly on the Ghost Box label, and albums bases upon *The Old Weird Albion* called *The Path*

(2023) and *Chanctonbury Rings* (2019) with folk artist Sharon Krauss. See also Hubbard (2025).

4. It would be a huge disservice to Andy's Sharp's *English Heretic* project to label it purely folk horror. Many of the occult geographies he describes include Ballardian and dystopian post-nuclear landscapes which, as such, could be labelled 'urban wyrd' – a phrase that acts as a counterpoint with the more rural emphasis of folk horror and which often include Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* films.
5. Other zines in this field of interest would arguably include *Rituals and Declarations* (2019–), *Myth and Lore* (2020–), *Under the Ancient Yew* (2025–), and *Heath and Mud* (2024–) as well as a whole host of more localised zines, some of which we return to here, including *Shuckzine* (2020–) and *Black Dog* (2020–). In addition, these occult re-imaginings of the landscape reoccur in a number of podcasts such as *Knock Once for Yes*, *Weird Norfolk*, *Myths of the Moor*, *Eerie Essex*, and *Hallowed Histories*.
6. The Icknield Way is also central to Robert McFarlane's (2012) bestselling and influential book *The Old Ways*, and as such we see the crossover here between these occult geographies and 'new' nature writing.
7. As such, these writings, particularly when they draw inspiration from folk horror wherein the landscape and nature can be agential in the fear experienced in the landscape, mirror ideas and texts of the 'eco-Gothic' and Gothic Nature genre (Parker and Poland 2019).
8. Southwell is the creator of the hauntological 'Hookland' (https://twitter.com/HooklandGuide), a fictional 'lost' British county whose folklore and ghosts are told through the words and pictures of a writer known as 'C.L. Nolan'. Hookland shares many similar hauntological characteristics to the equally fictional authoritarian 1970s British local council of 'Scarfolk', a 'town that did not progress beyond 1979' (https://scarfolk.blogspot.com/). See Sweeney (2020).
9. Deller's work often appears in these texts, especially his artwork 'Sacrilege' (2012) comprising an inflatable, bouncy castle version of Stonehenge and he is interviewed in *Weird Walk* (Clark 2022) discussing his film *Everybody in the Place*: *An Incomplete History of Britain 1984-1992* (2018) which looked at the free rave scene as a countercultural history of the nation.
10. *The Gallows Pole* (2019) author Ben Myers states in *Weird Walk*, 'I'm not nostalgic for a mythical past and I heartily embrace diversity and immigration – the best things to happen to Britain – I'm merely noting a seismic shift in our relationship with the land' (Tromans, Hornsby, and Nicholls, 2019d: 10).
11. One of the key online spaces for these interests is the *Folk Horror Revival* Facebook page which, at the time of writing, has over 31,000 members. The social media profiles of these publications are also popular – *Weird Walk* has over 65,000 followers on Instagram, with *Hellebore* over 27,000 and *Hwæt* nearly 8000.
12. In addition, good map reading skills are required in some cases. One the authors of this paper spent many hours with a copy of *Hwæt* trying to discover some of the rock art and cup and ring stones on Ilkley Moor without success.

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